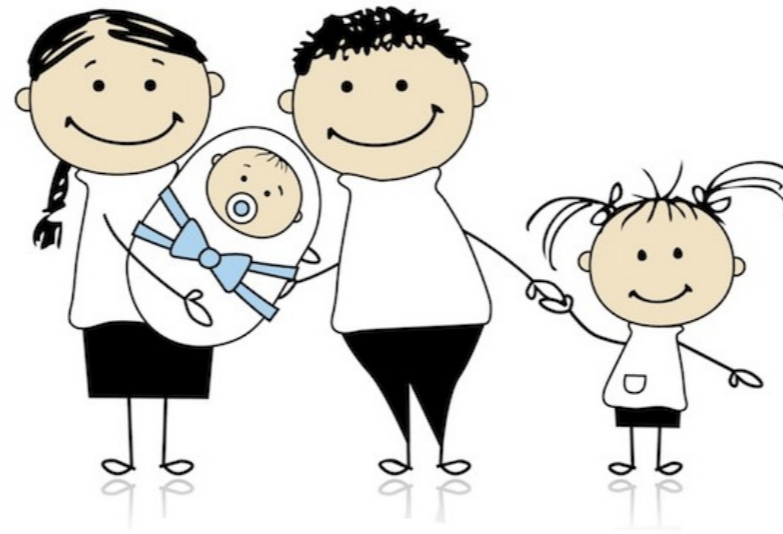

The Intentional Parent

Becoming a Competent Family Leader



an easy and sensible approach to “leadership parenting”

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Part One: Introduction



Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

John Kennedy

I have been fortunate to be able to share a lot of my experiences as a psychologist who works with kids and families, in books that I have written and seminars that I have conducted. I have always wanted to write a book that presents an easy to follow, very specific approach to parenting education -- one that is easy to read, easy to share and discuss, and easy to conduct seminars and trainings around. *The Intentional Parent* has become that book for me.

Part One of *The Intentional Parent* is a parenting framework. This framework helps my readers understand how intentions, actions and outcomes form the foundation for becoming a competent leader. Looking at parenting from a leadership perspective has become important to me because as I write this I believe children are facing a lot of challenges. Today's kids are growing up in a world where they are influenced by media, technology, the fracturing and recombining of families, early introduction to drugs, alcohol and sexual behavior. Whether these have always been issues, or whether they are more influential issues because they come into kid's lives sooner is hard to say, but I speak to thousands of parents every year and I know they are searching for answers to the question of how to be more effective at influencing their kids to navigate the tough times of growing up. Strong parents make strong kids and I am convinced that focusing parents on the concept of leadership is beneficial to everyone.

Part Two of *The Intentional Parent* is general parenting knowledge - descriptions of common parenting concerns with specific advice on what you can handle alone and when you

should seek outside help. The advice in this section is mostly geared to kids up to age twelve. If you want content that is related specifically to teens, you can get a copy of *Dr. Peter's Guide to Teen Parenting* from the Apple iBook Store or from www.tribecakidcoach.com.

The leadership coaching in Part One will help my readers better understand the process of parenting. Part Two concentrates on situational knowledge. Part Two is not an encyclopedia of parenting topics. Instead it is a good sampling of parenting topics across the developmental continuum and I recommend reading all of them even if your kids are older or younger than the ages of the kids in the vignettes and anecdotes I have included. The second reason for Part Two of *The Intentional Parent* is to provide material for discussion at the parenting seminars I teach. There are common elements in the situations that can help stimulate your thinking and acting even if your situations are not exactly the same.

PART ONE: THE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

The Broad Strokes

Here is a brief overview of the leadership framework or “go to” principles involved in becoming an intentional parent.

The Intentional Parent concentrates on these principles:

Principle One: Effective parenting is a function of competent family leadership

Principle Two: Competent family leaders ...

- lead with intention
- motivate their family members with love, high expectations and structure
- communicate their expectations clearly and consistently
- set limits which outline the natural consequences of breaking family rules

A Time for Leadership

Today's parents are more oriented toward the concept of leadership than the parents I worked with 25 years ago when I first started a practice in child psychology. Women play more important roles now in business, commerce and world leadership, and hopefully will gain even more ground in these areas. They can relate more with leadership roles than my mom clients did in the past.

Men appreciate the roles of women in the family more now than a quarter century ago, and are more willing to “co-chair” the family team, making stronger efforts in family chores that were more traditionally occupied almost solely by mothers.

These are some of the sociocultural reasons that parents might embrace a parenting approach that emphasizes leadership -- but there is also a much more practical reason. When parents speak to me about what frustrates them most, it is that they struggle

with what role to play in the lives of their children. They do not want to be too strict. They want to give children “choices,” (even though some of the choices they are given should not be made by kids). They do not want to be disliked by their kids and are afraid their relationship might not ever be reconciled if they show anger or resentment. If anything, today's parenting is often passed through filters of anxiety, guilt and regret.

I hope to influence parents to see an advantage in looking at their roles with the more positive perspective that “leadership” implies as opposed to the more negative connotation that “disciplinarian” might suggest to some. However, good leaders are good disciplinarians, and it is my intent to help you learn that being a good disciplinarian does not mean you have to bark at, punish your kids, or stifle their spirits.

Breaking a Child's Spirit or Promoting Clear Expectations?

When parents tell me “*I don't want to break his (or her) spirit,*” as an excuse for not wanting to introduce parenting expectations a child might see as negative (like clear boundaries and high expectations), what they are telling me is that they are afraid to lead their children.

Unless parents have clear intentions about what kind of behavior is appropriate and what is not, they develop parent-child relationships that tend to be chaotic and driven by the whims of their kids. They ignore behavior that represents poor judgment, disrespect, impulsivity, and aggression, believing that these negative behaviors are merely a function of “self expression.” As a result they parent with a blind eye as to how these behaviors shape their children's futures, or worse yet they parent with fear of rejection from their kids, and anxiety, walking on eggshells whenever they want their children to behave.

This can make children feel as though they are the most powerful people in the family, and so kids become insulted when they are not permitted to exercise whatever wish is floating around in their heads (i.e. “I want to eat cookies for breakfast.”) You can preserve your child's curiosity, “spirit”, independence and personal flair but at the same time you also have to teach your child that part of their future success will be adjusting to the demands of certain environments where rules and boundaries are important -- like school, on the playing field and when they are someone else's house.

When you are uncomfortable telling your child to stop talking, be respectful, stop misbehaving, pay more attention, do chores, etc., there are lots of other authority figures who won't hesitate to, and they will often do it without the love and affection you would deliver those messages with. Inevitably parenting criticisms are directed at you when your child ignores the admonitions and you get

called up to school for a good talking to. Then the guilt comes; or you might assume the teacher or other significant adult does not really understand your child, or that your child deserves a break at home given the pressure and stress of other environments. Good work habits, respect for others, and self-control all “follow the leader.”`

Parents As “Friends”

I have often found it quite ineffective to try to persuade parents to be more strict, expect more from their kids, stick to the consequences they lay out, and incentivize kids without giving them too much “up front,” without them earning it. Sometimes, parents tell me, “I don’t want my kids to feel the way I did when I was growing up.” When parents tell me they don’t want to feel the way they did growing up I answer back, “How do you know your kids won’t feel worse because you were not the kind of “friend” that they wish you were?” Kids rarely stay close to their childhood friends, but you are a parent forever.

Curiously, when I ask parents if they would like to learn to be better “leaders,” and to be able to teach their children the importance of being “successful leaders,” almost everyone can listen to that and guide their children through all sorts of challenging life experiences. The two relationships, friend and leader are simply not on the same plane.

The basic framework of the parenting education approach I lay out in *The Intentional Parent* is so simple, that even the most anxiety ridden parent can pull it off. Hopefully, the benefits you reap from this approach will bring you to your next level of evolution, not only as a parent, but as a person as well.

Intentions, Actions and Outcomes and The Leadership Framework

The leadership framework I present in this book, revolves around three simple ideas:

- intentions
- actions
- outcomes

After this framework is laid out, I will focus you on how to be an effective motivator, how to communicate effectively and how to help your children understand the relationship between behavior and consequence.

In my parenting approach, I ask parents to think and ask questions:

“What do I want to happen in this interaction with my child?”

What do I have to do to make what I want to happen, actually happen?”

“Did I do it? Did I make it happen? Why? Why not?”

You might be wondering, “Is this really a method? Isn’t this what I do all the time, anyway?” I find that most intelligent people ask themselves these questions, but they don’t do it enough and they don’t do it with purpose, and frequently, they abandon perfectly good parenting strategies because they don’t work the first time, or they don’t work every time.

I want you to interact with your kids in ways that are purpose-driven and methodical. You, in turn, can teach and share strategies with your partner, and your kids will in turn model this behavior and live their own lives in more purposeful and methodical ways.

Encouraging a Thinking Methodology In Your Kids

Part of the way your kids will benefit from your leadership style is that they will model (imitate) it. The other way they will benefit from your leadership style is that you will shape it by bringing their intentions, actions and outcomes into your parenting talks and discussions with them.

Doing this is as simple as focusing your children on *their* intentions, actions and outcomes, often with some very simple questions:

What were you thinking about when you...[did whatever you did].

What could you have done differently instead of...[whatever you did]

What do you think about how things turned out?

Parents worry about how they will approach their children when trying to encourage insight and behavior change. Breaking things down to intentions, actions and outcomes is a simple and effective strategy that will allow you to approach your children from a position of leadership throughout their lives.

You will find that kids are often at a loss for being able to respond to these questions, but getting an accurate answer to them is not really all that important. If they could answer those questions, they would probably have not misbehaved in the first place!

Like many parenting strategies, you have to wait for a “payoff.” But you will see that questions like these “prompt” intentional thinking because you are encouraging the habit of self awareness in your kids.

Tell Me What You Are Thinking

When I ask parents what they think about when they are interacting with their children, they either tell me something very vague like “I want my kids to know I love them,” which is a very wonderful goal, but it isn’t a very complete goal and it usually doesn’t stop children from whatever misbehavior might be going on. Or, parents tell me something like, “I want them to stop nagging me,” which is important for parents if one of your goals is to keep from losing your mind, but achieving this alone might not teach kids anything. I would consider both of these goals to be great secondary goals, but they do not address building strong character or navigating the difficult times in life.

You can get your kids to feel love and you can get them to nag you less -- and you can do it while teaching them to be:

- smart risk takers with good judgment
- hard workers
- excellent partners in many different types of relationships
- comfortable with who they are

In my program, parents and children learn together, learn from one another, succeed together and fail together -- as a team, with the parents as the team leaders, the driving force in helping kids meet life’s challenges.

Warm up: Know Your Child’s Temperament

Before you undertake any attempt to be coached or educated by anyone about parenting, know that you are the ultimate expert, because you know your kid(s) better than anyone else. No one knows your child’s basic style of temperament as well as the people who spend every day with them.,

In the debate over whether we are more the products of our genetic make up or the environment around us, the best conclusion science has to offer is that we are certainly strongly influenced by both.

To be an effective parent it is very important to your success as well as your sanity to understand that your child came into this world with predispositions in their behavior and approach to the world.

Temperament is the genetic contribution to behavior and can, at least in part, reflect whether your child is an easy going, good listening, calm, flexible, attentive and happy child; or whether he or she is difficult, stubborn, oppositional and even grumpy child.

Parents are almost always aware of what their children's temperaments are, but often do not realize that difficult behavioral traits do not always come from what you are doing, right or wrong, as a parent. Before we knew that children had temperamental qualities it was common for people who were experts in the field of child development to attribute the cause of difficult behavior in children to "parenting mistakes." Now we know that children who are spirited, oppositional, rigid and stubborn, and even aggressive can be born with tendencies to be that way, and even if there were a way to do things perfectly, it would not have much effect on a child's behavior.

Does this mean that behavior that is influenced by temperament is impossible to change? No, not at all, but it might mean that many, many more repetitions or corrections might be needed to create that change, and it might mean that your "workload" as a parent might be higher than a child with a more easy going temperament.

We don't know why yet but some parents are blessed with children who are easier to raise. It is entirely possible to have several children with very different behavioral styles.

Here are some typical behavioral traits which can be influenced by temperament:

Shyness - doesn't seem to like to meet new people, anxious. This child doesn't like to be singled out. Does not want to socialize with peers.

Stubbornness - hates being told what to do. This child won't do what others are doing in a group, and wants to do "her own thing." Also, this child hates being told what to do and often out at authorities.

Intense - emotionally reactive. This child can be dramatic and grandiose, and likes to be the center of attention.

People pleasing - socially aware. This child is motivated to please. She is compliant, and has a natural sense of gentility. She is sensitive to the needs of others. She wants to impress.

This is not a complete list but rather descriptions of some behavior that is influenced by temperament.

Sometimes temperament is observed as a "tendency" in a child who might be a bit left or right of average, and sometimes temperamental behavior shows itself as a moderate to extreme behavior. If your child is an extremely difficult child to raise, consider speaking with your pediatrician about it, or consulting a child behavior expert.

Turning Concept Into Action

Throughout *The Intentional Parent* you will find that my tendency is to present an idea, give you some examples of how to turn that idea into a parenting action, then further discuss and summarize. Your first example of this is right here, in this discussion about temperament:

If you have a spirited, difficult child pick and chose your battles. You will exhaust and frustrate yourself if you make correcting every bothersome behavior a battle of wills.

Remember that it is important to always try to bring your child's focus and energy to your level. Do not "stress up" to your child's level because chances are he or she will raise the bar and escalate the situation even more.

Try not to punish a child for what he cannot control. It is better to help your child improve behavior by rewarding effort for good behavior than to punish for bad behavior.

Knowing your child's temperament has little bearing on the practical advice I try to give here. You will probably want to try almost everything, though not everything will lead to immediate success. When it comes to evaluating the "outcome" of how you parent your children, you might want to reflect on your child's temperament, and know that if you lead with intention, it might take time and a lot of repetition but eventually you will get results!

The Format and Style of This Book

As you will see by how many times I refer to the notion, "less is more," is a very important concept to me. After writing a dozen "paper and ink" books with traditional editors and publishers, I am now interested in developing books that connect me with my audi-

ence through social networks on and off the internet. Electronic publishing has made it possible for me to add value to my writing by updating, adding and revising continuously. As I talk to more and more people, I will provide more feedback and value added information through the website associated with the book. The book itself will ultimately become updated and revised based on what my audience would like to see. I also look forward to taking my show “on the road” in the form of coffee talks and seminars so look for me in your neighborhood. Better yet, invite me to your small or large group!

I am currently in Revision 1.0

Visit the website www.tribecakidcoach.com to download the newest version and to get your value added content.

Let's begin!

Intentions



Absolute identity with one's cause is the first and great condition of successful leadership.

Woodrow Wilson

To be a good leader, you must be a clear thinker, and part of developing the clarity of thought required to lead is to be an “intentional thinker.”

Planning and Practicing in Your Mind’s Eye”

One of the most overlooked areas of study in psychology is the psychology of intention, but hopefully, it will not be overlooked for that much longer. Research over the last fifteen years or so is showing how important intention is to success in many areas in life.

Intention can be explained in a lot of ways, but the simplest way is, the more you think about something you want to achieve, the more success you will have at achieving it.

However, the thinking must involve planning, “practicing in your mind,” strategizing about the outcome and goal being goal directed. Intentional thinking is not the same as “wishing for success,” or blindly “visualizing,” -- these are components of magical thinking more than they are the building blocks of goal directed behavior.

One bit of good news about the power of intention is that, it appears that the harder the chore, or the more complex the goal, the more effective thinking about it seems to be -- and parenting can be a hard chore.

The skeptical amongst you might say, “*Are you telling the only thing I have to do to be a better parent to my kids is think about it more?*” The answer is: “*No, but that’s definitely where you should start.*” When you think about parenting your kids (and to be a bit more precise we are talking about *thinking about doing*) you should focus on the following:

- knowing what your intention is
- interacting with kids in a calm, assertive manner (tough to do but always possible to get better at)
- being brave enough to end ridiculous conversations by saying, “Sorry, but that’s all the conversation we are going to have about this,” and ignoring the rest of the pestering, the tantrums and the whining that follows
- understanding that immediate action-reaction (your action leading to a child’s reaction or improved behavior) payoffs can be few and far between

Identifying Your Intentions

Can a person think about absolutely nothing? I, for one, would be very envious of anyone who could think about nothing! The brain is quite a busy organ. It processes information, some estimates say, at a rate of 20 million billion calculations per second.

Actually, the problem is the opposite, especially in the the lives of busy people with a lot of responsibilities. People, it seems, are thinking about *everything*, so much so, that their thoughts jump and race, with no particular priority until something interrupts that flow of information which requires action. The result of being in that particular mode of behavior is that we become very *reactive*, and a problem with reactive thinking is that it permits the demands of the immediate environment to have priority over goal-directed thinking. Of course, that is not the only kind of thinking people do, but I think a liability of faced paced lifestyles is that the faster we move, the less goal-directed thinking we tend to do, and therefore we lose the benefits that intentional thinking can provide.

Some might disagree and say, if I am listening to demands and knocking things off my “to do” list, certainly I am “goal-directed.” The goal directedness people achieve when they multi-task is not the same as the kind of intentional thinking I am talking about, which is highly concentrated and very focused on achieving what I call a “local” goal.

Local goals are specific problem solving efforts, which might very well be part of a larger strategy, in this case the strategy being the *global* goal of , “how do I create a really desirable, happy, confident person in my child?”

To gain these benefits we have to practice two things:

- thinking
- thinking about thinking

Thinking versus Thinking about Thinking

Practicing thinking is a simple matter of focusing your attention on one thing -- for the purposes of this book, that one thing would be parenting your children as a good family leader. The tips and discussions we have throughout this book will give you lots of food for (focusing your) thoughts on leadership.

Thinking about thinking, (the fancy word for this is “metacognition,”) is a bit more difficult to explain, but the best way I have found to share this idea with people is to say that thinking about thinking is “quality control for your inner voice.” We do this by knowing what we are thinking about, and asking:

- What are the possible outcomes associated with acting on that thought?
- Now that I have considered these outcomes was that really a good thought?
- Can I put my minds eye on performing actions that will lead to good outcomes?

Most people do this some of the time, but not nearly enough, and when you are trying to change your behavior *you have to thinking about thinking with extra effort.*

To get the best benefit from intentional thinking, sit in a quiet place (some people can even make a quiet place in their minds even if they are in a distracting environment), pose a problem to yourself, for example:

“How can I get my five year old son to be more polite and not so fresh?”

Then run through various scenarios for how to deal with it, for example:

- I will take away his favorite toy
- I will ignore him when he talks in a fresh way
- I will sit him down for a good talking to
- I will give him a time out
- I will encourage him to communicate the same thing without the freshness and model the appropriate behavior

It might even help to write your strategies down in a list like the one above.

By the way, those ideas are good ones, in case you are trying to get your five year old to be more polite and less fresh.

