

Breaking Your Bad Discipline Habits

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Okay, your six- and eight-year old boys are in the back seat of the car, strapped in and heading home from school. And then it starts, “Mom, can we drive through and get some fries and a soda? Huh, Mom...please Mom...I’m dying of thirst and he’s starving! Huh, huh, huh?” This is just what you need—you had visions of hurrying home, unloading the boys and getting them started on their homework with a quick snack from the fridge. And, you really don’t have the cash to spend on fast food nor the inclination to give your kids junk to eat right after school. But, you’re also not in the mood for the verbal onslaught that undoubtedly will follow a flat-out denial, so you do what just about any harried mom would do—you mumble a quick “maybe, we’ll see”. Well, that will buy you about 10 minutes until the golden arches are in sight but at least it gets you out of the car pick-up line and on the road without an argument from the guys. But boy, oh boy do you pay for that maneuver as you deftly pass by all of the fast food joints and swing into the driveway at home. Now the kids are really furious since you “promised” (and when did “maybe” mean “yes”?) and didn’t follow through on your word, at least from their point of view.

When *maybe* really means *no*

One of the most frequent disciplinary mistakes that I see parents make is trying to sidestep an issue with their children by saying *maybe* or *perhaps* when they absolutely know that they will not or cannot comply with the request. Why do we do this? Well, to buy time, that’s why! Most folks do not like disappointing their kids, nor having to endure a barrage of nagging, whining and pleading. At the moment they will do just about anything to avoid saying no and that’s when the fun begins. It really only buys them a few minutes or maybe hours, and children who can’t remember to brush their teeth *never* forget when you’ve said *maybe* to a request. It’s just a fact of kid human nature, it’s nothing that you’ve done wrong. Parents want to avoid a fuss and kids want what they want when they want it. Pure and simple.

The effective way to handle it:

If you want your children to tone down the nagging, muster the guts to say *no* when you really mean *no*, take the flack for a minute and then describe the negative consequences that will occur if they don’t knock it off! If they calm down... great. But if they don’t they will lose privileges for their misbehavior.

When *no* may really mean *yes*

Then there's the parental mind set that drives kids nuts—when their requests are automatically denied with a definite and resounding *no* from a parent who really hasn't even processed it. As soon as Mom or Dad hears “Hey, can we.....?” you say *no* without really listening to the request. It's almost as if you're on auto-pilot and even if the kid asked for something reasonable, you've denied it without hearing the child out. Of course, that method doesn't sit well with the troops as they feel that you don't listen nor care about their feelings, wants and desires.

The effective way to handle it:

Listen...think it over...and then answer the child. If you really can't give a yes or a no at that moment then tell your son or daughter, “I need some time to think about that or to ask your father what he wants to do. We'll let you know right after dinner.” If the child fusses about needing an answer *immediately*, let he or she know that the answer will be *no* if they insist on an immediate response. Also state that there's a decent chance that, given time to think, plan and check your schedule, you really may be able to comply. Then it's the child's choice as to whether to get smart and give you the time to think (and maybe go along with the request) or to push you into a knee-jerk *no* since you haven't been able to take a breath and consider all possibilities. *Most kids feel good about waiting for an answer if you give them a **definite time** by which you will get back to them.*

When yelling is your first reaction

Have you turned into the screamer that you always said that you'd never be? Do you reprimand loudly as a knee-jerk reaction to your child's rudeness or misbehavior? Or, do you say things that, the minute they're out of your mouth, you regret having said? Well, join the club, as many parents find themselves behaving in ways toward their children that they are embarrassed to admit. Kids have a way of pushing our hot buttons, and some children are pros at it! But, that doesn't negate the negative effects that screaming, reprimanding in a nasty tone of voice, or calling kids names (stupid, irresponsible, lazy) have upon your child's self-esteem. Hurtful comments can be apologized for, but they are never really forgotten, or forgiven. Children become resentful when they are screamed at, and rarely is this an effective way of getting your child's attention, and therefore the possibility of behavior change.

