

Healthy Parents Examine Expectations For Kids

by Dean Walker

I've just discovered my 2-year-old, Graham, throwing 10 clean diapers and half a dozen bath towels into the tub I was preparing to put him into. In a tone of half despair and half reproach, I say to him, "What are you thinking?" What I do next has a lot to do with that question. But the person who needs to answer it is me.

That situation, and thousands more like it, can give rise to parental misbehavior—yelling, hitting, making dire threats that we will not carry out. Being less than perfect, especially when stressed, all of us have engaged at one time or another in one or more of these parental misbehaviors.

But the likelihood that we will misbehave can be reduced by examining our thinking. Sometimes it's not so much the things kids do that causes parental explosions as it is the things we say to ourselves about that behavior.

Take the child who says "no" when we ask him to put on his coat before we leave a store. A common train of thought is, "My child should obey me without question." The child who goes against the grain of this thinking is likely to face more than a little parental anger.

On the other hand, in the same situation, the parent might think, "Children are engaged from a very young age in the process of developing an independent self. It is their natural, healthful tendency to question authority, to search for and discover the limits of their power. Yes, it is often a pain in the you-know-what for the person in authority, but it is the price paid for the development of an emotionally healthy, independent adult."

This parent probably will be irritated and annoyed, but also much more likely to work out a calmer, more reasonable response and to mete out consequences, when necessary, that are logical and proportionate to the child's deed.

"Oh, c'mon," you say. "What real person will take 30 seconds (I timed it) to think such reasonable things when facing his or her defiant child?"

Right. No real person does that. Nor does any real person in that situation actually think on a conscious level, "My child should obey me without question." What really happens is that chunks of thinking have gotten rolled up into hard little "marbles" that clatter around in our unconscious or subconscious minds.

We can only infer that these marbles of hardened thought are there because of the feelings and behavior they automatically cause when they strike, or are struck by, certain events in our world—like our children's actions.

To reduce parental misbehavior, it's helpful to roll these attitudinal marbles out into the open and melt them down into their composite thoughts. We can then ask ourselves, "Do I really want to believe that? Is that belief supported by any evidence? Does this kind of thinking help me reach my goals as a parent?"

Knowing how we would like our children to turn out can provide a road map against which to check our attitudes, to see if they are likely to get us where we want to go. Some attitudes lead us right into the ocean of alienation, or precariously along its edge. Some get us onto a freeway of anger with no apparent exit. Others are more likely to lead to a satisfying and mutually respectful relationship with our children—at all ages—though the route may at times seem endlessly circuitous.

Some parental goals seem almost universal. They come up again and again in parent education classes. “I want my child to grow into an adult with a strong sense of self, someone who thinks for herself, who is self-directed and not afraid to risk embarrassing mistakes on the way to achieving her goals.”

It is less than universal, however, for parents to recognize the contradiction that often arises between unconscious attitudes about children and parenting and the goals we consciously hold. For example, how does, “Obey me without question” eventually translate into, “Think for yourself?” Do we assume that there’s a hidden switch that can be thrown at the age of 18 that will suddenly transform an individual from a child who, without question, subjugates himself to the will of another into an adult who is independent and self-directed?

Facing frequent anger and intimidation by a parent who either consciously or unconsciously operates from the attitude “obey without question,” a child may end up having to unlearn a lot of the emotional lessons she learned from her parents before she can become independent and self-directed.

There are a number of goal-defeating attitudes about the roles of children and parents that we can ferret out of our unconscious minds. Whenever we find ourselves behaving—misbehaving—with our children out of anger, we can take that as our cue to ask ourselves, “What am I thinking?” We may find that it is not a bad idea to lose some of our marbles.

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