Parenting Intentions

To make it a bit more specific to parenting, and *thinking* about parenting here are some points of reference for focusing your parenting intentions:

- *I intend to make my child's difficult behavior stop.*
- *I intend to ignore the feelings of frustration and anger I am experiencing and even ignore the behavior of my child, as long as he or she isn't doing anything harmful to himself or someone else.*
- *I intend to reward good behavior more frequently.*
- *I intend to be a good model of self control.*
- *I intend to judge myself not on a single action I take, but on the more important whole process of how I treat my children.*
- *I intend to show my child the relationship between freedom and responsibility.*
- *I intend to interrupt any violent or aggressive behavior shown to a child who has done nothing to warrant it.*
- *I intend not to give into whining and other oppositional behavior.*
- *I intend to stick to the consequences I lay out.*
- *I intend to be a good model of forgiveness and a better model for apologizing for regrettable behavior.*
- *I intend to help my child show anger with words more than with actions.*
- *I intend to teach my child the importance of confidence and the shame of arrogance.*
- *I intend for "no" to "mean "No."*
- *I intend to show my child how to see the beauty in what other people often overlook.*
- *I intend to lead by example.*

- *I intend to be a better parent than I am a friend, because friends come and go, even good ones, and you often need to be popular to be someone's friend.*

This is not an all inclusive list, but I would bet if you could accomplish the outcomes related to these intentions and you did it with love and affection you would have a better than average if not fantastic kid.

Actions

The art of leadership is saying no, not saying yes. It is very easy to say yes.

Tony Blair



There are thousands of parenting intentions like the examples I gave above, but by comparison there are very few parenting *actions* you can take. The trick is finding an effective action to take in a given situation -- like when to address a behavior, when to ignore it, when to bring it up later, when to issue a consequence, etc.

Here is my short list of parenting actions which every parent should know how to employ:

- *offer a choice*
- *say no (offer no choice)*
- *set a limit*
- *communicate an expectation*
- *apply a consequence*
- *reward a behavior*
- *model a behavior*
- *provide information*
- *ignore a behavior/do nothing*

Sometimes more than one action fits an intention so don't put pressure on yourself to always find a perfect fit between action and intention. Sometimes there are better actions to take than others depending on the circumstances. Sometimes a parenting intention requires more than one action. What I am telling you is this is not something you need to be perfectionistic about. Utilizing the techniques above is what provides purpose to your intentions. They help you move from *thinking* to *doing*. Since every child is different with respect to their temperament, you might find that some actions work better than others. It is okay to experiment, all of life is an experiment. Wear your lab glasses!

PARENTING ACTION -- OFFERING CHOICES

Leaders Make Decisions and Direct Behavior: Give Choices but Limit the Type of Choice

Giving your child the opportunity to make a choice is a parenting “action,” but I find it is a source of great misunderstanding amongst parents. Your position as family leader requires that *you* take action, independently of what action your child wants you to take. Parents sometimes treat their children like “little equals” and somewhere along the line, parents have been given the impression that giving children choices is the best parenting tool you can employ. It isn’t. Some choosing is fine and recommended. If you give your child too many choices, she will think her opinion is as important as yours is, and her position with regard to family leadership is also equal -- and that will cause you to bicker with your child over things like why she doesn’t want to get in the car when you have some important place to go, whether she can have a new cell phone every other week, and whether she can order the most expensive item from a restaurant menu when you know she will not finish it.

We all enjoy having choices, but there are certain times when the only choice you have is to follow the wishes of the person in charge. Choice is often a privilege and that privilege should be earned by prior good behavior.

Often parenting experts recommend giving a child a choice about just about everything. If you offer too many choices then it becomes an expectation for the child, so when you don’t or can’t offer a choice, control over the environment passes to the child, you will not behave unless given options.

The Intentions

Here are some intentions to practice when reminding yourself that giving choices isn’t the solution to every parenting issue you encounter:

I want to give my child choices but it is not a good idea to teach my child to demand them.

I will give choices to show my child that I am a reasonable leader, but not a pushover.

Sometimes my priority to get things done is more important than giving my child choices.

It is not a good idea to teach my child to bargain and negotiate over every little thing.

Turning Intention to Action

A good way of helping your child understand the distinction of when she has a choice and when she does not is by making that distinction early on. Some things that you can say to help your child understand that it is your choice to give her a choice are:

From 2-5:

“You pick, *this time*.”

“What would you like to do *for now*.”

“I would like for you to help me decide.”

From 6-12

All of the above plus...

“I will give you your choice this time.”

“You can decide this one.”

“I think you can make this choice.”

“I’ve decided to let you decide.”

Best yet, connect it to some behavior in the recent past to show your child that there is a relationship between responsibility and freedom of choice such as:

“*Since, you did such a good job cleaning your room, you can choose xyz.*”

After watching parents give their kids too many choices (like the parent who asks the three year old, “*Where should we go out to eat tonight?*”), I have given the question of why parents find the advice to give children choices so easy to take. The reason, I think is because not giving children choices can be so hard to do! Putting your foot down and letting your child know he has no choice can result in whining, complaining, foot stomping, mouthing off, aggressive language, and a host of other undesirable behaviors. So, take a step back for a minute and answer this question: *Is it more important to give your child choices or to accept the choices you make for him?* The answer is that it depends on the situation. It is important to let your child know you are an open and fair minded leader, and not a self absorbed, tyrannical one. If you become the latter, then your kids will rebel against you and try to overcome your “government. “

Oppositional kids (kids who almost never want to listen) don’t know what they don’t know, and what they don’t know most is how important it is to absorb the wisdom of people who want to keep them out of trouble.

Here are some guidelines for giving children choices while remaining in a position of leadership:

Guideline Number One: Give choices when the choice is inconsequential (like the choice between two healthy food items).

What this sounds like when talking to a child:

“You can try the broccoli or have some carrots, whichever you want.” Then go back and give it the old college try, *“Now why don’t you give some broccoli a try?”* not *“Would you like to give some broccoli a try?”*

(Note about offering children food choices: Generally it does not pay to beg your children to eat certain foods. When parents have a very difficult time getting their children to accept healthy foods, it is because there are other not so healthy food choices in their lives. So if broccoli is what you are trying to get them to eat but fast food is a regular part of their food choices, good luck with that. Healthy eating is a habit. Fast foods are designed to have an impact on choice making. If the fast foods are not available, the healthy foods become the habit.)

Guideline Number Two: Give choices when you have specified a contingency that your child has successfully managed (like when you “make a deal” for a reward privilege, provide a choice of what privilege he or she may choose).

What this sounds like when talking to a child:

“I think its great that you were able to keep your promise about cleaning your room. Now that you’ve done such a great job, you can have your choice of downloading five songs, or you can have Billy here for a sleepover.”

Guideline Number Three: Give your child his or her choice of consequence for misbehavior, just make sure you specify what the choices are. Often, I tell parents to give their kids the choice between apologizing and taking a time out. However the apology cannot be lip service. When giving an apology, the child must be able to articulate what he should have done instead, or it’s straight to time out anyway. Also, if the child uses the apology as an maneuver to get away with whatever he or she is trying to get away with, straight to the time out as well.

What this sounds like when talking to a child:

“ You should not have tripped your brother. Do you have anything to say to him? How do you think you are going to handle things next time? ”

“You should not have tripped your brother. Say something to him to apologize or go to your room. Your choice.”

Guideline Number Four: Give your child the choice of timing themselves out for a while or accepting a more severe consequence.

What this sounds like when talking to a child:

“ You can either go to your room and take a time out, or there will be no television or video games after dinner. Your choice. ”

Guideline Number Five: Always praise good choices.

What this sounds like when talking to a child:

“ Thank you for walking away from your sister when she pushed you. That was a great choice. Let’s think of something special for you for your good effort.” (Always try to praise effort over results because if a child tries to do the right thing and fails, at least you can praise the choice to try to do the right thing. Since good effort always almost leads to good performance, eventually, it is important to reward and acknowledge effort.)

Guideline Number Six: Discuss bad behavior as bad choices or decisions, but not endlessly or the conversation will have no real meaning when your child makes a *really* bad choice. Creating a link between behavior and choice helps your child develop a voice of reason. Ultimately you want your child to reflect on his or her own choice making as a way of developing good judgement.

What this sounds like when talking to a child:

“Chatting online when you should have been studying was not a good choice. Computer will have to come out of your room and shut down at 7 PM until further notice.”

Summing Up

Giving choices might seem a bit confusing, but you can follow one basic rule of thumb and make the concept work for you with success: *Give choices, but do not give up leadership.* When your kids think they have as much say in the family business as you do, they have been convinced that they have the right to lead as much as you do -- they don't and it is your job to tell them that. And that is the lead in for the next section which is about telling your kids they DON'T have a choice.

PARENTING ACTION -- THE TAU OF NO

The Hard Work of Parenting is Sticking to Your Guns

Most of the hard work of parenting is dedicated to being more stubborn than your kids. In a battle of wills, nine times out of ten kids have the superior advantage.

First, they have more free time on their hands to nag, beg or protest. While you are trying to work, cook, shop, mow the lawn, break 90 on the links, survive, etc., they can afford to spend copious amounts of time campaigning for a new backpack, cell phone, pair of sneakers, permission to go somewhere you don't want them to go, and the like.

Second, a lot of us don't like to argue. Being argumentative is often considered an unsavory personality characteristic and most of us (except for the genuinely argumentative among us) want to avoid it. To top it off, we often do not want to deprive our kids of something they want, or are afraid kids will stop loving us if we cut them short in an argument over whether they can purchase a \$2500 laptop on the spur of the moment. To be a good family leader you must not be afraid to stand by your “No!”, and puppy eyes and begging shouldn't take you off your mark.

Alas, if only it were that easy -- it isn't, but it's *necessary*.

Cutting Short the Back Talk

Good leaders do not take “back talk,” and have enough clout behind their admonition to make their warning about cutting it out to stick. Okay, easier said than done with your kids but it should be done and it must be done because if you let your kids out argue you, out negotiate you and convince you to do something “just this once” (five hundred times in a row) you are not doing them any favors. You are merely teaching your kids that enough persistence applied to anything will pay off.

I hear some of you asking, “*Isn't that a good thing? Shouldn't I be teaching kids to be persistent?*” Of course you should. However, persistence in pursuit of a goal that comes with appropriate work and effort is far different from annoying someone into submission. Not everyone will have as much patience for begging, whining, nagging and relentless asking as you will, and those people who don't owe your child the patience that you might give them will get annoyed at your child, develop unsavory impressions of your child, and also tell other people your child is annoying.

Many children ultimately become smart enough to reserve the super obnoxious behavior only for their parents, and thank goodness for that. The advice still stands though, because why should you be the recipient of such exclusive aggravation?

Ultimately, it doesn't matter who your child is annoying, you or the whole world, the bottom line is that when you tell your child “*stop,*” “*no,*” “*not this time,*” “*maybe some other time,*” “*stop it now*” (as when you are trying to leave the house while they are playing video games), the child should respect that request. The reason for this is when you tell a child “*you can't...*” you are teaching them to respect a boundary. There's a lot of attention paid to helping kids understand “you can do anything you want to do if you put your mind to it,” and it is wise to teach children that hard work and effort can accomplish great things. However, it is just as important to teach kids to respect what is not theirs, respect the fact that other people's priorities might be more important than theirs are, and that the world does not present us with a menu of items that we can choose to be immediately bestowed on us.

Patience, respect, consideration, humility and self-control are all taught around the word “no,” and that is why “no” is an incredibly important word in your parenting vocabulary.

Have I Already Given In Too Much?

This should be a relatively easy question to answer. Do you...

- Argue with your child (over everything)?
- Feel as though your child is always in charge of “negotiations” and will only settle on his or her terms?
- Feel guilty about “giving in” but just do so because you want to stop being aggravated?
- Get into situations where your child is able to make you feel guilty about not giving him everything he wants even though in your heart you know you give him plenty?

If the answer to these types of questions is yes, you have a “control issue” on your hands. I say it this way because most parents hate the idea of their kids being in control of their behavior. Your instincts as a parent and a leader should be telling you that this is not the kind of balance of influence there should be between a parent and a child.

What makes this an even more difficult problem to solve is that children with difficult temperaments can make your parenting tug of war a losing battle every time.

The parent who leads with intention makes the understanding of “no” a top priority in how they structure their relationship with the children. And it should be a priority because the flip side of this battle is once you get it under control a lot of other parenting challenges become easier as well.

The Intentions

Here are some intentions to help you center your thoughts on the importance of “No!” What they are really telling you is to “stick to your “No’s” so that you do not communicate to your child that they can lead by being stubborn:

It is a fact of life that we do not get everything we ask or wish for. Teaching that to my child is an act of love.

Saying “No,” to my child might cause my child to be angry with me, but that anger will pass.

If I do not say no my child will grow up believing she is entitled to everything she asks for. I will try to prevent that.

I know that if I set a limit by saying no, future interactions with my child will be more pleasant.

Turning Intention to Action

Parenting intentions for setting and keeping limits are very important to practice. Every time you practice the intention of saying no and sticking to it, you fortify your resolve, you commit to a leadership stance, and you show your child that their technique of wearing you down is not as effective as your technique of being the decision maker in your family.

In the long run some aspects of parenting are simple numbers games. If you say “no” and stick to it, what you are also doing is not reinforcing your child’s arguing behavior. When your child argues with you and wins, he will argue again because you have shown him that arguing pays off. Whenever arguing works, even if it works one time, you are giving your child a coupon to argue and nag in the future. However, if you teach your child early on that arguing is a “dead end” there are much better odds that you will achieve the longer term objective of making “no” mean “no.”

When you are in your “intentional thinking” mode, reflect on the following:

When I do not give in to my child, I am teaching him to respect boundaries.

When I stick to ‘no’ as my answer I am contributing to raising a child who will not be seen as obnoxious and inappropriate.

I imagine my child whining and nagging to me and ignoring her because it will only give me more/worse problems later on.

I do not want to see myself as a parent who is at the mercy of my child’s nagging.

Temperamental Variability and The Rule of 1000

Some kids are easier to lead than others. This is an unalterable fact of genetic variability. What I am saying here is that some kids are born “difficult.” Stubbornness, behavioral inflexibility and oppositional behavior can (and pretty much does) appear in all children from time to time, but there are children who completely excel at it. If you have a difficult to manage child it is easy to feel like a bad parent. If you are doing your best to lead, you are not a bad parent, you just might not know enough about kids.

One of the most important things to know is that while children vary greatly in terms of their temperaments, their willingness to listen to their parents, and their desire to conform to the demands of the environment, the actions you take will remain the same. What will vary is the time and the number of repetitions it takes for those actions to produce results. That's where the Rule of 1000 comes in. When parents say, "*Dr. Peter, I did what you told me and it didn't work.*" I usually reply, "*Well don't worry, you only have 999 repetitions to go.*" When you are telling your child "no," you are teaching them not to argue and they are learning not to argue. Ever try juggling? With good instruction, some people learn after a dozen times. Some, however, take hundreds of tries. If you try to teach someone to juggle who could care less about juggling, but has no choice but to learn, it can take THOUSANDS of tries. So, learning is a matter of:

- instruction
- repetition
- motivation

Good leaders are also good teachers. They are patient with respect to the number of repetitions it takes people to learn. They also realize that not everyone has the same motivation.

Doing something right doesn't mean immediate results. Always remember that you are shooting for enough good parenting to get your kids out of the house and self sufficient with enough time left for you to be able to have your own life while all your parts are still in tact. And, on top of that, giving your kids enough love to make them want to take care of you when your some of your parts stop working.

Here are some actions that you can pair with the intention of "making no mean no." Making "no" stick is part of a three step process:

Step One: "The Listen"

When working with stubborn, oppositional behavior, less is more. Let your child express what she needs to express, then say,

"I've listened to you. I can't give you what you want," or

"I've listened to you. I can't do that," or

“I’ve listened to you. I can’t make that happen,”

OR

“I’ve listened and I can’t give you permission for that.”

Substitute “won’t” for “can’t” when kids are really coming after you with a lot of negative emotion, insinuating you are bad, evil, horrible, cheap, tyrannical, etc. (you know, the usual). Do not add “I’m sorry.” “I’m sorry” is a way that parents give up their leadership position.

Say you are sorry when you have done something wrong and when your children deserve an apology. Saying you are sorry is a great thing to model for your children because it models personal responsibility taking. When you say you are sorry for not caving to unreasonable demands (or demands that are reasonable but not practical) what you are saying is, “I’m sorry, but when I am behaving less badly I will give you what you want.”

Step Two: “The Reminder”

“The Reminder” is only required when there is push back after “The Listen.” Children will continue to campaign after a request is rejected. Depending on their temperament and their past history, you might see them “winding up,” in response to your decision. As their energy goes up, yours should go down. The reason for this is that if a child cannot get what she wants, sometimes making you upset is a good enough substitute. You have to show kids that they do not control your feelings (even though they do influence your feelings you can’t give them permission to make you feel bad after you have made a decision they do not like). “The Reminder” sounds like this, delivered in a calm tone, with less energy than your child is being driven by:

“I am still listening but I have already made my decision, and I don’t intend on changing it.”

With younger children (two to six) you can say:

“I am listening but it is still no.”

Once you give “The Reminder” your kids will never have a legitimate claim to you “not listening. Of course that will not stop them from saying you are not listening, but you just told them *twice* that you are.

Step Three: “The Shut Down”

Have you been a good listener and fair with respect to listening to your child’s perspective so far? At least according to me you have been. But wait, the pecking continues. Time for “The Shut Down.” The Shut Down represents your leadership option of closing a conversation. It sounds like this:

“I am not going to listen to this anymore. The conversation is over.”

With a younger child it is appropriate to ignore, simply walk away or give a time out. By the way, we are going to talk more about time outs as a parenting action but I will give you a quick tip here as well: Never threaten a time out. Just do it. Threatening a time out just gives kids the sense that they can continue behaving badly until you decide to take action.

Summing Up

No is probably the single most important word you can say to your child. It teaches respect for boundaries and it clarifies and reinforces your role as family leader. As with every other parenting action, children who have difficult temperaments will resist your attempts to control and direct them, but with time, patience and repetition, even stubborn kids will fall in line.

PARENTING ACTION -- LIMIT SETTING

Limit Setting: Not Always A Close Cousin of “No.”

If you do not set limits for your children, they will not have a good reference for self control. They might learn self control from other important figures in their lives, but in a world where people have a difficult time resisting unhealthy temptations like smoking, drinking too much, overeating, etc., it’s tough to disagree that self control is important--and that the best models for self control come from you.

Within a strong leadership model, you can teach self control by practicing it in your own habits (and to be perfectly blunt, if you are not in control of yourself, likely that you will not raise healthy, well functioning kids), and by teaching your children about the relationship between freedom and responsibility, by setting limits and then gradually reducing restrictions based on your child’s ability to show they can handle autonomy.

Do As I Say...

...not as I do. I would hate if someone were to point out my flaws and shortcomings and then suggest that these flaws are screwing up my kids.

Unfortunately there are instances where the habits and behaviors of parents do have a very negative impact on kids, and there are some very obvious ones. For instance:

- If you want to reduce the chances of your kids taking up smoking (because it kills you), you shouldn't smoke.
- If you don't want your kids to suffer all the impairments that people suffer when they are obese, don't buy junk food, don't sit around the house watching television, and do promote a family value of running around outside until you are breathing a bit hard.

Becoming a competent family leader means you can't deny the obvious outcome of being a bad role model, because if you do, your kids will be oblivious to the relationship between lifestyle and well being. All I am saying here is, that with respect to limit setting the first order of business is to lead by example, and of course to do it *intentionally*.

The Relationship Between Freedom and Responsibility

OK, no more lecturing you to straighten yourself out if you want to be a model for good self-control. That was only a few short paragraphs, but they are important ones.

