

Kids Learn Behavior Best Through Dialogue

by Lodie Fuller

“Go to your room!”

Have we all used that command to put a temporary stop to our child’s inappropriate behavior? Of course we have, and hope at the time that during such “time-out” our angry one will calm down and realize the errors of his ways.

When we think about it more carefully, we see that we were angry, too, and banished our crying youngster to a room that is supposed to represent comfort and safety, where she can now feel punished and ignored. Ideally, this familiar space may offer her some sense of consolation, giving her a chance to settle down, and think about where she crossed the limitation that got her into trouble. Once that’s out of the way, she’ll entertain herself or perhaps just curl up on her bed and sleep.

However, the behavior has not been addressed and the child isn’t sure why he was bad or if the consequences changed anything. He knows that this will happen again, but he doesn’t believe that he has a choice in his conduct or misconduct pattern.

Seldom will a child be adept enough to ask about the rules, or why they are important. When she does use “why” in search of reasons, she may often be told, “because I said so, that’s why.” That response creates frustration which in turn, exposes more rancor and resentment on her part and creates more anxiety for parents. A vicious cycle, if you will.

Long term studies and programs report that as early as the age of 2, children can learn what is expected of them, what consequences really mean, and that they can be part of the problem solving. They respond well to making plans for their behavior changes and begin to learn to think for themselves.

The magic skill here, for parent and child, is DIALOGUE. Real conversation, after the heat of the misunderstanding has subsided and the parties involved can sit together in a calm atmosphere. Then the healing can begin.

Our approach to talking and listening with our children is of utmost importance. When they were wee babies, they communicated quite effectively with us to have their needs met. Even then, they could sense the distinction between an angry response from us, or one of love and tenderness. They were introduced to the reality of life through our attitude, tone of voice, and touch. They learned by experimentation to get what they wanted; their experiences taught them what worked and what didn’t, long before their verbal skills permitted them to express and demand.

Let’s think about the grocery store, a place where those verbal demands have their field day! When a small whiner insists on a cereal that Mom knows will fill his body with salt, sugar, and possibly sawdust, can she take the time to stop, explain in the child’s language that his particular food isn’t good for him? Can he choose another and then hold it close to him for the rest of the time spent in the store? Or does he hear “No!” and feel a slap on the hand without any information. That response would leave him feeling outside of the decision process and rob him of small child dignity.

If that same little person is a constant source of interruption when her mother is on the phone, it's usually because attention has been diverted away from her for those moments and she is at a loss. When given alternative choices of different things she can do during the conversation and the activities are provided, she can be occupied and reasonably quiet until Mother hangs up the phone. A fun sidetrack is a play phone so the waiting child can have pretend talks with friends, "just like Mommy," with no interruptions, of course.

I'm not suggesting that there should be a constant flow of explanation, but once a child becomes aware that he is included in making choices, he welcomes and internalizes the reasoning concept. When we say "hot" as a little one nears the stove, he believes us and knows we are protecting him from pain.

If she is determined to find out for herself, of course she owns the consequence, but the warning has been an honest one and she remembers. When unacceptable behavior enters into the child rearing picture, there is no question that something must be done. That effort must accomplish the aspect of teaching this small perpetrator to take responsibility for her actions. Once again we must start early.

Myrna Shure, Ph.D., developmental psychologist, is author of a new book, "Raising A Thinking Child." She finds the dialogue approach to be extremely effective, the premise being that during the calm periods, parent and child can reach sensible solutions, with both contributing to the outcomes.

Questions like, "What could you have done differently when you got so angry?" "What else might have been better than screaming and falling on the floor?" "Can you make a plan for different behavior the next time you begin to feel angry?" And most important, "Can you tell me how you were feeling then and how you are feeling now?"

Expressing feelings opens the door to understanding. Ms. Shure reminds us to be attentive listeners. Children want to know that we are really paying attention and when they feel that is the case, they in turn, listen to us.

Your child has a voice and he feels empowered when he can share in making the decisions. His self-esteem is nurtured as he begins to take part in his own discipline. This partnership is the catalyst for a changing attitude—the magic of raising a thinking child. As life situations balance out, this youngster will move on into adolescence with a sense of security and self assurance. Juveniles who have matured in this kinship will have internalized the values of morality, self respect, and respect for others.

They will seldom, if ever, have a desire to do anything against the laws of the land or of nature. They will be eager to learn and unafraid to show their enthusiasm. These are the attributes we ascribe to for our younger generation and we must be willing to spend the time required to assure that they have the tools to build a happy, responsible future.

Ms. Barbara Coloros, author of "Kids Are Worth It," says that when children have a conflict, our job as parents is not to solve the problem, but to say to our child, "I know you can handle it." And she agrees that this process can begin at about 2 ½ years of age. When it is suggested to one or more children involved in a conflict, that they need to make a plan, an agreed upon method to resolve their differences, they will come up with such a plan. If it is not a good plan, some adjustments must be made until children and parents are satisfied and supportive.

A psychologist for Dade County, FL., schools says that a child who will get in a car with a stranger, is a child who is always being told what to do. A child who is taught to make responsible decisions, can make a “safety decision” right on the spot. When children are in control of their behavior, they can avoid the dangers that they will inevitably face in this society. Florida school teachers report that children who have experienced decision-making programs also improve their school work and get along better with peers and teachers; even very shy youngsters learn to participate and make friends easily.

The principle of the dialoguing/problem-solving approach is to teach children the reasoning skills that will give them an understanding of what to do, what not to do, and why. They find that their behavior does have an impact on others as well as themselves, and that good behavior contributes to happiness and harmony.

Teachers, psychologists, trainers, and parents agree that parenting is not having power and control over their children but being a prime source of their preparation and rehearsal for adult living. Our loving task is to foster their development, enrichment, improvement, discipline, and self regard. We must talk with and listen to our children.

Lodie Fuller, a free lance writer and relaxation therapist, is an ongoing student of child/parent psychology. She has volunteered at Skipworth Detention Center for more than 10 years, working with troubled youth.

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