The effective way to handle it:

Although it may seem easier at the moment to yell at the kid, or to call him lazy or irresponsible (even if his actions are lazy or irresponsible), please don't give in to the urge. As an adult you do have control over what comes out of your mouth, but it may not always be easy to exert that control. If you see that you are becoming a screamer, work at stopping yourself as you feel your blood beginning to boil. You know the feeling, when you just want to blow your top because once again, grape juice has been spilled on the carpet and you've told the kids at least a million times not to take it out of the kitchen. Screaming at them obviously doesn't work, or the juice rule (“only in the kitchen”)

would be followed. Count to ten, take a trip to the bathroom and wash your face, or have the child go into time-out while you decide what to do. The consequence may be that your daughter will have to try to clean up the mess, donate money to rent a carpet cleaner, or do extra chores that weekend while you steam clean the rug. Or, if you're using a behavior management system (which I highly recommend to all families), give the child demerits and the misbehavior may result in the loss of all privileges that day and the daily allowance. If you absolutely can't come up with a consequence that makes sense at the moment, tell your child that there will be a significant negative event happening later that day, but that you'll get back to her after dinner with the verdict. Buying time gives you the space to cool off, lets the kid stew about the possible consequences, and you won't have to resort to ineffective yelling or name-calling. *Remember, if yelling really worked with children, we wouldn't resort to screaming at our kids often, since it would change their behavior.* As is usually doesn't work (children become immune to screamers), you're wasting your time and your vocal chords, stressing yourself out unnecessarily, and making yourself feel guilty since your behavior is somewhat out of control.

When consequences don't matter

It's all too common when we are given a 10-day prescription for, say, an upper respiratory infection, to stop taking the meds after 7 days as the symptoms appear to be waning and we're feeling better. But, all too often we find ourselves back at the doctor's office the next week because the watered down medication regimen didn't work and another round of antibiotics is in order. Analogous to that situation is using watered down, ineffective consequences with our children. So many parents employ too-short time-out periods, or time-out in the bedroom with the kid's CD player, TV or toys available. Or, they take away electronics privileges (anything that plugs into the wall or uses batteries) for only an hour or two during which the child is easily distracted by playing with siblings or enjoying a board game. On the reward side of consequences, many folks use privileges as dangling carrots that are just not that big of a deal to their kids (a trip to the library, 50 cents daily allowance for a 14-year-old). Of course these consequences won't get the kid's attention, they don't really matter! Recently I was speaking with a fourth grader who told me that the only consequence that occurred in school for not turning in homework was that "his card was flipped" (from the green to the yellow and then to the red). When I asked what happened if the day ended with the card on the red he noted that "nothing happens...that's why I don't bother to do my homework." Wrong answer, but honest from the kid's point of view!

The effective way to handle it:

Make consequences count. If they don't get the child's attention you're wasting your time. Time-out may have to be in a quiet hall for an *extended* period of time. Know your child—if 5 minutes in the thinking chair does the trick (better behavior follows) then that's great to use. But some kids, of the more ornery ilk, may need 15, 20 or even 30

minutes of time-out in the hall, the bathroom or another safe, but boring place. If your child lives for TV, video games and music then take away all electronics for the next 24 hours. Put up a sticky note on your refrigerator to remind you the next day that electronics are forbidden...don't count on Junior to remind you! Make the rewards interesting too...crank up the daily allowance for chores completed and good behavior to a level that gets your son's or daughter's attention, but is still within your financial means. And, let them spend the money the way that they want to (the purchase has to be legal, safe, and allowed in your home). Too many rules and restrictions on using their money waters down the effectiveness of an allowance. If you're using privileges make them interesting to your individual child's desires—some kids love a trip to Chuck E. Cheeses, while others would rather go to the zoo, rent a video, or have a friend spend the night.