Parents often confuse limit setting with the prior topic ("The Tau of No"), but they couldn't be more different. You say "no" to stop the topic of a conversation happening "right now." You set limits as part of an ongoing campaign to teach your children the relationship between freedom and responsibility. Take a look at this list of common parenting challenges:

- *teaching your kids to save money as opposed to spending it the second it hits their itchy little palms*
- *teaching your kids to stay out of dangerous places*
- *teaching your kids to respect curfews*
- *teaching your kids to be safe when operating something that transports them (tricycle to bicycle to automobile)*

- *teaching your kids to eat well balanced meals and limit their consumption of junk*
- *teaching your kids to censor what they say before they say it. The more inappropriate the thought the more they should censor it, however, it is often wise to say nothing unless it is worth listening to.*
- *teaching your kids to do more homework and play less video games*
- *teaching your kids the importance of using their online and telephone time productively and not as an excuse to harass other kids*
- *teaching your kids to respect privileges that you pay for*
- *teaching your kids the importance of dressing in a way that lets them express their own fashion tastes without looking like they have just been arrested, should be arrested or just got out of jail after being arrested*
- *teaching your kids what is appropriate to do when they have friends over*
- *teaching your kids what is appropriate to do when you are not directly supervising them*
- *teaching your kids the wisdom of affiliating with kids whose reputations are good*

When left to their own devices, kids cannot negotiate these issues without some help from you. Some parents will say that their children exercise good judgement reliably and naturally in most instances. Those parents are extremely fortunate. But if you are not that fortunate how do you lead in these situations and situations like them?

The Intentions

Intentions give your parenting efforts focus and resolve. While it is natural to want to give your children privileges, it is important that they understand that privileges are earned by showing responsible behavior. Often parents tend to put the cart before the horse. For instance, they will give their kids a cell phone without truly examining whether the maturity level is sufficient to have that responsibility, then wonder why they receive a \$1200 bill because the cell phone is used for text messaging eight hours a day.

An important (perhaps even *the most important*) goal of intentional parenting is to *act towards your kids (i.e. lead them) in ways that help them become healthy, productive, autonomously functioning and loving human beings.*

Let's review this sentence because it summarizes the goals of this program. It also summarizes the thoughts and wishes of most parents, that is if you can get them to talk about their intentions.

So to get you started, let's look at some intentions, and use them as foundations for leadership behavior:

I want our children to be healthy, that is in their physical health as well as their emotional health.

I want our children to be productive. This gives them the ability to be self sufficient when they need to be, and to share what they earn with the people they love.

I want our children to be autonomous -- again so that they do not become dependent on people or things that cause them to become compromised, exploited or otherwise taken advantage of.

I want our children to be loving, as a reflection of our love of them, and as a means of providing emotional nourishment to the people who they chose to share their lives with. Along with the ability to share and express love, our intention is to encourage civility in our children, so that they achieve the ability to manage and resolve disagreements and enjoy the benefits of harmony over the toil and trouble involved in prolonged and needless conflict.

(As you can see these intentions are phrased a bit different than the others you have been given as examples. You can construct your intentions however you want to as long as they are statements which reflect "thinking about the concept," and "thinking about thinking.")

So, why are these intentions so important under the heading of "limit setting?" Limit setting is a critical parenting action which forms the basis for teaching children self-control. Each one of these areas: physical and mental health, productivity, autonomy and loving-ness, is a function of self control, and parents have a large influence on each one of these areas of life, depending on how they teach and enforce self control through limit setting.

The Relationship Between Limit Setting, Self Control and Freedom

From about age two forward, children express the desire to break loose and experience the world on their own terms. Leaving the protective supervision of the environment into which they are born is a biological imperative for most living creatures. For hu-

mans it is important for the well being of the species but it is important for other reasons as well -- because humans value the importance of autonomy. However, achieving autonomy is easier said than done, and autonomy has different meanings in different cultures. For all intents and purposes, we are talking about autonomy as it relates to cultures where children leave their home environments and have the permission and ability to re-locate anywhere or stay close to home and have a large extended family, based on their preference and their presumed. In either case, there is the sense that child rearing imposes a responsibility on the parents to “prepare” children for life and its challenges when children are on their own.

Effective family leaders develop a sense of timing around the issues of freedom, permission, entitlement and privilege. We have already spoken about the necessity for parents to say, “no,” so let’s turn our attention to the importance of the word “yes.”

Whenever a child requests permission to exercise his or her judgement as a substitute for yours (a very, very important process for parents to successfully teach kids), think of you saying “yes” as almost always having “strings attached,” so it is never really, “yes,” as much as it is “yes, so long as ...” and the “so long as” part reflects some criteria for your permission.

For instance, when a child wants to be left somewhere unsupervised (a repetitive request that children make throughout their entire childhood and into their teen years), it is my advice that parents need to base their permission on responsible behavior that a child has *already* demonstrated. In other words when ten year old Joey wants to have a play date at Danny’s home and part of that play date is that they will both be home alone in Danny’s home, you need a reference of some kind that tells you that Joey has shown behavior that is mature enough to handle all of the worst case scenarios, even ones where Danny is doing something that could get them both in trouble.

You should not be using the play date itself as a “test” of whether Joey is mature and responsible enough for the situation.

This is hard for parents, because (1) they *want* to trust their kids; and (2) they *don’t want* their kids to argue, whine and complain because they are being prevented from doing the things they want to do.

We have been talking about intentions. Is “*I want to trust my kids,*” a worthwhile intention? That would only be a worthwhile intention if your children have shown you over and over that they should be trusted and you refuse to let them gain the autonomy they have earned.

“*I will to be patient enough to allow my children to show me I can trust them,*” is a better intention and is more in line with the natural progression of allowing children to *earn* freedom and autonomy.

Now let's look at it from a leadership perspective. If you permit your kids to influence your decision making by being repetitive, whiney, guilt inducing or aggressive who is *leading* the agenda? This is bad precedent because once you allow your kids to take control of what should be your decision making, they will be insulted when you try to reinstate your authority, and invariably they will push back.

It is better to stay strict and have your children be angry with you for making a decision, than it is to reinforce a transfer of leadership to them. The worst mistake you can make by being too careful about when to let your children experience more freedom is that your kids will have to do a bit more to show they deserve the autonomy they seek.

Striking a Good Balance

There is a caution I must advise about the process of letting your children show you they have “earned” the autonomy they seek, and that is that you have to be aware of your control issues as well as whatever issues there might be about your resistance to letting your kids grow up.

It is part of the normal struggle of being a parent to have mixed feelings about your kids becoming independent and on their own. Sometimes it does not feel all that good when kids show you, even when they show it appropriately, that they can take care of themselves. This is when you have to carefully examine whether your demands for evidence of sufficient maturity and judgement are realistic. It is fine to be strict, but another matter to be unreasonable. At every age and station in life there will be questions about whether “it is okay” for a child to have responsibility to do certain things that require judgement.

The parenting *action* we examine in this section is the push-pull that goes on between parents and children that involves “giving permission,” which is an outright “yes” based on past behavior, and setting a limit which is a “qualified” version of either giving permission or withholding permission until a greater level of responsibility has been shown.

Turning Intention into Action

One of the things that makes the processes of “permission” and “limit setting” so difficult is that when kids ask for permission to do things they rarely consider the timing of the request, and when they do, the timing always favors them. It is easy to get sand-bagged by a last minute request, which turns into a last minute argument, which creates aggravation for you and permission given begrudgingly because you don't want the conflict.

You can prevent this in large part by communicating well in advance that “last minute permission..”

- Is always going to be more difficult for you to grant.
- Almost never given at all when it is clear that the request could have been made much sooner.
- Is always going to be judged on the basis of recent responsibility taking behavior.

Emphasizing these issues should be a part of your every day discussions about the quality of your child’s decision making. In other words, your child should be well aware before he or she asks for anything that you are going to make your decision based on what he or she has done lately, and that permission for anything is not going to be doled out simply because it is asked for. This includes if the child asks in the nicest possible way. Often parents emphasize “asking nicely,” and I think it is important for children to be polite when asking for something but asking nicely is not the pivotal concept -- it is merely a “required add on.” When parents say, “I will let you do it because you asked politely,” they are emphasizing the less important concept.

Parents need to consider their every day interactions with their children around areas of responsibility taking and acknowledge that responsibility “in the moment.”

When praising children, for instance, instead of saying “Good job,” always say “Good job *picking up your clothes.*” Make your praise specific. Similarly, make your criticisms specific and if your child does not meet certain expectations it will be much easier for you to set effective limits by forging the link between behavior and the natural consequence of that behavior.

Here is a point of emphasis:

When it comes to permission and a child’s drive for autonomy, good leaders reward responsibility with privilege and set limits by giving the child opportunity to show that responsibility has been learned.

So, this is very much different than “rewarding” or “punishing” a child (even though your child might protest that your failure to let them do what they want is “a punishment). Instead the act of permission always begins with a review of something that has gone on already, followed by what you are comfortable providing permission for, or what you want to see in your child’s behavior that will permit them to gain the permission they are seeking.

Many parents do this quite naturally when their children are young and very dependent. For instance, when parents say, “*You can have ice cream when you finish your vegetables.*”

Notice how it is expressed in the positive, “*you can have ice cream...*,” as opposed to “*You cannot have ice cream until you finish your vegetables.*” I believe it is much more effective to tell children what they can have (based on contingencies you layout), as opposed to telling them what they can't have. Even as an adult I find I am much more responsive to people telling me what I can do, as opposed to being told what I can't do.

Be mindful of this as your children become older and more prone to arguing with you and attacking your logic. Teens, especially, hate being told they can't do something, so tell them they *can*, with the qualifier “so long as you show me...”

Arguments with kids become much shorter when you cut off their avenue of criticism which begins with “*You never let me do anything.*” Instead of being the perpetual naysayer, you can be the perpetual incentivizer!

Up and Down the Developmental Ladder

Most people know the latin term, *quid pro quo*, which is a fancy way of saying, “you do for me, I do for you.” Your leadership position in the family will not rely on this type of exchange because your children might not be mature enough to understand an exchange of equal value and might argue, as if to say in a ridiculous example, “*Okay, I will do my homework and you will let me drive the family car around the neighborhood after midnight (at eight years old).*” The last thing parents should have to deal with is “constant negotiation.”

Instead, think of your interaction with your children as more consistent with the model of *sine qua non*, or in English, “*I will do this for you but first you have to do this for me.*”

Summing Up

One of your most important family leadership roles is to promote growth and development by appreciating your child's need for developing independence and autonomy through appropriate responsibility taking. Your intentional efforts come with understanding that promoting healthy autonomy impacts physical and mental health, productivity, and the give and take necessary to be a loving participant in important relationships.

As a family leader you want the importance of good judgement and decision making to be part of your everyday interactions with your kids. Rather than giving permission first, then seeing if your kids can handle it, it is better to teach children that you are always observing how responsible they are, and as a result will provide permission and freedom as a natural consequence of what you see every day. Your permissiveness is a reflection of their behavior so if you see a lack of responsibility taking there will be more limits imposed on their behavior until you can see that their level of responsibility has changed for the better.

PARENTING ACTION -- COMMUNICATING EXPECTATIONS

Set ‘Em High!

The most important fact that parents need to know about parental expectations is that if you want your child to succeed, those expectations should be high. Children will work harder when their parents expect them to. This is a very important leadership concept because either your children will lead you to accept their point of view of what they can achieve, or you will motivate them to achieve what you know they can achieve.

Reality Testing and Overcoming Resistance to Challenge and Frustration

The intentional aspects of communicating expectations require a balance between good reality testing, and helping your child overcome resistance to challenging themselves.

By good reality testing, it is important to develop realistic expectations about your child’s abilities. Never use just one person’s opinion (and by that I mean including just your own) with respect to evaluating your child’s abilities and talents. Also, understand that “abilities” refer to a vast range of skills and talents -- your child might excel in some areas, and have less skill in other areas. That is how it is for most of us.

As much as you might want to think the saying “*We can all do anything we want to as long as we puts our minds to it,*” is a key to success, I do not think this is always true, but I won’t go so far as to say it is completely false. Motivation and perseverance are important and that’s what can make the difference between a less naturally talented person’s success over a more naturally talented but less motivated person’s success.

However, while motivation propels us forward, frustration pushes us back. So, if you have a child who doesn't mind practicing the piano for hours on end to accomplish a difficult piece of music, and if that process produces satisfaction and drive to become an even better musician, then you can encourage your child to work hard and achieve more and more. But if your child is frustrated by playing the piano, and every practice session causes a meltdown, and you feel it is your job to demand better and better performance because that is what *you* want, the end result might be rebellion against this and most other expectations.

Unfortunately, it is never easy to judge a child's potential, or how hard you should push a child to reach what you think is their potential. Part of the resolution of this quandary revolves around how you feel about making your child uncomfortable. Another way of framing this struggle is how hard you feel you can push your child without damaging their self-esteem.

The Intentions

Picture the child who comes home from school and immediately starts avoiding the process of settling down and doing homework. There are children who will sit, *for hours*, with their head on the table, zoning out, avoiding, harassing a sibling, getting out of their seat, etc.. Are you doing something bad, by forcing the child to remain in that environment, challenging you to a battle of wills? Or do you think you can "teach your child a lesson" by forcing him or her to confront the avoidance and conquer it? These are hard questions! I am going to give you some guidance by talking to you about intentions and actions within a leadership framework.

Effective leadership requires that you know the strengths and limitations of the people you lead, as well as the influences of the environment that they are operating in. In addition, there is a third process that often works independently of this, and that is your your own personal system of values and beliefs about the importance of hard work, and a person's ability to do that hard work, even if it causes discomfort.

Trudging through a frustrating task even though it might be uncomfortable, even painful builds character. I am emphasizing that as a parent and leader, it is up to you to teach your child to develop the strength of perseverance. When you do that, you actually help develop independence and self-reliance in your child. It is during the difficult times we encounter that we have to rely most on ourselves, achieve success under pressure, and push ourselves past the discomforts a demanding situation places on us.

I believe that promoting the journey to completion of difficult tasks builds character even when it does not produce complete success, but it should always result in you emphasizing the satisfaction we achieve from knowing we tried our hardest.

Be cautious, however, of placing yourself in the position of being a demanding taskmaster who does not appreciate effort. If your lessons in this area become nothing more than a tug of war of wills, your child will react with rebellion and resentment over control issues and less on the importance of challenging oneself. If you remind yourself to appreciate your child's efforts you are less likely to fight that battle.

Parents need to find a balance that permits children to feel uncomfortable but at the same time showing a child love and support in their challenges. It will be very important for parents to understand that if all a child has to do to get you to back off an expectation for performance is to throw a tantrum, then you can easily but inadvertently teach a child to throw tantrums every time there is a demand for performance.

This can be a confusing set of instructions for parents because on the one hand I am suggesting that you teach your child to challenge their limits, and on the other hand I am suggesting that you don't push your child to the point of rebellion. As we go through life, not everyone appreciates the effort we put forth. It is easy to be cut down by those who seek to dominate us, minimize us, criticize us and exert control over us. Parents provide the foundation for confidence and self reliance by standing along side their kids, supporting effort and perseverance. When expectations for competence are accompanied by praise for effort, love and support, kids become ready to face the tougher times a harsh world can dish out.

A combination of parenting intentions and actions addresses this very difficult but important issue. Here are some intentions:

I am going to make a strong effort to learn my child's strengths and limitations.

I will find ways to insist my child produces effort to meet certain expectations without saying or doing anything that damages their self esteem.

I will not force a child to endure a highly frustrating experience without trying to find ways to modify the experience to make it less frustrating.

I will not get angry at my child for failing, but I will, when appropriate, let my child fail because understanding failure is a key to achieving success.

I will emphasize that getting to the end of a task with even the smallest degree of success is better than quitting in the middle.

I can hinder my child's success if I constantly demand performance that exceeds his or her abilities, or if I push too hard too fast.

I will emphasize effort as much as achievement.

Productive Versus Unproductive Time

Good results should follow good efforts, but at times they do not, because an additional component to achievement is *time*. Parents (and often teachers) are in the unique position of being able to help children understand that time on task is a key component to success. We live in a society that places a rush on just about everything. We are over scheduled, hurried and always “tight on time.” Achievement is rarely accomplished without dedication, and dedication takes time.

It is always important to be able to observe your children with an eye toward whether they are spending “productive” versus “unproductive” time. Productive time is time spent problem solving and practicing. Unproductive time is time spent avoiding problem solving and practicing.

Turning Intentions Into Actions:

Your parenting interventions (actions) should address productivity and practice but also consider the importance of time.

The environment your child works in influences productivity. As a general rule of thumb I advise parents to avoid “the kitchen table” as a place where homework is done (unless of course space is a premium and there is no where else to do it). Too many other things happen in the kitchen to make it a productive environment.

Parents should pay attention to “electronic distractions” that influence productivity -- phones, television, music players, etc. By the way, some kids can do good work with these items in the environment, but it should be your call. A kid who has his head propped up with one hand, and listening to a music player with his eyes closed is not demonstrating a productive state of mind, and will not make productive use of his or her time. With children like this you will sometimes have to physically remove the distractions and re-structure the environment. It is OK to encourage your child to take a short break, but important not to let your child decide when to take that break until he or she has shown that taking a break is not another type of avoidance that interferes with getting things done.

The Unproductive Avoidant Child Versus The Unproductive Frustrated Child

We have already discussed the importance of making an accurate appraisal of your child's abilities when communicating expectations to your children. Now I am going to focus you on a finer appraisal -- the difference between "avoidant" behavior and "frustrated" behavior. Frustration often leads to avoidance, but all avoidance is not necessarily linked to frustration.

Some children avoid meeting your expectations of their performance because their own agenda is more important to fulfill than yours. Children, after all, are opportunistic creatures. Consider the child who prefers playing video games and watching television to doing homework. The child might be perfectly capable of doing homework, but simply prefers not to. There might be more rewarding activities to pursue in his or her environment than what you think is important. In this instance, the parents "knows" that ability is there, but motivation is not. The behaviors you might choose to address in your parenting actions might include:

- Demanding better quality work with better work habits and imposing a short term consequence or restriction until your expectations are met.
- Eliminating opportunities for distraction over the long term (taking the television and the video game playing station out of a child's room altogether until long term expectations are met).

These actions and other actions where you place a demand on a child for not meeting your expectations are all quite appropriate, even when they cause your child to fuss, complain or even tantrum. If you stick to your expectations (as long as they are in line with your child's abilities), more than likely they will be met.

However, your actions should take a different emphasis when your child appears frustrated by the performance based tasks required of him or her. You can usually tell when your child's performance is suffering from undue frustration because when kids become overly frustrated they become emotionally fragile -- irritable and often self-deprecating ("I am terrible," "I am stupid," "I can't do this," etc.). In this circumstance, ability might be there, but influenced by learning difficulties, attentional difficulties or emotional difficulties (depression, anxiety, reactions to situational stressors like conflict between the parents).

Your actions here should be more supportive and less punitive than those stated above, but your demands should not drop to zero either. We must all learn to push through frustration. Often, dealing with the frustrating aspects of tasks that require attention and performance are more important than the end result of the task itself. Here are some parenting actions that can be taken to help

overcome “frustration meltdowns.” Encourage your child to do a few things at a high level of proficiency as opposed to complete the entire task at a low level of proficiency.

- *Praise effort.*
- *Allow time to rest and regroup.*
- *If your child insists on quitting, encourage a time out to bring down the level of frustration, but do NOT let the child choose an alternative that rewards quitting.*

When these actions do not lessen the stress shown by your child, it is time to seek outside help from child behavior specialists, so that a proper evaluation can take place and a remedial plan of action can be developed.

Summing Up

One of the toughest parenting (and leadership) tasks of all is to make accurate appraisals of your child’s skills and talents, then communicate expectations which help your child achieve their potential.

High expectations produce better achievement, but parents must communicate these expectations with an eye toward monitoring frustration. High expectations combined with an appreciation of effort, and delivered with love and support are keys to promoting self reliance.

Permitting your child to experience some discomfort meeting your demands is appropriate. Children must learn to push past their discomfort to realize their potential.

PARENTING ACTION -- APPLYING A CONSEQUENCE

We Are All The Architects of our Own Destinies: Consequences Teach Us That

There are parents who say they have never had to do much more than praise their children when they are behaving well to keep them on track. Other parents I have worked with lament that everything is a struggle with their children who push back at every twist and turn, fight against every instance of someone trying to control their behavior and simply do not and will not change negative behavior. Much of the this has nothing to do with your competence as a parent and mostly everything to do with your child’s

“temperament,” (a point we keep coming to over and over) the genetic contribution to behavior that we have been touching on within these topics. Yes, some children are *born difficult*, but that does not mean you cannot get them to behave. It means it might take longer to get them to behave, and it means you will be more frustrated and aggravated than parents who are lucky enough to have easier, more compliant kids.

Never beat yourself up if you have a difficult, strong willed and stubborn child. Applying consequences is a very important part of managing a strong willed, difficult tempered child. So, just stick with it. Your gains will likely be smaller and your progress slower, but there’s nothing you can do but your best.

The majority of parents will need to provide rewards and incentives to motivate good behavior but will also have to provide consequences for undesirable behavior -- but not hitting or spanking which I think causes more harm than good.

Notice my choice of the word “undesirable” as opposed to saying “bad behavior.” It has become frowned upon to refer to behavior as “bad” for fear that the child will think he or she is “a bad person.” But, did I really need to say “undesirable?” I think that the emphasis is on the wrong issue here. As long as children understand the difference between the things they do, and your opinion of them as people, it is fine to refer to their behavior as “bad” (even though I did not do it above). I hear parents telling two year old children that their behavior is “inappropriate.” However, if you say it or anything else in a tone of voice that indicates disapproval and disgust you can say that behavior is “inappropriate,” “unwonderful,” “bad” or whatever else you want to say and it will all sound like you are telling your children they are bad human beings.

Natural versus Imposed Consequences

At some point in your parenting interactions with your child you will either say:

“You did this, so now you can’t do that...”

“You didn’t do this, so now you can’t do that...”

“If you don’t do this, I am not going to let you do that...”

“If you don’t stop doing that, this will happen...”

...and assorted variations on these themes that all parents become familiar with over time. These are all ways of helping kids understand the consequences of their behavior.

When you employ imposing consequences as a way of managing your child's behavior you are performing one of the most important parenting leadership tasks of all, which is teaching your child the relationship between *behavior* and *outcome*.

You don't have to be a Buddhist to appreciate the Buddhist philosophy that we are all the architects of our own destinies. In other words, whenever we make a choice to behave in certain ways, we are pointing ourselves directly at ALL of the consequences that we could encounter as a result of that behavior -- both good and bad.

When parents take a step back and let a child experience a behavior that they know will likely produce an unpleasant outcome they are letting children experience the "natural consequences" of their behavior. Sometimes we call this "learning by experience." But not everything can be learned by experience. You would not want a child to learn the value of crossing the street safely simply by experience.

Good leadership is always intertwined with good "teachership," so effective family leaders, through the rapport they establish with their children, can teach their children the relationship between behavior and outcome through their parent-child communications. If you have put in the time to develop good communication with your kids, it will be much easier to help "talk them through" the consequences of certain behavior, and when you do that, you are getting the added benefits of teaching your children to become intentional, purposeful thinkers.

Finally, parents can instruct children about the outcome of their behavior by imposing consequences on their children for bad behavior after it happens. Taking away items or privileges or imposing a time out are common ways of doing this. One would think that applying a consequence "after the fact" would be enough to teach children the errors of their ways but often it is not. If parents do not consistently follow through on the consequences they lay out, children will learn that you are "all talk and no action," and that does not give you an effective leadership platform to guide your kids.

Depending on the temperament of your child (with particular emphasis on whether your child is more compliant, or stubborn and resistant to your requests), there are some children who will "test" your ability to stick to the consequences you lay out to the max, showing you that he or she is the leader no matter what you try to do to maintain your leadership role. With a stubborn, headstrong or willful child it is important to monitor and neutralize your emotions, especially when describing or delivering conse-

quences. Children with headstrong temperaments will counter your attempts to deliver consequences with behavior that “pushes your buttons.” Parents often underestimate how satisfying it is for kids to see their parents as upset as they are when they go toe-to-toe over struggles to establish leadership.

The Intentions

Teaching children the relationship between behavior and outcome is not easy, does not produce immediate results and requires lots of parental self-control -- in other words it is like every other parenting task!

Intentional thinking improves our leadership efforts and provides balance and moderation to our expectations:

I intend to make it a priority to teach my child the relationship between his or her behavior and the consequences of that behavior.

I intend to assert my position as family leader by not permitting my child’s protests about consequences to cause escalating conflicts between me and my child.

I will allow my child to experience the natural consequences of behavior when it does not jeopardize my child’s health/safety.

I will impose consequences in a way that is educational but not overly punitive. I will not encourage rebellion. I will encourage compliance.

I intend to take into account my child’s temperament when assessing my competence as a family leader.

I understand that learning about and acting to avoid negative consequences of behavior can be a very challenging task that can take a lifetime even for adults to learn. I have done most of my job by merely pointing out the connections between behavior and outcome, and often do not have to do much more.

Turning Intentions Into Actions

The Intentional Parent takes a “broad stroke” approach to teaching you the essentials of leadership parenting. For one thing, it is impossible to “micro manage” someone else’s family without knowing a lot more than I can assume in this book. Second, I try to

discourage a “cookbook” philosophy with parenting issues. I would prefer to encourage “philosophy” over “methodology,” but by the same token I will always tell parents that learning a reliable set of concepts will get you most of the way through many difficult parenting experiences.

In this section the “broad stroke” I am prioritizing is teaching children the relationship between behavior and outcome. This is important at every developmental age and station in a child’s life. It becomes super important during the teen years when often all you can do is point out the natural consequences of poor behavioral choices.

Infants come “pre-programmed” to experience the cause and effect nature of their interactions between themselves and the surrounding environment. They “connect” their actions with the consequences of their actions, favoring the successful connections and avoiding repetition of the unsuccessful ones. The natural behavior of infants is circular and repetitive and we have all watched infants trying to get their hand or foot into their mouths, shake a rattle, and otherwise grapple with the demands of their environment. They do not do it, “just once,” they do it over and over again, “stamping” the behavior into their developing nervous systems.

That might work within the safety and controlled nature of the home environment (and even that can be a challenge when we realize how important it is to “baby-proof”), but as our options for interacting with the environment expand, so does the range of actions and potential consequences. As children become more psychologically and intellectually complex, the consequences of their actions (lying, cheating, selfishness, manipulative behavior) also become much more complex, because the social consequences of behavior become more complex.

Explorations into the world of cause and effect form the foundations for learning good judgement which, in turn gives us the opportunity to learn about social success and failure. While consequences for poor judgement can be harsh in the “real world,” parents need to pay close attention to how to deliver consequences in the “family world.”

It is always better for parents to work and act on the positive side of behavior and we will be doing that in the next chapter, but when we talk about imposing consequences we are usually referring to the interactions parents have with children about the negative aspects of their children’s behavior.

Here is a list that covers most of the major “behavioral transgressions” children test their parents leadership with:

- active opposition

- passive opposition
- dishonesty
- overindulgence
- risk taking
- failure to prepare (as in not getting ready, not doing homework, not studying, etc.)
- transgressions of civility
- opportunism
- laziness

Before we go any further, let me point out that all of these misbehaviors are completely normal ways that kids test their parents authority. Breakdowns in leadership happen when children's stubborn temperaments are far outside the normal range, and when the limits of a parent's tolerance are exceeded, and what I mean by that is when a parent's patience is exhausted, which is normal and which happens (a lot) with every parent and child.

Parental patience is very much like a child's tendency to be oppositional. Parents have different capacities to be patient. So, obviously, the worst parent-child combination of traits is the parent with limited patience and the child with endless stubbornness. This results in the kind of head-butting that makes every day difficult for both the parent and the child. Leadership is challenged many times a day, every day. That is why a common point in every parenting strategy is to choose your arguments carefully.

Long term problems occur when leadership is challenged and the leader fails to restore what should be the balance of power in the family structure. Consider this anecdote from my practice:

Mark had always been a difficult child. As an infant he was hard to soothe. As he grew older he was impatient, demanding, and very aggressive to his parents -- but he also had a very warm side. He could be cuddly, polite (to the point that almost all of the parents of the children he played with mentioned that to his parents) and very helpful around the house. Mark was the classic case of the boy who, "when he was good he was very, very good, but when he was bad, he was horrid." I decided that I would do

an eight hour observation of Mark (he was nine at the time) at home with his parents and discovered that Mark's moods and behavior determined the level of stress in the household. When Mark was demanding, his parents first response was to try to figure out a way to yield to his demands. When his demand was impossible, (he asked to be taken out to buy a video game thirty minutes before dinner), they would try a "compromise." Saying "no," was not an option because they feared his wrath which included cursing at them, throwing objects, breaking furniture, etc. My main piece of advice to the parents was to "lay down the law," and then let him throw whatever fit he chose. Then wait until Mark wanted something else. Then inform him that because of the fit he threw it would not be possible for them to do what he asked. If he threw another fit, the natural consequence would be to point out that privileges and "extras" could not be considered until his behavior changed. Havoc ensued for the next two weeks and then the new leadership fell into place.

Mark's moods and demands were the authoritative force in the household. His parents had given him so much authority that he became insulted when they would not yield to his (often outrageous and inconsiderate) demands. I only needed to teach these two simple facts to re-balance the power and control issues in their household:

Mark depended on his parents for the things he could not do for himself (like take him to a friends house for a play date).

That Mark determined the outcome of his behavior based on his parents requests for civility and his ability to abide by those requests.

The example above is an example of "natural consequences." Using natural consequences involves having enough patience to avoid lecturing and threatening. It also involves confidence in the knowledge that your children need you and rely on you and that much of what you do for them is optional. Kids can easily get to the point where they treat their parents as indentured servants -- but that can only happen when parents allow it by abdicating their leadership role. Setting things back in the proper balance takes time and patience, but sticking to your guns works more times than it doesn't

Timing Makes a Difference

Depending on the nature of your child, the timing of how you express the relationship between behavior and outcome (consequence) can make a difference. The younger a child is (and also the more stubborn a child is) warning about a consequence might not have much of an effect.

However, most children whose temperaments show that they can be influenced by parental authority (most five through twelves) are quite impressed by conversations which point out the relationship between behavior and outcome. You can tell most children things like:

“No video games until after you’ve finished your homework and I check it.”

“If you come home past curfew you are grounded for the next two days.”

“No special privileges if you are aggressive to your sister.”

As long as you stick to the consequences you lay out, the behavior you are looking to mold will occur much of the time (but do not expect perfection as kids test parental limit setting *constantly*.)

If children do not yield to the relationship between behavior and consequence enough to meet your expectations, delivering the consequence is still a “natural outcome.” The difference between simply delivering a consequence and “laying it out” before the undesirable behavior occurs really depends on whether your kids ignore you when you talk about their behavior. If they do, stop talking about it, and show your child you mean business by acting on their “bad” behavior (there, I said it). Another way of saying this is that if your threats do not deter your kids from behaving badly, don’t threaten, just *act*.

For whatever it’s worth most parents need to “do less talking and do more doing.” I have seen too many parenting experts extoll the virtues of “counting to three” before taking action. I think parents should simply show kids that there are consequences to their actions. I don’t know of too many bank robbers who are given a count of three to return the money to avoid going to jail.

Make Certain the Consequences are Reasonable *and* Enforceable

In order for you to be able to accomplish the goal of encouraging better behavior and teaching the relationship between behavior and outcome, the consequences you set forth have to be reasonable and enforceable. If you can’t follow through on the consequences or if you follow through inconsistently, you might encourage your child to ignore you more frequently in the future.

For instance, if you tell your child that as a result of bad behavior they cannot go to a friend’s party, but then relent because recent behavior was better, you are not teaching your child the value of good judgment. Instead you are teaching that previous consequences can be avoided by better future behavior. “*What’s wrong with that,*” you might say? It’s not a question of right and wrong,

it's more a question of whether that is a good model of how life works outside the context of the family environment, and good leaders aim to teach kids how to operate better in the real world. If I speed and get a ticket that ticket does not go away if between when I get the ticket and when I pay the fine, I slow it down and obey the speed laws.

Unreasonable consequences do little more than allow you to vent your spleen when your kids are misbehaving, and if you can't follow through your children will ultimately scoff at your hollow threats. *"You won't go out for a year, after what you have done,"* is a tough threat to follow through on, and in the end might make you more miserable than it will make your child attentive to their behavior. Much better to link your consequence to something about to happen in the near future.

Time Out

The term "time out" is a term most parents are familiar with but the practice of giving a time out is poorly understood and therefore poorly utilized. Time out is a consequence, which parents often mistake for a short stay in "home jail."

Time out is a term derived from behavioral psychology but lots of my colleagues even forget that the term is a shortened version of the term "time out from reinforcement," which means that one aspect of time out which motivates different behavior is the association of having been taken out of an environment that is reinforcing. Bottom line is that if your child is being removed from an environment that is chaotic and poorly structured in the first place time out is unlikely to have any direct positive effect on behavior. Your child might actually seek negative attention and a time out to go to a place where he has more control. Returning to the chaotic environment then only produces more bad behavior.

Time out might improve parenting behavior by disrupting a circumstance which is causing the parent to be overly angry or aggressive. So, a second purpose of time out is to give the parent some time to regroup and regain composure.

Parents frequently ask how long is an acceptable period of time out. That's very hard to say and often depends on the child. As a rule of thumb I think twenty minutes is a long time out, and I think telling a child to stay in their room "all night" or "all day" can breed resentment and might cause the child to isolate themselves from the family as a means of retaliation. Some parents offer a way out of time out by asking the child to explain WHY what he or she did was wrong. This is a good approach for parents whose children already have insight into their behavior. For children who do not have good insight into WHY their behavior was wrong, you should TELL them why it was wrong, ask them to stay in time out for twenty minutes (or however long is reasonable based on

the child and the circumstance) and then give them the opportunity to repeat the “why”, and promise to be more mindful in the future.

Similarly, focusing a child on their intentions, actions and outcomes is a great way to use time out. Ask your child:

What were you thinking?

What could you have done differently

What did you expect to happen? What would have happened if...[you supply the appropriate behavior]?

Children will almost never be able to answer the first question. You might have to supply the answer, “Maybe you weren’t thinking enough about the consequences.” Most children can hazard a guess about the second question, but will often shrug their shoulders because they do not want to face the responsibility of having to correct their behavior. When this happens, walk away and say, “we’ll talk about this more later.” The third question you will always supply information with (for instance, “What do you think would happen if you told the truth about whether you did your homework”?) because that is how you will be teaching your child how to avoid a bad consequence.

So, to reiterate, parents can add an “educational” requirement to time out by incentivizing children to ask for their “release” contingent upon showing insight into their previous behavior. I recommend this technique -- but only for insightful children. I don’t see much of a point in telling a child they can come out of time out if they can say why it is wrong to shave the cat, or beat up a sibling if the child is simply giving the parent what the parent wants to hear without remorse or a promise to change.

It can become a slippery slope for parents at this point. Children often know why their behavior is bad, but continue doing it anyway. I do think it is worth a try to see if it is useful to permitting a child to explain why what they did was wrong, and teaching them if they don’t know. However, I think you have to decide as a parent whether that brings you to a point of diminishing returns with respect to future behavior. This presents a challenge for parents and when children repeatedly defy a parents rule or leadership and show little progress toward behavior change, then it’s time to think about removing privileges as a strategy. If oppositional behavior becomes a long term struggle it might help to consult a child behavior specialist.

Time Out Is For Parent's Too:

It might be that time out works more for the parent than the child, and if so, that is important. Manage your expectations and use more than one technique. Some parents might find it helpful for a child to enter time out, then merely come out when they can be calmer. Also, it can be helpful for children to come out of the time out place with a requirement to stay in a less restrictive but still somewhat limited space in the house. All of these things give parents some time and space too, but don't turn "time out" into a battleground in and of itself.

Also, parents sometimes find, with children who have very difficult personalities that the child will either trash their time out environment out of spite, or wait for their sentence to pass, come out and wreak havoc in the same or worse manner than before they went in. Suffice it to say that "time out" is not a universal cure for bad behavior.

Finally, remember that if your child will not accept a time out, you can "disconnect" and take a time out. Removing yourself from a situation can be a stress reliever for you. Your best approach here is to ask yourself if being in the same place at the same time as your child is escalating the conflict to a point of one or both of you are totally out of control. If the answer to this question is yes, take a break. Obviously, you cannot do this in every environment. Do not disconnect and take a time out when you are in the car for instance! (Just a little joke there). Mostly, you will employ this at home.

Talk About Good Consequences Too

Finally, you can and should show your child the relationship between good behavior and good outcomes:

I have a part of my business in London, England and I recently heard a proper British mum tell her toddler aged child, "*You will get a balloon if you eat the rest of your porridge.*" When the mission was accomplished, the balloon was handed over. It was nice to see that incentivizing good behavior works on both sides of the pond! Our next parenting action covers the very misunderstood concept of "rewarding a behavior," which is just another way of expanding on the topic of providing "positive consequences."

Summing Up

This chapter highlights the importance of the family leader's job of helping children make connections between behavior and outcomes (consequences). Your home environment should aim to approximate the "real world" because when kids get old enough to establish themselves independently that is the only world that counts.

If your child has a stubborn, oppositional nature, then talking about consequences will probably provide very little deterrence from bad behavior. The more difficult a child is, the more you will have to *do* and that often means showing your child that many of the things you do for him or her are optional and do not occur without respect or appreciation. Hence, if talking about consequences fails to work, you must help your child learn that the “natural consequence” of bad behavior is a lack of motivation on your part to provide “the extras” that most parents provide numerous times a day. You are under no obligation to drive, fetch, buy and reward a child with privileges that are returned with negative, demanding and unappreciative behavior from your kids.

When you do apply consequences, make sure you stick to your guns, and do not lay out a consequence that is impossible to deliver or enforce, because it will weaken your family leadership role.

PARENTING ACTION -- REWARDING BEHAVIOR

I was once giving a lecture, talking about the importance of rewarding good behavior when a parent jumped up and said, “*I refuse to bribe my child to behave in ways they should behave without any reward but the knowledge they have done the right thing.*” Similarly, when I was in professional school for psychology some thirty years ago, we were taught that people who perceived rewards as bribes should consider what happens every Friday when they are paid for the work they do. Was that a *bribe*? Now that I am an all grown up psychologist I don’t have to listen to everything I was taught in school, and I can still take exception to the parent who tells me they won’t bribe their children. Here are the reasons, in short form:

First, reinforcing a child’s behavior is not a bribe, because a bribe helps people achieve something that is usually underhanded and immoral. A bribe is an incentive for people to perform bad behaviors for self serving reasons. It is meant to incentivize people to overcome their resistance to doing things they should not do. I can’t think of a single appropriate comparison to the behavior between a parent and a child unless a parent offers their child a lollipop if they would steal a car for them.