When there's too much talk and not enough action

I can't tell you the number of my kid clients who complain that their parents yak, yak, yak...lecture, lecture, lecture but really do nothing about the kid's behavior or action. A whole lot of threatening without much follow-through is a recipe for family disaster, but that's how many parents discipline their children. Talk is cheap, and trust me folks, it's not really listened to. The kid can write a dissertation on the dangers of jumping on the couch or running out in the street without looking both ways...he's heard the lecture many, many times. But that doesn't mean that the yakking will change his behavior.

The effective way to handle it:

When you make a rule—stick to it. Clearly state (in 25 words or less, yes...count them!) what the child did to break the rule (stuffing dirty clothes behind the bed) and what will *definitely* occur the next time it happens (he'll have to fold the entire family's clothing by 7 PM that night). Keep it short, make eye contact with the child while describing the sequence of events, and move on. Don't belabor the point—the kid heard you and now has to decide whether you'll follow-through with the consequence, and if he believes that you will, whether the consequence is noxious enough to motivate him to stop stuffing his own dirty clothes behind the bed. If it works, great—move on to the next part of the day. If it doesn't, and his nasty socks and shirt are creating a distinct odor make him clean them up and while he's at it fold *everyone's* clothes that are in the dryer that day. End of story. No ifs, ands, or buts...and, no further lectures or yakking about it!

When you're questioning rather than requesting

Asking a seven-year-old "Would you like to turn off your favorite TV show and take your bath now?" will most likely be met with either a resounding *no!* or simply with silence. You've been ignored again. Get used to it...you're a parent! By *asking* rather than by *requesting* a behavior from your child you are literally giving him or her the choice as to whether to comply or not. If that's the case and you really don't care if the

child takes the bath at that time then your statement is fine. But, if what you *really* meant was “Sarah, I want you to turn off the TV and hop in the bath, it’s almost bedtime”, then you needed to have stated it as a request or a demand, making it clear to the child that putting it off to later is not an option.

The effective way to handle it:

Stop and think before talking...that should take care of the problem. *Use the correct language*...if you want something done at or by a certain time, then state it definitively—exactly what it is that you want, and started or completed by a certain time. I’ve found that most kids, when asked to do something usually want to put it off until a more convenient time, which could also be never. So, take away that option—stating “Please be in the tub before 8:30 PM (or beat the 10 minute buzzer if you are using that system). You can read in bed after that for a few minutes, and then I’ll come in to tuck you in.” Clear and simple. If the child does not comply with your request (and remember, it was not a question, it was non-negotiable), give a consequence (no TV the next day or loss of outside playtime). And, be sure to follow-through with the consequence by leaving yourself a reminder note for the next day.

When *now* means *whenever*

A similar ineffective disciplinary habit occurs when parents are *fuzzy* in terms of when things are to occur or to be accomplished. As adults, we pretty much know that when we ask someone to do something *now*, it’s mutually agreed upon that that means “at *this* time”, or “within a few minutes”. But kids just don’t get it, mainly because they don’t want to be interrupted when doing something that’s interesting to them and having to turn their attention and efforts to accomplishing something that may not be fun (such as completing homework). Children will diligently argue, and sometimes quite convincingly so, that they were “about to do it, on their way, just getting ready to get up and wash their hands, turn off the TV, complete their homework...whatever.” The truth is that most of the time they are putting off the inevitable until the last minute, or Mom’s nagging gets louder or it’s time to get in the car and go to school.

The effective way to handle it:

Get a portable, digital countdown timer and use it! Kids respond beautifully to “beat the buzzer”, and will almost always comply and get moving when you’ve made your request. Use the timer to get them into the shower, out of the bathroom, dressed on time, out to the car to help you carry in the groceries or to begin their homework. Children thrive on structure and timing is one of life’s most tangible ways to organize the day. It also is the fairest way to discipline your children. State what needs to be accomplished, give the time limit, mention the consequence that will occur if not completed on time...and set the buzzer. Life is good with a timer—the kids can’t complain that you didn’t warn them, and best of all...it works!