Second, when people go to work, there is (or should be) a pre-existing and perfectly understood relationship between work and pay. It is not a bribe, once again, for the reasons I mention in the previous paragraphs. Lack of work provides more of an incentive for your boss to *punish* you by firing you or threatening to fire you. Punishment is the “opposite” of reward. Punishment would be meant to decrease your slacker behavior at work. I suppose you could make the case that people who work for commission are “incentivized” to work harder for more reward -- and we can capture the importance of the idea of reinforcing a child’s behavior right here, with the word “incentivized.”

Bribery, in every connotation of the word is not a good leadership strategy.

Different words, even scientific words can have different meanings in different contexts, especially when we are trying to take terms that were constructed to explain the results of experiments and bring them into the real world. The word “reward,” from a technical point of view, refers to something that increases the probability that a behavior will increase in frequency over time. Training a dog to sit with bacon treats is an often used example, although scholars still argue over whether this represents a pure reward-based paradigm. In any event, if you want to teach your dog to sit, push his butt down, say “sit” and shove a doggie treat in his mouth. The more you do it, the more your dog will sit when you say “sit” with the expectation of receiving a treat. Many dogs (especially puppies) are so compliant and generous with their behavior that they soon learn to sit without the treat, or they will sit just to get a pat on the head, or they will sit to hear you say “good boy,” or they will sit just out of habit, presumably because they have a history of getting a reward for that behavior.

Professionals have written books suggesting that raising a child is just like raising a puppy -- yeah okay -- it should only be that easy, and that relatively inexpensive. However, I won't deny that there are elements of the processes of raising a child and raising a puppy that are common to both.

You can reward a child:

- materially with toys, food (not always recommended), money, etc.
- with activities or privileges
- socially, with praise and affection

Giving money, tokens, stars, toys, presents, etc. are examples of material rewards. “You do *this* -- you earn *that*,” (where *that* is a material thing). I don't recommend rewarding kids that often with ice cream, soda, candy or nearly any type of food. The reason for this is that our culture emphasizes rewarding ourselves with food and the more we learn to reward ourselves with food, the more obese we seem to get as a society. Parents looking to teach their kids proper nutrition should emphasize that food is not the center of our being. There is a separate book I could write here about the role food plays in our psychology and our parenting, but that would be too far afield of our topic in this book.

Activity rewards exchange a promise for permission to do an enjoyable activity (watch television, play a video game, etc.) paired with the performance of some desirable behavior (doing homework, chores, etc.).

Social rewards include praise, smiles, hugs, snuggles, “I love you’s” and any behavior that makes a child feel loved. Social rewards can and should be given out generously, but they can be overdone. Some parents hate when I say this because it sounds like I am telling them to “ration” love. I am not saying this at all. What I am saying is that you cannot raise a child to be a competent person if you don’t distinguish acceptable versus unacceptable behavior for them. That is part of your leadership function. It starts in the toddler years when kids are mobile enough to destroy their surroundings but perhaps not advanced enough to understand the logic of why it is not a good idea to turn the caps on bottles decorated with those pretty little skeleton heads, (Yes, I know those bottles are child proofed, but presumably you get the idea.) Even as babies you can’t always use a sing-songy voice to steer them out of trouble. “Learn to be stern.” It’s also a part of loving kids. I know you adore your kids, but the world outside might not, if you don’t teach them the basics of politeness, self control, and managing the space around them. It’s all connected and if you don’t believe me, come visit some public spaces in New York City where there are so many people from so many cultures, screaming into their cell phones without the slightest regard for anyone else around them. Selfish, rude behavior seems to be all around us. If you want to set your kids apart from the “mob,” that is aimlessly led by popular culture, media, commercialism, etc., it is you who must lead them.

You can provide any of the above in any volume or proportion but if you do not do it systematically, as a part of your leadership role, it might not have much of an effect on your child’s behavior even if we can all agree that “reinforcing a child’s behavior is good.” I would say that reinforcing a child’s *good* behavior is good, but reinforcing a child, especially materially, for no particular reason except that you want to show that you love them is not so good. The practical explanation for this is that if you reward your child materially for no particular reason except that you love them, and they then ask you for things you refuse to provide, they will act as if you don’t love them. Put a star next to that last sentence.

Non Contingent Reinforcement

Non contingent reinforcement is a fancy way of saying, “rewarding a child for no particular reason.” Can there really be anything wrong with hanging every piece of art your child draws on the refrigerator? Is it bad to hug, kiss and say “I love you,” to your child a dozen times a day? The issue these questions are getting at is whether you should provide rewards (these are social rewards but the same goes for material rewards) for kids who don’t necessarily do anything to earn these rewards. Should a child have to *earn* everything?

The short answer is “of course not.” But like everything else in life, you can overdo what some parents insist is “unconditional love” but in reality is merely spoiling kids with expensive material possessions. To put it in perspective, three hundred dollar smart-phones for kids who “just want them,” granting a child’s every material wish, putting no limits on spending, indulging a child’s addiction to soda and candy, unlimited media consumption is nothing short of buying your child’s attention. Same goes for over-the-top praise for performance that is below what you know your child can achieve.

The Intentions

Don’t be afraid of your kids not loving you enough. If you lead with the fear that your children will not love you, they will manipulate and disrespect you. Permit your children to be mad at you. If you have the type of child who goes ballistic, walk out of the room when he or she is having a tantrum. From a leadership perspective a tantrum is nothing more than an aggressive move to become the decision maker or leader. Here are some intentions to help remind you to stay in charge of incentivizing your kids:

I will remember how important it is to accentuate the positives and not react as much to the negatives.

Compliments and praise are important motivators but they should also be consistent with a child’s level of performance. “Good,” “Very Good,” and “Great” are all forms of praise for different levels of performance.

I can give my child “unconditional love” while still expressing high levels of expectation for performance.

Material possessions do not a well behaved child make.

Non-contingent reinforcement (random acts of parental kindness without the expectation of performance of any kind) is a parents right, privilege and responsibility, but I promise not to overdo it.

If my kid gets mad at me, he or she will get over it.

I don’t have to be my child’s friend to be a good leader. In fact, it is often harder to lead your child when you consider them your equal.

I will not abdicate my leadership because my child is having a tantrum over something they want which I refuse to give them.

Turning Intention Into Action

There are a few things to remember about rewarding a behavior that can guide you in using reward as an effective leadership tool.

First, and most importantly, it is tough to make reward work if the reward is too far off into the future. The parent who promises a trip to Disneyland for an excellent report card, might not be incentivizing a child in the most effective way because the reward might be weeks or months into the future. Try to make your reward come close in time to the performance of the behavior. Of course, you can always combine short and long term rewards so that your child is rewarded for smaller goals (like good test and quiz grades) leading up to the bigger goal (getting a good report card grade).

Second, make your contingencies very clear. Here are some examples of contingencies that are not so clear. The contingencies (goals) are in italics.

“You can [do, have, earn] this *if you are good.*”

“You can [do, have, earn] this *if you behave.*”

These goals are far too general and global. When goals are stated in such unclear terms, kids often assume that by doing nothing, they should be rewarded.

Good family leaders promote specific behaviors. Also, it is best to promote behaviors that are good building blocks to other behavior. For instance, if you want to encourage a child to be neat, you can start as young as you like with even toddlers wiping a cloth across a table (even imitating you while you do it). As kids get older give them chores. Reward them with praise. When you feel they are old enough make their chores part of their allowance. As long as you are working on rewarding something positive and specific, you will be on the right track.

Don't make goals unattainable. Try to incentivize your C student into a B student before you demand A performance. Be realistic. If your incentive structure creates more frustration than success, that frustration will be the prevailing emotion and there is a very straight line that can be drawn between frustration and avoidance.

Sticker Charts and Contracts

Some parents draw up behavioral contracts with kids to memorialize everyone's attempts at improving both the leadership structure and incentives. I am in strong favor of behavioral contracts, but only under the condition that parents have the ability to *manage* that contract. For contracts to work at helping change behavior they have to be a focal point for conversation and interaction. Contracts work best for kids from about eight through teens. Contracts do not have to be complicated and as a matter of fact, the simpler they are, the better they tend to work in my opinion. (There are some examples of contracts on the Tribeca Kid Coach website).

Star or sticker charts work best for younger kids and are the younger version of behavioral contracts (see Appendix B) in that they lay out a goal or set of rules and stickers (often in the shape of gold stars) are given as intermediate rewards, and when enough are collected, they can be redeemed for whatever it is the contract states.

Contracts and sticker programs can really make a difference in behavior and represent a concrete way to establish a stronger leadership position. However, the goals cannot be too distant, and you have to “pay up,” when the reward is learned.

I have found that a great alternative to stars and stickers is the “good behavior coupon.” You will find more information about this and other incentive programs for kids at www.tribecakidcoach.com. These programs are good for kids up to about age ten or so. The good behavior coupon is given to a child at the beginning of the day and is tied to a single behavior (let's say taking out the trash). If the child does what the coupon represents, the coupon can be redeemed for a reward. If not, the coupon must be returned and the opportunity to earn the prize or privilege is lost for the day.

Avoid This Mistake: Flipping the Script

When using rewards to improve your child's behavior it is important to avoid “changing the deal.” Don't make it easier for your child to earn the reward you have proposed, because if you do you are teaching your child that he or she can cut corners or deliver less performance for the same incentive. Remember, your ultimate goal is to prepare your child for the real world, and in the real world it is hard to achieve success by doing only part of a job.

By the same token don't withdraw or modify the structure for earning a reward if it looks like you have made it “too easy.” There is always a next time and a “new deal.”

Consequences Can Be a Type of Reinforcement

Most parents can be easily confused by the technical differences between “punishment” and “reinforcement.” Simply put, punishment is anything meant to reduce the frequency of a behavior. Reinforcement makes behavior happen more often.

If you wash a child’s mouth out with soap after he says a bad word, you are punishing the child. You are telling him you don’t want him to say that word any more. If instead, you praise a child for being polite, and you want him to be polite more often, you are reinforcing that behavior so it happens more often.

Often, the difference between rewards and punishments boil down to whether you emphasize the positive aspects of behavior (rewarding for being more polite) or the negative aspects (punishing to be less of a potty mouth).

There is a term called “negative reinforcement” which concentrates on avoiding or escaping something unpleasant. Let’s say that a parent is dealing with siblings and trying to promote more civilized behavior between them. Examine this instruction, which is positive reinforcement: *“If you and your sister can get along, you can watch the movie you both wanted to see and stay up an hour later tonight.”*

There’s a lot going on in this instruction, and what is NOT said is just as important as what IS said. I am going to break it down for you:

“If you and your sister can get along...” The goal you are setting here is improving civility. You are setting the standard to be MORE niceness.

It would be a far different instruction if the instruction were *“If you don’t stop fighting you are both going to your room.”* What you are asking for is LESS fighting and the way to AVOID having to go to your room is to stop fighting and of course, be nicer.

In practical parenting settings choosing whether to reward a behavior or set up a circumstance where you are teaching your kids that it is better to avoid a consequence.

I have a preference here, but in reality you have to know what motivates your kids. There are kids with very difficult temperaments who will only respond to threats of losing something. My preference is to keep kids motivated to achieve positive things when at all possible. It is a better leadership style to encourage a positive work ethic than it is to discipline by threat. I think there are enough

natural consequences in the world to show kids that it is wise to avoid unpleasant outcomes. This is one of those areas where parents have to experiment to see what works best.

Teach Your Kids Reward Themselves Intrinsically

Intrinsic reward is another way of saying “self satisfaction.” With so much emphasis placed on the acquisition of material things, being “self satisfied,” is not a very valued trait. Doing something for the sake of being rewarded by the task itself is part of the foundation for good self esteem. In the next section we are going to explore the role of family leaders being good role models for a lot of important behavior in their children. One of those important behaviors is the behavior of enjoying one’s own efforts at success and achievement. So, in this section I am underscoring the importance of intrinsic rewards, and in the next section I will cover ways of becoming a good role model for it.

Summing Up

Part of being a good family leader means understanding how important it is to incentivize kids to behave in ways that help them achieve success and maximize their achievements. How you reward a child is important. You must learn to choose reasonable goals. You must make sure that the performance you expect produces more success than frustration. You must follow through on the contingencies that you set, and not “change the deal.”

Not all kids are incentivized with the same incentives and in the same ways. Like most of parenting you must be a good experimenter and rely on the techniques that you have observed work effectively.

PARENTING ACTION -- MODEL A BEHAVIOR

Be Careful About What You Are Demonstrating

It should be no surprise to anyone that children imitate behavior -- lots of behavior (not only their parents behavior), and they imitate behavior that is undesirable as well as desirable. The ability to imitate behavior is an integral component of the human learning “toolbox.” We are programmed from birth to imitate language, emotion, aggression and many complex human behaviors.

The emphasis in this parenting approach is leadership, and being a role model for behavior that incentivizes success in the real world is probably the single most important leadership skill a parent can have -- but it is not easy.

Your child will take his or her cues from you regarding:

- how you manage your physical appearance
- whether you drink
- whether you smoke
- how loudly you raise your voice
- how kind you are to others
- your tolerance of other races
- your religious observances
- your work ethic
- your political ideas
- your ability to love and forgive
- your charitable behavior

...and those are just the first few that pop into my mind.

There isn't really all that much more to communicate to you about "observational learning," because it is just about as simple as it sounds.

Your ability to influence your child to behave in ways that are consistent with your best values and features diminishes somewhat as the teen years approach and children feel the need to develop their own identities. In healthy families, while teens might rebel, research shows that they credit and appreciate the influence of their parents.

In the "Turning Intention Into Action" section I will offer just a few tips to help you understand how to make your efforts at being a good model pay off.

The Intentions

I will be a healthy model for leadership and problem solving.

I will strive to place my children in the company of other good models for social and emotional behavior.

I realize that “Do as I say, not as I do,” is not an effective message for influencing my child’s behavior.

I understand that my negative patterns of behavior might be a stronger influence on my child than the positives I try to put out there, because negative behavior often gets more attention.

When I do become a negative model for behavior such as anger and poor self control, I can always model the behavior of apology and striving for self improvement.

Turning Intentions Into Actions

Reinforcement and modeling go hand in hand. Children tend to model behavior that is rewarded, and they also model behavior that is rewarded in others. Unfortunately, there is a negative side to this. Children will model behavior that is often socially rewarded by their peers like bullying and aggression.

So, when you consider how “observational learning” influences your kids you have to factor influences like:

- social media
- traditional media
- who your kids are playing with and associating with in their peer group
- the social culture of the school they are attending
- the influences of other adults who play important roles in the lives of your children like teachers, religious leaders, coaches, babysitters, extended family members, etc.

It is the sum of influences that your children come under that determines who they will copy and imitate. It can become a very delicate process to steer your children away from those influences that are unsavory.

The best advice I can give parents in this regard is not to be afraid to place rules and limits on environments that can have a bad influence, even if it means your kids will act as if they don't like you. You are supposed to be smarter and more wise than they are. Act that way, and they might not like you, but they will respect you.

Summing Up

Children develop a lot of their personality on what they observe. Behavioral modeling is another way of saying that children imitate what they see, and they will imitate both positive and negative behavior. Negative behavior might be more easily imitated if kids see that it is rewarded with attention or other forms of social rewards. Being a good role model for your kids requires that you do not send a mixed message about the standards you set for yourself, versus those you set for your kids.

PARENTING ACTION -- PROVIDING INFORMATION

Curiosity Kills The Cat, Information Made Him Fat

Most every time we speak to kids we provide them with information, a lot of which they often tend to ignore, and sometimes I can't really blame them.

Some parents give kids waaaaay too many orders at once, and this happens to be so at all ages, in my opinion. I recently fixated on the following conversation between a mom and her ten year old child while they were walking past me apparently on the child's way home from school. Now mind you this is ONLY the conversation that transpired in the minute or so it took for them to walk by:

What did you do in school today?

I just asked you what you did in school.

It can't be that you did nothing, you had to do something.

Did you remember to show the homework we did last night?

Did you eat your lunch?

I don't want you drinking soda during lunch, or juice. Just water, okay?

For this portion of the conversation, the child was literally glazed over and non-responsive.

The Importance of Practice: The Good Kind and The Bad Kind

The way I saw it, he was *practicing* ignoring her. I am completely awestruck whenever I see a kid practicing ignoring their parents. Because, what I can't believe is why parents will then ask me why their kids don't listen to them or why their kids tune them out.

Parents should always be mindful of kids practicing undesirable behavior. Anything we humans practice we tend to get better at, so whether it's baseball or throwing a fit, or ignoring a parent, the more practice we get, the more skilled we become. Should be enough said.

Less is More

Kids often pay more attention to what their fathers tell them than what their mothers tell them. That's because often kids interact less with their fathers than they do with their mothers. Sure fathers are perceived as more aggressive, more stern and less predictable, but I don't think any of those things matter as much as the fact that in families where the roles are more traditional, kids get more practice ignoring their mothers.

Some research suggests that women speak more words than men. The data are unclear and arguments abound. However, for the sake of this discussion let's say that whether you are a man or a woman if you use too many words you run the risk of losing the attention of your kids, and it is very hard to lead a person who is not paying attention to you.

There are a lot of reasons why parents talk too much to kids, but I think an important one is lack of confidence. Parents don't believe that they have the ability to influence their children, so they *over* communicate.

Don't get over communication confused with repetitiveness. I think a moderate amount of repetitiveness is good. (Everything can be overdone.) It's long windedness that loses kids, frustrates them and encourages them to space out.

If you have a child who has an attention issue, that makes efficient, effective communication that much more important.

It has been my experience with parents and children that effective communication can also be hampered by lectures that are too “loving”, “supportive,” and “feeling expressive.” Don’t I sound *horrible*? Let me redeem myself. There is a place for loving, affectionate, emotional talk -- but not when you are trying to get kids to do things they don’t want to do, and it is my position that at least half of all parenting revolves around parents telling kids to do things they don’t want to do. If your child is an easy to manage, very compliant, eager to please kind of child you have no worries. Say and do whatever you want. There are actually kids who are so easy to manage that all you have to do is feed and water them and they grow up to be close to perfect. This isn’t a joke. Some kids are very easy to raise. There is certainly a genetic luck of the draw to your kid’s personality.

I am talking directly to the parents of kids with “average” to “difficult” temperaments. Kids who have to be cajoled from place to place, encouraged to do their chores, kids who push back, are down right surly or mouthy -- you know, *most kids!*

What it comes down to is that effective leaders use:

- assertive communication
- verbal cues
- verbal rewards and support
- concise and compact information

Let’s see how these two approaches work, when speaking with a child about poor homework effort.

Approach One

“I’d like to talk to you about your homework. What kind of effort do you think you have been putting into it lately? Are you feeling frustrated? Do you think I should have a talk with your teacher? What can I do to help you get that homework done? Etc...”

Contrast this to:

Approach Two

“Your homework hasn’t been very good lately. We all go through tough times with our responsibilities, but you have to improve what you are doing. Homework is going to be done directly after school. You are going to have to show me everything you hand in. It’s probably going to be an adjustment you are not going to like very much, but you can do it. Let’s figure it out. “

Exact words aren’t important. You don’t have to sound like you are reading a script.

Which person is placed in more of a leadership position? in “Approach One” seems to me, like the parent is asking the child to manage his or her own behavior and soliciting from the child what he or she wants to do. I don’t favor this approach for correcting a behavior because if the child were capable of that kind of self-correction there would probably be no homework problem to begin with.

Critics might say it is more important for a child to become “self motivated” and that is why Approach One might be better. Hogwash! Self motivation is something that evolves from experiencing the consequences of one’s behavior and sometimes those consequences are not good. Good family leaders want to be in charge of controlling the consequences. This way children don’t always have to learn that the natural consequence of not doing homework is failure in the larger world of school. Much better for them to get their lumps (consequences) in the smaller venue of home.

Approach Two is a better presentation of information because it does the following:

Provides feedback (*Your homework hasn’t been very good lately.*)

Provides support and behavioral expectation (*We all go through tough times with our responsibilities, but you have to improve what you are doing*)

Provides a clear plan of action with another dollop of support. (*Homework is going to be done directly after school. You are going to have to show me everything you hand in. It’s probably going to be an adjustment you are not going to like very much, but you can do it.*)

Models (see last chapter) that the parent is there to offer assistance. (*Let’s figure it out.*)

In order to succeed in your “talking” sessions with your children you have to make an honest assessment as to whether your communication style:

- is too wordy
- lacks assertiveness
- places your child in charge of the conversation
- is more of an interrogation and less of a conversation
- lacks a clear statement of goals
- does not provide a supportive model
- gives your child opportunity to whine and argue

The Intentions

These points become a natural segue into helping you practice of your intentional thinking:

My child is not my equal, so I need for him or her to pay attention to what I am saying because if I am choosing my words carefully, what I am saying is important.

Short and sweet is better than long and boring.

I need to practice saying helpful things to my child without second guessing my competence.

Carrying on a conversation by asking questions can place my child in charge and undermine my leadership position.

Carrying on a conversation by asking questions can sound like an interrogation and help my child practice tuning me out.

I can acknowledge that change can be difficult but express confidence that my child is up to the task.

I will communicate most when my children are motivated to listen

Turning Intention Into Action

For kids who are always jockeying for a few minutes more of time before they have to go to bed, offer to talk to them about something important. This is a win-win for parents. Either they are going to go to bed, because talking is torture, or they are going to listen to what you have to say. If they don't want to talk simply say, OK. I have something I need to tell you and then you can go to bed.

Children do not communicate well when they are playing video games. Don't even try. However, set a limit by saying, "We have to talk in five minutes, so save your game and don't wait for me to come over and turn the game off myself."

With younger children, do not present your information when they are in the middle of a fit or tantrum. Deal with the tantrum, then have the talk but only when they are calmed down.

With older children, capture their attention when they want something (which is almost anytime they occupy the same space as you do). Say, "I will listen to what you want, but you have to listen to me first."

Capture the "Soul of Wit"

There is no one on earth who can convince me that "long talks are better than short talks." Remember we are discussing "talks about behavior," not a long talk about a National Geographic special, or The Yankees, or any topic which is a shared interest between parents and children. As a matter of fact, if you keep your conversations about behavior short and to the point, your child will appreciate the longer, less tension filled, less emotionally draining talks that typify the types of talks you have when talking about behavior.

Assertive and Aggressive are Two Very Different Approaches

"You are grounded for a month, you disrespectful annoying pain in the ass."

"You are going to do your homework before you can have your cell phone back."

The first statement is aggressive. Also, in order for this kind of communication to work, it must inspire fear and anxiety every time you use it. Also, in order for aggressive parenting communication and behavior to work consistently, you have to escalate that behavior because kids tend to accommodate to what their parents say and do. So, unless you think its a good idea to threaten military

action against your kids, eventually you will run out of threats and when your child finds out you've got nothing to back up your harsh words with, they will assume the leadership position.

Summing Up

Less is more is the rule of thumb when it comes to talking to children about their behavior. Children have limited attention spans, generally do not like being lectured to and have lots of imagination to play around with while pushing your interrogations and lectures into the background of their psychological landscape.

Tell your children what to do. Don't ask them. Consistent with the other advice I have given you, do not prioritize being their friend or their equal.

You will never have to resort to aggressive threats or verbal put downs, if you can approach them assertively with effective, efficient communications.

PARENTING ACTION -- IGNORING BEHAVIOR

Dealing With The Cost of Doing Business

We all want to ignore our kids from time to time, and from time to time it is best to ignore certain kinds of behavior: "*Mom, mom, mom, mom, mom, mom, mom,*" with the accompanying pokes, prods and face grabs, can be utterly tormenting when parents have pressing issues to attend to. To make matters worse, when your best intentions are to ignore behavior and you let yourself get worn down, you can easily encourage more of the type of behavior you are trying to stop or prevent -- by giving in just to get some relief.

By not properly ignoring a child's behavior you unwittingly teach your child to absorb "the cost of doing business." If you ignore the whining, begging, negotiating, tantrumming and are doing a great job at it, but ultimately give in, you are teaching your child that whining, begging, negotiating and tantrums are what is required to turn a "no" into a "yes."

So, when parents tell me that when they ignore a child's annoying behavior, and it doesn't work, I put on my bullet proof vest and tell them it's often their fault. In order to be able to ignore a child's behavior successfully enough to get it to stop, your will must be stronger than theirs, and that is a very tall order with some kids. Ignoring a child's annoying behavior is a zen-like dedication. One

of the reasons for this is that there is a “second prize” that children will settle for if they cannot get what they want. That second prize is the thrill of seeing YOU have a meltdown and screaming “*GET AWAY FROM ME NOW!*” or saying “*STOP IT I CAN’T TAKE IT ANYMORE!*” while looking like you have your hair on backwards.

Children receive “secondary gain” by seeing you meltdown. On the simplest level it is a button pushing challenge to your leadership role. It is as if kids are proving...”If you are going to make me feel bad, I am going to make you feel bad. “

From a leadership perspective, relentless nagging, whining and negotiating is a direct challenge to your leadership position. Combine your withdrawal of attention with the lessons you learned in the section “The Tau of No.” You don’t have to ignore a behavior until it completely peters out. Start by ignoring the behavior, and then apply a firm “No,” then ignore what follows.

It is often necessary to interrupt behavior that you have first started to ignore, because let’s face it, you don’t always have the time to outlive the torrent at hand. Think before you screech. I observed the following in a shopping mall:

A child of about seven (way to big to carry) had an idea that only she thought was a good one:

“Mom I want to ride on your back!”

The mother’s reply was, *“No, Nancy, no!”*

“Mom, I want a ride.”

The mother’s response was *“My back hurts from yesterday’s ride. I can’t do it.”*

“Mom. Pleeeeeeeeeeeease. I can’t walk, I want to ride. I neeeeeeed a ride.”

“Nancy Margaret McBride, you cannot have a ride, and that is my final answer.”

Then Mom successfully ignored the rest of the onslaught without saying a single word.

I was pulling for the mother, really. I thought she had it in the bag. I was about to offer to pay for ten chiropractic adjustments just for sticking it out. But no, the rest of the scene unfolded right before my eyes in super slow motion.

Nancy became a bag of dirty laundry and dropped to the pavement (cement I might add). There was wailing, chattering of teeth, out of body experiences, and all of those things happened before the child hit the ground.

Seconds later, in super fast motion, Nancy was draped around her mother's neck like one of those fox stoles where the fox bites its own tail to stay wrung around it's wearers neck.

In the minute it took to watch this scene play out I could imagine the machinations that led up to this and could only conclude that this child had more staying power than the mother. Her fault right? Who carries a seven year old on their back? Someone who has been outlasted, that's who. But that doesn't mean you cannot turn behavior like this around. It's always a bit more work to get a child to pay attention when you have given up your leadership role, but remember, kids rely on their parents from "the basics" to "the premium add ons." Recapturing leadership is often a matter of going back to the beginning and setting new standards for who is in control.

So, the moral of the story is you have to learn how to "mean business," and employ that along with shutting yourself off to annoying behavior. Meaning business means lowering your voice, looking your child right in the eye and saying, "I do not have the time or the patience for what you are doing right now, there will be consequences when we get home." Notice I do not advise you to provide an "if you don't behave" clause. The bad behavior has already happened. Do not reward a child for misbehaving then behaving. This will only serve to teach your child that they have a "get out of jail free coupon," which they can use prior to having to pay attention and behave.

The Intentions

I must have the patience to outlast obnoxious and irritating behavior.

If I give in to this behavior now, I know it is going to become worse in the future.

I do not want to teach my child to be the kind of person who intrudes on and takes advantage of others.

The best way I can love my child right now is to ignore the behavior he or she is showing.

By ignoring my child's inappropriate behavior, I am modeling a behavior they might need in their future dealings with difficult people.

Turning Intention Into Action

Parents who I coach sometimes worry that ignoring a child's behavior is "not enough." What they are saying, in essence, is: *"If I ignore my child's difficult behavior I feel as though I am not taking enough 'action.'*" However, doing nothing is often doing something.

The difference between doing nothing because you don't want to be bothered to lead when leadership is required versus not acknowledging behavior that is irritating, self-interested and discourteous is a matter of whatever else is happening at the time. For instance, if your child is embarrassing you in public or otherwise puts you in a position where time out is not possible you might have to ignore behavior that you might usually correct.

Do not argue or escalate conflict in public places, and do not admonish by saying, *"Wait until we get home..."* Children learn more when you handle their behavior with actions than with warnings. When you have a track record of providing consequences, then warnings can be effective, but I always prefer action to warnings.

So, here you are with your child arguing and being difficult in a setting and at a time when you really can't do much about it. Worse yet, you are being mortified by their behavior.

Step One: Describe the behavior you are seeing. Do not relate it to yourself because children should behave in ways that reflect more on them than it does on you, so avoid this:

"I am very disappointed in your behavior right now..."

Instead, describe the behavior as it relates to the child:

"The behavior you are showing right now is not making you look... (mature, like you capable of controlling yourself, like you can control your temper)," or in the alternative, *"The behavior you are showing right now makes you look (immature, angry, like you cannot control your temper, selfish,etc.)."*

This type of admonition is meant to help the child understand how other people are seeing them, and make them self conscious about it. You might not believe that kids care about how they look to others but most kids after seven years old or so, do.

Do not insult them by saying things like, “this behavior makes you look (stupid, ignorant, crazy, etc.) Doing so only teaches your kids how to insult others.

Step Two:

If the behavior doesn't stop, add, “I hope you understand that there are consequences for this type of behavior.” Use a low tone of voice. Do not get overly excited. Yes, this is a threat, but it is a very non specific threat. You are not saying, “Wait until we get home,” which often emboldens kids when you don't follow up. Instead you are saying, “OK, we are in an environment which I do not completely control right now. When I am in control of the environment this behavior will not escape my memory and it will catch up to you.” The older kids get the more they need to realize that there is more of a give and take relationship between parents and children, and a lot of what parents do for kids is completely optional -- driving places, purchasing that “special” pair of sneakers, permission to go places, stay out later, extra spending money, cell phone privileges.

You never have to impose a punishment. You merely have to wait for a request for a privilege, then say, “Sorry, but after what you did (explain the circumstances) I don't think that it would be a good idea to let you take advantage of me like that. Show me that you know that behavior was bad (wrong, inappropriate, etc.) and I promise you things will change.

Step Three:

When the child can address the behavior, show the importance of forgiveness.

“Everybody has a bad day, so it's no big deal. We learn and we move on.”

Summing Up

It's not always practical to be proactive, and your kids know it. So, it will be natural to challenge your leadership in places where you can't rely on your entire parenting toolkit. Be strategic. Ignore behavior, but address it using discipline by natural consequences. There are a lot of things that parents do for their children that are optional. If you cut down on some of those optional generosity, it will get your kids attention.

In the following sections I will discuss how these techniques are used and in what situations. While all of these techniques apply kids from 2 through the teen years, the teen years require more emphasis in some of these areas and less in others. My website:

<http://www.tribecakidcoach.com/teens> provides lots of information about teen parenting.

Evaluating Outcomes

Leadership is getting someone to do what they don't want to do, to achieve what they want to achieve

Tom Landry



I started *The Intentional Parent* emphasizing the importance of “thinking about thinking,” (as well as “thinking about doing”) and that is the point we come back to here. The first step in evaluating your performance as a parent is to think about that performance and whether or not it matches your self imposed expectations. Human beings can have a very difficult time doing that. People’s tendencies run from being overly critical of themselves, (i.e. “I will never be the parent I want to be.”) to being blissfully unaware of the interplay between their behavior and the behavior of their children. So how do you know if you are being too self critical or not critical enough. Well, the first thing that should clue you in is what other people are telling you about your kids.

If parents, teachers and other significant people are praising the behavior of your kids, then chances are you are doing a good job. If, on the other hand people are telling you about incidences your kids are having in school, in social settings, and in places where respect for authority is a priority, then you simply have to ask yourself if (1) your child’s temperament is so difficult that outside coaching from a behavioral expert is something you should consider, or (2) whether you are putting enough emphasis on being an effective leader.

One of the reasons why I have tried to create a structured approach to parenting is to help people evaluate their performance. Here are eight simple questions you might want to ask yourself (all connected to concepts in this book/program) to determine whether you are hitting your leadership stride?

- Am I giving in to unreasonable demands from my children, just because that is the only way I can control them?
- Am I providing good models for respect?
- Am I providing good models for conflict resolution?
- Am I providing good models for emotional control?
- Am I providing good models for controlling bad habits (like eating).
- Am I afraid of my kids?
- Do I rely more on praise or criticism to re-direct my kid’s behavior?
- Do the kids control the emotional climate of the home, or do I?

What if you don't like the answers you are coming up with? If that is the case, choose one behavior, any behavior that you would like to see change, *in yourself as a parent and leader*, and try to create improvement in that area. See what I am saying here? Challenge *yourself* to become a better leader, don't give yourself a homework assignment that requires some performance increase on the part of your kids. **The challenge is always to become a better leader, not to put the burden on your children to make you feel that way.**

You see, depending on your kids to validate your parenting leadership is not so reliable, especially if you have a child who is tough to manage. They are not always going to appreciate changes you make in your leadership. In fact their behavior might get worse before it gets better, while you are upping your demands on them, and improving your leadership style.

And with this point we come full circle, where the circle begins with the intention to lead, the actions taken to fulfill those intentions, the honest evaluation of those actions, and back to the intention to lead better, better, better and better. Put yourself in that circle and make lots of laps. Simple advice to give but difficult to follow, but I have given you a system.

“Unconditional” Love

The biggest challenge I face when trying to teach parents how to become better family leaders is their interpretation that they must be stern and rigid instead of loving and warm. Unconditional love and non contingent love are two very different concepts.

Non contingent love means loving without rules and limitations. Hugs, kisses, attention and reward are available in every circumstance, no matter what. This kind of approach leads to children growing up entitled, demanding and selfish.

Unconditional love means that you are accepting of your children's strengths and weaknesses, willing to forgive mistakes without damaging a child's self esteem, but letting your child know that not all behavior is acceptable.

Unconditional love that is shown by a parent's unwillingness to let a child face the world unprepared to understand that bad behavior creates obstacles to success in life, is damaging. When you love a child by making excuses for them, rewarding bad behavior, approaching them like an equal (i.e. a friend), you are not providing a very accurate example of how the world operates.

Be loving and demonstrative. Don't deprive yourself of hugs, kisses and snuggles for the short time they are available. Cherish your special time. Tell you kids you love them. All of this provides a healthy foundation for emotional security and best of all, it

eventually prepares them to be loving parents themselves. But understand that if you give your kids this, and only this, you are not giving them enough.

Part Two: Situational Knowledge



I am endlessly fascinated that playing football is considered a training ground for leadership, but raising children isn't.

Dee Dee Meyers

Practical Examples

This section of *Parenting With Intention* shows every day examples that cover a wide range of parenting situations. Good leaders have expert knowledge so here is a foundation for dealing with common parenting issues.

Naturally, not every example will apply to you, and not every example applies to every child. I hope that by reading these examples you can get a good feel for how to handle common parenting situations.

These questions were originally taken from a parenting tips hotline I once ran in my practice. Look at the advice and think about which parenting actions from the last part apply. There is no single correct answer because different courses of action can bring successful results. The main point is *have a plan of action and intend to pursue it*.

Acting Out

All kids misbehave. You will find that intercepting misbehavior and intervening sooner rather than later is often better than a “wait and see what this turns into,” strategy. This is especially so when you have more than one child to deal with and you don’t want them fighting like two cats in a bag.

Biting

My toddler seems to have developed a habit of biting me when he's upset. I have considered biting him back to show him what it feels like. What should I do?

Toddlers bite for a number of reasons. Some toddlers who aren't talking much bite as a means of self-expression. Others might be very verbal but bite anyway because they have learned that it gets attention.

Biting is often a phase, but just because it tends to go away on its own doesn't mean parents should tolerate it.

Biting your toddler back is not a good idea. Humans can give nasty bites and if you inadvertently break the skin your child can get a very nasty infection, not to mention a visit from your local child abuse authorities. Another reason why you should not bite is because it models aggressive behavior, so it is entirely possible that this could cause more biting.

A better strategy would be to be on the lookout for when your child looks like he is ready to bite. A firmly spoken "No!" combined with talking away from your child, for a few minutes is generally all it takes to break this habit.

Reward more appropriate expressions of emotion in your child. Give praise and hugs when a child expresses herself appropriately. Reinforce the concept of using words not actions to show feelings. Say something like, "If you are angry you may say, 'I'm very angry,' but you may not bite'.

Even if your child is not old enough to understand the words or concepts, your tone should be more than enough to interrupt the behavior.

Lying

My eleven year old daughter lies a lot. She lies about what she does to her sister, she lies about doing her homework, and she lies to her mother about what I (her father) tells her and vice versa. What can we do to get her to tell the truth?

The most common reason kids lie is to avoid what they think will happen if they tell the truth. When whatever method they use to avoid the truth succeeds, it strengthens their motivation to lie again.

The goal for parents is to make telling the truth easier than lying.

Here is an example: You ask your child if she has any homework. She tells you "No," because she knows there is a good chance that if she says that, you will leave her alone. If it works, she has successfully avoided an unpleasant task. It may even work better than she planned, because the next day,

when she goes into school, if her teacher falls for whatever excuse the child gives, then she has lied successfully, *twice*.

This can go on for the whole year, until parents read something on the child's report card that indicates there are tons of missing assignments. Now, kids should only be able to run this scam once, because after you find out they have been lying about homework you can stop it by increasing your child's accountability. One way of doing this is to arrange a conference with your daughter's teacher and work out a weekly homework progress report that goes directly from the teacher to the parent.

You have effectively removed the opportunity to lie, and with that whatever benefit was gained by avoiding the truth.

A second way to solve lying is to make sure you don't punish a child for telling the truth. If a child knows that you will yell, carry on, and otherwise make life miserable if he owns up to his mistakes and misgivings, he will not understand the value of telling the truth. Does that mean as long as a child tells the truth there should be no consequences? No, not at all. It just means that telling the truth should always be rewarded and acknowledged; and it means that telling a lie should always be dealt with more harshly than telling the truth.

Spanking As Discipline

When I was growing up, my parents spanked me when I misbehaved. I don't feel they ever abused me, and I believe that the spanking helped keep my behavior under control. I know a lot of so-called mental health experts are against spanking, and quite frankly, I don't understand why. If a parent is in control when he or she spans a child, is it really such a terrible thing?

Yes, it is a terrible thing. There is an enormous amount of research out there that shows that spanking is not a very effective way of managing a child's behavior, or of accomplishing the task that discipline should accomplish, which is teaching and promoting more positive behavior in children.

Spanking also has several bad side effects. First, it is aggressive, hostile behavior. This is not something you want to subject a child to. You certainly don't want to use aggression to discipline a child for being aggressive himself. Second, no mat-

ter how hard you try, you cannot always be certain that you are really in control when you are spanking your child. The possibility always exists that your child will try to jerk away from you or will trip on something trying to avoid you, and be injured. Third, spanking tries to prevent a behavior from happening again by using humiliation as a teaching tool. Humiliating someone will cause resentment more often than it will enhance someone's desire to learn how to behave properly. The fourth and best reason is the many years of research that show that spanking just doesn't work and tends to make kids more aggressive, and less well-adjusted.

Whenever possible, concentrate instead on encouraging behavior you want to promote in your child. For instance, it is better to praise a child for using kind, appropriate language than it is to spank a child for using foul language. By the same token, it would be better to reward siblings for playing nicely with one another than to spank them for behaving aggressively toward one another.

Time Out Doesn't Work

I have been using "time out" as a way of disciplining my six-year-old son when he misbehaves. Whenever I send him up to his room, though, he never seems to care. He'll stay in there just to be spiteful, and then he'll come out and tell me he doesn't care how many times I send him up to his room. What can I do?

Time out is probably the most common technique parents use to discipline their kids. On the surface, the concept of "time out" seems pretty simple—if your child misbehaves, you send him off to his room to cool off and think about his behavior. In reality, using time out effectively means that you have to understand some of the fine points behind the concept, and these fine points are rarely taught to parents.

First, the most important element of time out is that the child has to be taken out of an environment that is inherently rewarding. What does that mean? It means that if your normal

household routine is hostile and chaotic, if it is a place where people are always yelling, punching each other around, or criticizing, then there is no reason for a kid to want to go back into that environment. Time out might actually represent a welcome relief from that environment.

The second most important thing is that the goal of time out is not to have your child come out with a new lease on life. Parents often interrogate kids coming out of time out as if they were their children's parole officers. *"Do you know why what you did was wrong?" "Did you spend any of your time thinking about your behavior?" "Do you promise not to ever do that again?" "Would you like to come out and apologize to everyone whose feelings you hurt today?"* Who would want to come out of time out and have to deal with all of that? Time out is effective because it interrupts a negative behavior (such as talking nasty to a brother or sister) before it has the opportunity to be rewarded by something negative (your child getting to see his or her brother or sister in a tortured state, and getting away with it).

Be mindful of the amount of time you "sentence" your child to. Time out doesn't have to be long to be effective. A good rule of thumb is a minute for every year of the child's age up until five, then no more than fifteen or twenty minutes. Also, time out doesn't have to be just for your child. Use the period to cool yourself off a bit and reflect on your own temper and behavior.

Parents often want to know what to do if they send their kids to time out and they won't go. The solution for this is not to argue with them about it—this will only take the focus away from the original negative behavior. If the child won't go into time out, simply say (in a very calm, measured tone), *"You've got one more chance to go into time out. If you don't go to your room and cool off for a few minutes, there are going to be consequences later. It's your choice."* Then, walk away. The advantage that parents have over kids is that kids need their parents for everything: rides to friends' houses, treats, dessert, television privileges. Over time, you can make it clear to your child that if she doesn't want to go to time out, she will not have access to all of those perks and goodies that parents provide for their children—it's as simple as that. Later on in the day when your child wants a special favor you say (without spitefulness or hostility), *"When I told you to take a time out before, you wouldn't go to your room and cool down. That made me quite upset. If you do something that is wrong and I ask you to go to time out, I expect that you will go, cool off, and come out. Then we can both forget about it. I can't do what you want today, but tomorrow's another day, and I won't be upset anymore, and hopefully you'll listen to me when I ask you to take your time out."*

This little speech usually works wonders, but you have to stick to your guns and be sure you don't make a battle out of it. Some kids will test you on it, and the stubborn kids will frustrate you to tears. Be firm.

Doing Chores

I've tried every positive way I can think of to get my nine-year-old son to cooperate around the house. The only thing that seems to work is when I take things away from him. My wife and I feel very guilty over the fact that the only way we can get our son to do his chores is by constantly threatening him. What can we do to motivate him?

Parents and children fall into patterns in the way they communicate and deal with one another. You and your wife have managed to create a method of communication that seems to work but that doesn't make you feel very good. By and large, I usually don't recommend taking things away or threatening kids to get them to do things, but I have to tell you that sometimes it is the only thing that seems to work. I can imagine how guilty you and your wife feel about using this technique, because I feel just as guilty recommending that parents do it!

I have resolved this issue by recommending that parents try to provide a choice between taking something away and giving something positive. Here is one example:

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson tell me that the only way they can get their ten-year-old son, Brian, to clean his room is to perform "surprise inspections." If his room is messy, they go to a chart that has a drawing of sixteen quarters on it, one for every quarter of his four-dollar allowance, and they cross one quarter off. At the end of the week he finds out how much money he has lost for the next week. This technique worked very well, but I felt uncomfortable because Brian was always losing something, even if he kept his room mostly neat. I offered the following suggestion: Why not offer Brian an incentive for doing a good job? If a whole week went by and he only lost three quarters or less, he would receive a bonus of a dollar the next week. The bonus worked out just fine. Eventually his parents picked up on the idea and expanded it by telling Brian that if he had a good week he would receive a coupon for the next week. The coupon said "Stay Away From My Room," and it could be hung on his door any day to avoid surprise inspections. In essence, Brian got a day off when he could keep his door closed and live the way ten-year-old kids tend to live. It was a great compromise all around. After all, how bad could a kid's socks smell up the house, behind a closed door, for just one day? (All right, maybe that was a bad example, but I'm sure you get the point.)

Arguing, Whining and Crying

My eleven-year-old daughter is a world-class nagger. Whenever she can't get her way, she argues, beys, pleads, whimpers, cries, and actually has the nerve to let us know that if she doesn't get what she wants she will continue. She can usually wear us down to the point where we will finally give in. Is there any way we can stop her?

One day, when you are very old and your nerves have been worn down to little, teensy nubs, you will see that your daughter's persistence actually will get her far in life. Your goal is to be sure that you do not encourage her to be a person who, while being persistent and goal-directed, is impossible to be around. You and your wife have unwittingly, to save your own sanity, gently encouraged your daughter's behavior by giving in to her. Your daughter has probably been a strong-minded kid from the very beginning. She probably gets some of her perseverance (which is the positive, flip side of stubbornness)

from either you or her mom. What you haven't been able to do is withstand her behavior well enough to teach her that the world will not end if she doesn't get what she wants.

First, examine your feelings. Are you afraid that she will hate you if she doesn't get her way? That would not be an unreasonable fear, since she probably tells you that she will hate you if she doesn't get her way. Are you afraid that if you don't let her get her way she will be hurt? A lot of parents can't stand seeing their kids in discomfort. Finally, are you concerned that if you don't let her get her way, she'll continue nagging until you totally lose it and have to make a short, but well-deserved trip to the local in-patient psychiatric facility? This would be another acceptable reason, since parents can sometimes get so enraged at this kind of behavior that they worry that they will lose it big-time. These thoughts and feelings can take you far away from the position you want to be in when dealing with this kind of behavior. By this time your daughter is an expert. She's got a specialty. She's got a lot of time under her belt. She's got confidence. She's got an impressive track record. You need a plan.

Here it is:

First, confront the problem on your own terms, during a time of your own choosing. The worst time to confront the problem is when she's doing her thing and emotions are high on both ends. Wait until everything's cozy. Offer her a little extra time up at bedtime. Kids will do anything to avoid going to sleep—they'll even entertain thoughts of changing their behavior (ac-

tually, they won't see it like that, but it will help if you do). Next, bring up a recent situation and explain that you have been giving it a lot of thought and have come to realize that there is room for improvement in the way certain decisions are made. Then, completely shock her by saying that sometimes you are a bit too quick to say no when she asks you for things. Observe the glazed look of almost delirious satisfaction that comes over her. At this point you have actually hypnotized her into thinking this conversation is about you and your behavior. Tell her that you would like to give her more of what she wants with less arguing and frustration.

Now comes the part where you shift gears a little. Tell her that the reason you are so quick to say no is that everything has become such a battle and a struggle that you just want it to end as quickly as possible. Offer to point out that the next time she asks for something you will say, *"I'd like to think about this a little before I give you an answer."* She will have to promise to agree to let you think about it or the answer becomes an automatic, an unchangeable no. She is not allowed to say, *"No, Dad, I need an answer now."* Go on to say that all important decisions will have to be made by you and Mom together. Finally, conclude by saying that if you give something a lot of thought and your answer is still no, she will be allowed to present her case one more time before the matter is closed.

None of this will mean much at this point. The Day of Reckoning is the next time she presents you with a request and you remind her that this is precisely the type of thing you were talking about "the other night." After she says *"What other*

night?" give her a brief refresher on the ground rules, and return with either a yes, a compromise, or a no. Remind your daughter that she has one more chance to reargue her position, and then end it.

You will be rewarded for following all of this advice with the usual barrage of nagging, whining, and bone-numbing tactics that you have received in the past. But this time you will have new resolve. You will realize that this, indeed, is the beginning of the end—your daughter's last noble attempt to shatter your spirit. "Poor, beautiful, sweet angel," you will repeat to yourself, while only ever-so-slightly grinding down your molars. Stick to your guns and you will have more and more success. Understand that even when you are inclined to say yes right away, you will still always say that you will think about it. This way, when you do say yes, you will appear magnanimous and kind, and her need to campaign will be satisfied as well.

Stealing

The other day I caught my ten-year-old son stealing ten dollars off my bedroom dresser. This alarmed me and my husband. We confronted him about it, but he just kept denying it. How should we handle it?

When parents suspect that their child has stolen from them they are, all at once, terrified, ashamed, embarrassed, angry, and heartbroken. This cascade of feelings is likely to cause you to come up with any number of strategies for confronting the problem. Certainly, it should never be done by just one parent if both are available. The discussion that should precede your action should focus on why your child might feel the need to steal. Sometimes it is a sign that the child is feeling unattended to or neglected. Sometimes it signifies anger or acting out because peers might have access to something that he doesn't have access to (trading cards, video games, sneakers with ridiculous gadgets built into them, whatever). In rare but serious cases, it may be to support a developing drug, alcohol,

or cigarette habit. Realize that stealing is not necessarily an omen of a lifelong tendency to participate in criminal behavior. More than likely it is not. Just be sure to discuss all of the possibilities. Aside from giving you some reasonable hunches, it will also take the edge off some of your anger.

If you have seen the action take place, please resist asking a bunch of questions designed to let your child incriminate himself. For instance, don't say *"Planning on making any major purchases in the near future, Joey?"* or Similarly, don't try to pretend that you have super-sleuthing powers by making up a dumb story like, *"You know, I just read about some invisible powder you can sprinkle on money, and if the money is stolen you can shine a light onto someone's hands to see if they touched it. I bought some just for a joke and put it all over this ten-dollar bill I had on the dresser, and now the bill is gone."* Talk like this will probably succeed in raising your child's anxiety and may in fact make it more likely for him to try to avoid the topic or assert his innocence. Skip over all of that, and simply tell him what you saw. Say, *"I saw you take some money of mine, and I'd like us to talk about it."* If he starts to deny it, cut it short by saying, *"This is a serious thing. I'd prefer to talk about it, but if you feel that you can't right now, you'll have to spend some time in your room thinking about it. You'll still have to talk about it when you come out, so we might as well just do it now."*

The time out might be just the thing that allows him to come clean when he gets out. When he does start talking about it, be concerned, not angry. Work out an appropriate consequence

so that he can repay the money or learn from the experience.
Explain that it will probably take you some time before you
can trust him, but you will try your best. Then end it.

Sleeping

It's the end of the day, and all you're looking forward to is a few minutes of well-deserved rest and relaxation. The last thing you want to do is become a waiter ("*Can I have a drink of water?*" "*Can I have a cookie?*"), a minstrel or bard ("*Can we sing a song?*" "*Can you tell me a story?*"), or a jailkeeper ("*No, you can't have another drink of water, and we've already sung a song and read a story. Now stay in your room and don't come out.*"). Getting your kids to sleep can mean the difference between raising your stress level to the breaking point and reducing your stress level so you can enjoy some peace and quiet. Here are the most frequent questions parents have about sleep, and answers to help you solve some common sleep problems.

Getting Toddlers to Bed

My three-year-old is so active that he is wide awake at ten o'clock at night, which is just about the time my husband and I are ready to pass out after an exhausting day. I'm sure that if we let him he would stay up past midnight. He just doesn't seem to need any sleep. We try to put him down at eight o'clock but he climbs out of his crib and wanders into the living room looking for us. What can we do?

What a terrible time you must have for those two hours, battling with him to keep him in his room.

Let's see what we can put together as a plan to get him to sleep without so much fussing and aggravation. First, you describe him as active. Just how active is he? You might want to pay your pediatrician a visit to have him or her evaluate whether your child is overactive or hyperactive. Is he taking medication for anything? Children frequently have sinus infections or

allergies. Some medications can really "wire" a child, so please check this out first. Next, what about his routine? Does he still nap during the day? Some three-year-olds need a nap, and some don't. If he's napping during the day, he might be recharging his batteries so that he can stay up and party all night. Try skipping the afternoon nap and see if he conks out a bit earlier at night. Third, try moving his bedtime up to about nine or nine-thirty. Allow him to stay up, but require that he sit or lie down on the couch and do something that is more passive—no horse playing or jumping around. While he is up, don't fuss over him or pay too much attention to him. Go about your own business as well as you can.

At nine or nine-thirty (or earlier) begin your going-to-sleep routine.

Prepare by saying that it is time to get ready for bed. Settle him in a calm, soothing voice. A very wise physician, Dr. Hugh Riordan founder of the Center for Improved Human Functioning in Kansas, once told me that if you lightly rub the crown of a child's head clockwise it will make him very relaxed. I don't know if there is any medical basis for this, but many parents tell me it works! Talk a bit about what will be happening tomorrow. After story time is over, say that you would like to spend a few minutes just sitting and relaxing without talking. The key to success is in producing this same routine over and over.

The period between the ages of three and four can be very challenging with regard to putting kids to sleep. A lot is going on

physically and intellectually. Children first begin reporting their dreams at about three years old, and this can be confusing. By the way, if your son is old enough to climb out of the crib, it is time that you begin making plans to put him in a "big boy's bed."

Nightmares

My four-year-old has been waking up complaining of a "man" that she sees when she sleeps. Is this normal?

As a matter of fact, this is quite normal. Children first begin reporting their dreams at about three years old. It can be very confusing for a number of reasons. Children begin tuning into their imaginations around three years of age. They begin fantasy play at this time and may even conjure up an imaginary friend, pet, or whole new identity. As they pass through three and four years of age, they begin to learn

to distinguish fantasy from reality, but until they are able to do so, it can be scary. This is truly the age where things "go bump in the night." With regard to dreams, animals are usually the first inhabitants of children's dreams, followed six months to a year later by people. Because kids are egocentric, or self-centered, they don't understand that you don't experi-

ence the same things at night that they do. If your child has a dream in which she saw a person, she naturally assumes you saw that person, too. Allow your child the opportunity to describe what she saw, and explain to her that it was only a dream. Begin helping her understand what a dream is by telling her, *"You see, it was only a dream because when you woke up, that man was gone."* In your everyday speech you will begin using words like imagination, and make-believe so that dreams will be just another example of these things.

Bedwetting

My eight-year-old still wets the bed. I have been told this is a sign of emotional disturbance. Is this true?

Not necessarily. Enuresis, or bedwetting, is a fairly common childhood malady. Sometimes it coincides with stress and anxiety or with difficult life circumstances such as divorce or the appearance of a new sibling. Sometimes, however, it occurs in children who are completely well-adjusted. The biggest problem with bedwetting from the standpoint of the psychology of the child is that it creates tremendous embarrassment and humiliation, and prevents him from sleeping over at his friends' houses. It's also frustrating and worrisome for parents. No one has come up with a great explanation for why kids wet the bed, although physicians and psychologists have been speculating on causes and cures for bed-wetting for over two thousand years!

I believe that in a great many of the bedwetting cases I have treated, one factor has been the child's lack of responsiveness to bladder pressure during the night. The nerves around the bladder aren't sending strong enough signals to wake the child up so he can get out of bed and urinate. Another possibility is that the child might just be a very deep sleeper.

If your child is still wetting the bed after age four or five, look for signs of stress and refer to your pediatrician or child behavior expert for advice on how to manage the stress. If there is no stress, you might want to limit the intake of liquids before bed, wake the child up at night to go to the bathroom, or talk to your pediatrician about the use of a conditioning technique called a pad and bell, that will help train responsiveness to bladder pressure. Once in a while medications are helpful; however, in most cases there is little success with medication.

From an emotional point of view, it is never a good idea to make a big fuss over it. Purchase a rubber sheet that can go under the main sheet to protect the mattress from being ruined. Teach your child as early as you can to pull his own wet sheet off and put it in the hamper. Have a frank talk about whether he would consider using the disposable underpants adults use for incontinence, for sleepovers.

Although bedwetting sounds like a terrible problem, it disappears in the vast majority of cases by puberty. The most important thing to remember is to refrain from criticism or from implying that the child is inconsiderate or a baby. The problem is really outside of his control.

Night Terrors

My two-and-a-half-year-old daughter sometimes wakes up screaming at the top of her lungs. When I go to her she is upright in the bed, eyes wide open, and crying. After one of these episodes she closes her eyes, falls back to sleep, and remembers nothing the next morning. What is happening to her?

Your daughter is experiencing a sleep disturbance known as night terrors. She may look awake, but she is really sleeping. Little is known about night terrors, except that they sometimes occur in the presence of stress. They usually subside on their own within about three months after the time they begin.

See if you can uncover any stress in your child's life. Is she toilet training? Is there a new baby coming into the family? Is she frustrated during the day by anyone (such as a housekeeper or babysitter) or by anything? A lit bit of extra atten-

tion may be all that is necessary to chase away the night terrors. If they persist for more than a few months, contact your pediatrician.

Older Children Bedtime

My eight-year-old procrastinates over everything, including going to bed at night. His bedtime is nine o'clock, but he usually manages to dawdle around until ten or eleven. He doesn't seem to wake up tired for school the next day, but my husband and I are bushed. How can we get him to go to bed and stay put?

Adults often forget why it was so much fun to stay up "with the grownups" and why it was so lousy having to go to bed. There is actually a crossover point sometime in your late twenties when people really want to go to sleep. Soon after that, people literally beg for sleep. Kids tend to coax themselves into believing that right after they get sent to bed the living room turns into a hockey rink and Mom and Dad have a blast skating around and practicing their slap-shots all night long. Your son doesn't want to go to sleep because he doesn't want to miss anything. We know that the only thing he's missing is

watching you drool onto the arm of the couch, but kids have active minds and can be very creative.

One key to getting your elementary-school-aged child to sleep is to stick to your guns about bedtime. If you waver or leave things up for negotiation, you won't get the peace and quiet you are looking for. Consider letting your child entertain himself in his room with non television - related activities before bed. You might be shocked to discover that he may spend some time reading before going to bed. The following incentive program also works well with some kids who like to get up and wander around a lot. Offer a bedtime coupon that is good for either fifty cents or fifteen minutes. If he comes out of the room he can wander around for fifteen minutes, but he has to surrender the coupon. If he stays in bed, he can trade the coupon in for fifty cents the next morning. Should you pay your child to go to bed earlier? That's up to you, but considering what fifty cents will buy you these days, peace and quiet seems like quite a bargain.

Family Bed?

My husband and I have been arguing over whether or not to let our five-year-old daughter sleep with us at night. I came from a big family, and we all climbed into bed with one another. My husband says she will become dependent on it and will never learn to sleep in her own bed. What's the verdict on this one?

The verdict is "it depends." First, NEVER sleep with an infant. You run the risk of suffocating your child. Second, older kids will not usually become dependent on sleeping in their parents' bed. You slept in your parents' bed, yet somehow you were able to grow up, move out, and sleep in your own bed. But you do have fond recollections of sleeping in your parents' bed and might even have preferred to do that when you were young. If your daughter gets cozy in your bed, she might come to prefer it, but I doubt if she'll crave it like some strung out "Mommy-and-Daddy's-bed-junkie." The downside is the effect it might have on your relationship with your husband.

Does having your daughter sleep in your bed interfere with your sex life? If so, that's a problem. I have found that after they've done it a few times, kids don't really like sleeping in their parents' beds. Those big, smelly adults snoring and crushing you can be just as annoying as squirmy little kids who flip around 180 degrees and stuff their feet in your face all night.

Other than the discomfort or inconvenience you'll have to put up with, there is nothing inherently wrong with taking your kids into bed with you. We certainly did it as cavepeople to protect our young. Virtually all animals sleep with their young, and many cultures have a "family bed." Parents sometimes worry that children will become prematurely sexualized by sleeping in their bed. This can only happen if the parents initiate sexual contact with a child or with each other while the child is in the bed, situations that are, of course, always emotionally damaging.

Eating and Toilet Training

Eating and toilet training are two topics that parents spend a lot of time worrying about. Each of these behaviors develops from habits that are established pretty early in life. With so much concern about health and nutrition, I will spend most of my time here on the topic of food.

Although toilet training does create some stress for parents, eventually all children do become trained, and any problems a child may be experiencing in this area do disappear. There are a few standard tips and techniques, however, that will make toilet training a bit easier, and I'll discuss them here.

Giving Up The Bottle

Do you have any suggestions on how we can get our three-and-a-half-year-old son to give up the bottle? It looks like it is permanently attached to his face.

The bottle has become a comfort object to your son, just like a favorite smelly blanket or stuffed animal. He associates the bottle with everything that has kept him safe and warm throughout his short life. Getting him to give it up is like asking him to give up a piece of what he finds comfortable and secure in this world. But life does go on, and we all must move on to bigger and better things. The best way I have found to encourage a child to give up the bottle is to give him permission to use it only in a very restricted area of the house, like one particular chair at the kitchen table. Cutting down on his mobility with the bottle will make his life a bit more tedious. The great majority of kids choose the freedom to move around over the security provided by the bottle. You might also try of-

fering only water in the bottle, but more tempting things, like juice, in a cup.

Picky Eating

My four-year-old hates to eat. Aside from one or two special foods, we can't get him to touch a thing. Is there any way we can get him to eat a wider variety of foods?

Kids can have very peculiar taste preferences. They can run through periods where all they will eat is this food or that for days, weeks, or months on end. One five-year-old child I know went from a peanut-butter-and-jelly phase directly to a shrimp cocktail phase. ("That was quite an expensive phase," his mother reported.) The best way to get a child to eat a wider variety of foods is to introduce them when he's in a good mood. Never force food on a child. Many societies, including our own, tend to place a lot of excess significance on the eating ritual. We learn to eat in response to all kinds of external cues (to celebrate, when we are depressed, to watch a sports event) as opposed to eating to satisfy the feeling of hunger. Pediatricians tell us that, when left to their own devices,

kids seem to have a built-in mechanism that encourages them to choose relatively healthy foods. It's a safe bet that kids won't starve themselves. Children will, however, be influenced by what you eat, so it is best for everyone if you pay attention to healthy and nutritious food choices.

Poor Eating Habits

My eight-year-old son is a sugar junkie. He drinks two two-liter bottles of soda a day and devours all the candy and sugary snacks he can get his hands on at school. He's also big on chips and other junk foods. Lately, I've become concerned over the fact that he seems to be putting on weight.

First of all, it is good that you are concerned over your son's eating habits. It sounds as though they are a disaster. All that sugar is certainly taking its toll on his teeth and his general health. In addition, junk food contains a lot of fats and "empty," or nonnutritive, calories. Aside from this, your son is developing eating habits that last a lifetime. I don't know if this is the case in your house, but a lot of parents tell me their children are pigging out on junk foods all day long, and when I ask where they get them, they tell me right out of their own cupboards or refrigerators! Take the time to learn which snacks are healthy and which are not (pretzels and air-popped

popcorn are good choices; chips and chocolates are poor choices). You might want to set ground rules of no eating while the television is on and no eating outside of any room except the kitchen. Encourage moderation by controlling what kinds of snack foods come into the house and how they are distributed. Keep a watchful eye on your child's activity level, too. Many of today's kids are not very physically fit because they spend too much time in front of the television or playing video games. Teach by example. Cook healthy foods, and get out there and exercise.

Food As A Reward

I have heard that it is not a good idea to reward children for good behavior by using food as an incentive. How do you feel about this?

I am mostly in agreement with this, but I do tend to follow the rule, *"Everything in moderation, including moderation."* It is not a good idea to constantly associate success or good behavior with food. On the other hand, I see nothing wrong with a parent taking a child out for an ice cream cone or (heaven forbid!) an ice cream sundae on a very special occasion, say to celebrate that he hit the winning home run at his Little League game. I am not in favor of popping a handful of M&Ms into a kid's mouth every time he does something noteworthy. Parents need to understand that some of the most powerful motivators around are praise, kind words, hugs, and kisses (not the chocolate kind). Not only do they work as well as or better than food, they fatten only the soul, not the tummy.

Candy and Sweets Hoard-

While I was cleaning my eleven-year-old son's room I found about thirty candy bar wrappers and assorted food items that he was evidently trying to hide there. We don't allow that much candy in the house, but we don't deprive him of candy, either. How should my husband and I approach this with our son?

Hoarding candy or other food can be a sign of stress or depression. Sit down for a family meeting (Mom and Dad present) and tell your son what you found and that you are very concerned.

Say that you have heard that hiding food, and sneaking around to eat it, is something kids do when they are very upset. Do not express anger or disappointment over what you found, and do not focus on the fact that he was doing something sneaky. He obviously didn't take much care in covering up what he was doing, so it makes sense to conclude that he

might have been actually crying out for someone to notice. If he denies that something is wrong, have a discussion about it with your pediatrician, who might in turn refer you to a psychologist or other child behavior specialist. Whatever you do, don't ignore this behavior or treat it lightly.

Anorexia

We have a twelve-year-old daughter who is very thin, always complains that she doesn't look right, and literally never eats. She says that the smell of food makes her sick. She is much thinner than any of her friends, but her friends all compliment her on the way she looks and how skinny she is. We know she has a problem, but we don't know what to do.

The first thing you need to do is make an appointment to see your pediatrician. Your daughter's life may be in danger. When a child has a distorted image of her body, and when she is repulsed by food or refuses to eat, there is a strong chance that she is suffering from anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder that affects mostly females (although it can also affect males) in their early teens to late twenties. It is very serious. Family counseling is almost always necessary, and it is commonly believed that many anorexics grow up in families where control issues are a dominant theme.

Frequently, hospitalization is needed to restore nutrition back to a point where the child's life is no longer threatened. Parents are often so frightened by the prospect of their child being anorexic that they are immobilized by their fears and concerns and, as a result, do nothing. If you suspect that your child has anorexia, please seek help immediately.

Toilet Training Concerns

Our two-year-old daughter is able to tell us when she has to urinate, but she still has bowel movements in a diaper. Should we be concerned about her toilet training?

Absolutely not. The majority of kids aren't ready to be toilet trained until some time near the third year. This is a function of physical development more than anything else. The nerve that controls the sphincter muscle, which is responsible for bowel movement control, has not yet fully developed until some time close to the third year. Therefore, children under age three are physically incapable of controlling a bowel movement. (Sometimes parents can predict when their kids are going to have a bowel movement and will hold them over the potty until they go. This is a wonderful case of toilet training the parent, not the child.)

Toilet Training: No Interest

Our three-and-a-half-year-old son shows absolutely no interest in learning how to use the potty. We've tried bribing him, but that doesn't work. We let him run around the house without a diaper, hoping that when it's time to go, he'll want to use the potty, but no way. He would rather have a bowel movement behind one of our chairs or even under our kitchen table! This is very frustrating. What can we do?

Yes, it does sound quite frustrating, but believe it or not, this is a pretty common story. It doesn't take a Sigmund Freud to see that there is a power struggle going on between you and your son. He knows that it has become very important to you to see him go on the potty. He has decided that, for some reason, he'd rather not do you that honor just yet. The best thing for you to do is back off. Put him back in a diaper. Encourage him to spend more time in the bathroom. Talk positively when he's in there. Don't bribe him to go on the potty, because

he will think that going on the potty is something to do for someone else, not for himself. Be supportive, but don't light off any fireworks when he finally goes. Going to the bathroom on the potty is an act of etiquette that people who live in a civilized society perform. It's no great shakes—unless you make it out to be. In time, the whole issue will become pretty boring, and he will think of more creative ways of driving you crazy. You will then wish for the days when all you had to worry about was potty training!

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Media Influence

The issue of how the media influences our children has never been as important as it is today, and it will continue to be even more important in the near future. For one thing, there is a greater variety of media to influence our kids: print, radio, tape, live television, recorded television, video, movies, computer and video games, internet, phones, social media— the list goes on and on. And these forms of media are becoming more complex, more interactive, and more pervasive. We once worried about television because it was passive and hypnotic; now we can worry about it because it is interactive and hyper-real. We once worried about media because it could be so subtle and suggestive. Now we worry because it is omnipresent and impossible to disconnect from.

Violent Movies

My four-year-old son and six-year-old daughter wants to watch a movie that other kids in their grade watch. The problem is that there are several scenes in that movie that terrify me, so I hate to think of what they'll do to my kids! Should I take the chance and let them watch the movie, or should I let them feel miserable because every other child has seen it, but they aren't allowed to?

Some kids can have very bad reactions to movies—not only the bloody, violent kind, even some of the so-called family-oriented entertainment. These reactions can range from not being able to sleep and having bad dreams to full-blown phobias. There are also kids who are completely unfazed by media gore and violence. These are some of the same kids who like to touch frogs and pull the legs off bugs and who believe that the family fishbowl and a microwave oven combine to make an interesting science experiment.

No one knows your children better than you do. What is the reaction likely to be? If they are frightened by a movie, will they forget about it two hours later and beg to see it again? Or do they take life seriously, identify with all of the characters in the movie, and feel as though these things are happening to them? If you are unsure, talk with them about what is going to happen in the movie first, especially about scenes that may be frightening or disturbing. The reasoning "It's only a movie" might not be too effective with a four-year-old child who may be just learning to tell the difference between fantasy and reality.

If you have any doubts, don't hesitate to leave that movie off of your list of acceptable entertainment activities. You don't need that kind of "optional" worry. It's as simple as that.

Violent media absolutely influences the behavior of children. For children who are apt to act out aggressively, the influence is likely to be stronger. In other words watching violence can facilitate or de-sensitize children, so censor media accordingly.

Some research suggests that children who grow up on a steady diet of television tend to have more problems with emotional adjustment and are more likely to get into trouble with the law. On the other hand, there are those who believe that television is merely a window into a violent society, and that even if television were completely abolished, we would still have violent crime, prejudice, and hatred. In some ways we can ask,

"Does television create violence or merely reflect it?" Discussions like these exist too far out in the abstract for me. Parents want me to answer questions about what their children should be watching now.

All parents should be competent at observing their own children's reactions to things. When you look at your children and how they behave in your home, what do you see? Do they go wild when an action-adventure movie comes on? Do they start punching one another around while they are watching wrestling on television? Think about it. If your son or daughter was a straight-A student and had lots of friends, but liked watching movies where things got blown up or people got shot, do you think those movies would cause the child to suddenly snap and become delinquent one day?

I believe that what we see on television and in the movies most definitely influences our behavior. I would worry about a child who grows up in a house where he has very little contact with his mother or father, but consumes a steady diet of violent television. My concern would be that without the foundation that good parenting provides, the child would develop his conceptions of the world around the things he has become most familiar with. On the other hand, I wouldn't worry about a child who watches a few hours of television a day in a home where there is a loving relationship between a mother and father and love and attention shown toward the child. I believe that, ultimately, it is the parents' influence on the child that determines what other forces and influences shape behavior. If parents choose to allow television to shape the lives of their

children by using it as an electronic baby-sitting service, then television will shape children's lives according to the message of the content of the shows. If, on the other hand, parents choose to take an active part in their children's lives, the impact of what is seen on television will be minimal.

Satanic Messages

Our twelve-year-old daughter will only listen to "heavy metal" music. We have heard that there are satanic messages embedded in the music that can influence children. Is this true?

Even if messages were subliminally placed in the music they would not influence your child's behavior. Research on this subject does not indicate that subliminal messages influence behavior in any way. Think about it—if subliminal messages could influence us, advertisers would probably have us all acting like spend-happy zombies by now! Oh wait, bad example! As children reach their teen years, they are influenced more by their friends than by their parents, and that is where your concerns should lie. Musical preferences, sexual activity, and drug and alcohol abuse are all influenced by peers. That's why it is very important to communicate with your children when they are very young and more readily influenced by what you say.

Video Games

My ten-year-old is obsessed with playing video games. When he comes home from school that's all he will do. He has no friends and no social life unless the kids he's playing with are just as much into these stupid games as he is. What can we do?

The first thing you can do is try to understand what kind of need playing the video games might be satisfying. Some kids are driven to become expert video-game players because it gives them a lot of social power. They can demonstrate their skill to friends, brag about high scores, or share important secrets about playing the game. Sometimes, kids play video games to avoid social contact with other kids. Do you think your child feels neglected or left out by his friends? If so, why not plan a social event that he can invite one friend along on?

Parents are often put off by video games, but if they are part of your child's social and experiential worlds, take the time to

find out more about them. Try to tolerate watching or even playing them a bit with your child. Always remember, too, that parents are the ones who ultimately control the amount of video-game playing or television watching a child does. The game or set can always be turned off until chores or homework are done.

The best advice I can give applies to video games and any singular activity your child involves himself in: set limits and stick to them. Good leaders lay down the laws and then they enforce them!

Cell Phones

Help! I can't get my kid to put her cell phone down. She texts all day long. She texts at the dinner table. She walks around with earphones plugged in all of the time. What can I do to "disconnect" her?

We can talk about the evils of cell phones, but that wouldn't be a very practical conversation. Cell phones are ubiquitous. They are not going anywhere. They have their plus sides (in emergency situations), but I tell parents that cell phones would not be such a problem if kids had to earn using them as a privilege (especially at or before about age 14).

So before you buy a cellphone for your kids negotiate to your advantage...

- *Tell them they must pay for a portion of the bill, regardless of how small it might be. If you pay for you kids cell phone, they will not appreciate the convenience you have provided for the, and they will abuse the privilege.*

- *Keep a box in a prominent area of your home. Cell phones must be deposited in the box and cannot come out until you say.*
- *No cell phone use in their bedroom or at the table unless permission is given.*
- *Cell phone use includes texting.*

In today's social networking milieu children have the opportunity to be connected and stay connected to many peers. It is a "many to many" form of communication, so peer to peer influence is enormous. Your job as a family leader is to remain the most influential person in your kids lives, and you have to work to make that happen.

Following the four simple limitations above should teach your kids the manners they need to learn in order to curb the rudeness that comes along with cell phone use.

School and Learning Issues

When children begin school, a whole new set of issues emerges. One large issue for many parents is how much help to give their children on homework and school projects. Most parents feel that their children's schoolwork is a reflection on them—how well their home is run, how smart they are. Some parents become active and very involved, sometimes even too involved. Other parents don't spend enough time communicating with teachers and keeping on top of their children's work habits.

These days parents have to be strong advocates for their children. It is important to get a good sense of where your kids' teachers are coming from. Hopefully, more times than not, you will find that

Reading At An Early Age

READING AT AN EARLY AGE

My three-year-old child is very interested in reading. She will sit and look at the pictures in books for hours and can quickly memorize stories and "read" the stories back. I was wondering if I should start teaching her to read using flash cards. Do you think this would be too much for her?

You certainly have a bright and eager three-year-old. It is always so much of an advantage when children are naturally motivated to learn. In your daughter's case, you will have to be sure that you don't push her so hard that she burns out early. Some people have had a little success teaching children under the age of four to read, but many of these children later lose what they gain. It's almost as if the motivation was there but the readiness was not.

Flash cards might be a little too structured and regimented. Start your child off with some magnetic letters that stick onto a board. See if she can recognize and remember them. If her attention seems to wander, or she loses interest, don't push her any further. You don't want to risk frustrating her. Let her set the pace for your "reading" lessons. Always provide her with as many books as she will show interest in. While I am not a really big fan of teaching children to read before they are ready, I am a big believer in exposing children to books as often and early as possible.

Kindergarten Readiness

Our son Josh will be technically able to start kindergarten this September, but my husband and I have some concerns about this. He will be one of the youngest children in his class, and he is still a bit immature. He cries easily and is still quite clingy. Should we let him go to all-day kindergarten and hope he matures during the year, or should we hold him back so that he can mature at home?

This is just about the only wise time to hold a child back. (If it were second or third grade and he were having a difficult time, it would be a different analysis. The points you raise are all very good. If Josh is still immature for his age, there is really no need to send him to kindergarten. Children's academic and behavioral maturity at kindergarten age varies tremendously from child to child. If you introduce him into school and he has a poor adjustment, he could develop a nega-

tive perception about school, and that is certainly something you would like to avoid.

Provide some enriching experiences during the year you keep him out of school. This can be done at a formal pre K program, or even right at home. The activities should include creative ones such as painting and coloring, but also activities related to early academic skills. He can practice saying the alphabet or do simple counting games. Also, set some higher behavioral standards in terms of how long he can sit still. I am a big believer in exposing children to books as often and early as possible, but not the point of frustration.

Problems With Teachers

My child's third-grade teacher seems very mean. My daughter has always been a very good student, but lately she has been coming home terrified and upset. When I ask her what's wrong, she tells me Mrs. Martin is always yelling at her. I went up to speak with Mrs. Martin and she told me, "There's nothing wrong with your daughter or her performance in class. I get the feeling that sometimes she wants to be babied, but I've got twenty-two students who need my attention. She'll get over it." I feel so bad for my daughter. Her first- and second-grade teachers absolutely adored her, and she looked forward to going to school every day. Now, before school, she has stomachaches and headaches and tries to avoid going to school whenever she can. What should I do?

It seems as though your daughter is the type that enjoys pleasing adults. Kids like this are very easy to motivate because all

one has to do is acknowledge their performance. They respond to warmth. I have met many teachers like Mrs. Martin. Underneath all of that grumpiness, many are truly concerned about children, although they have a tough time showing it. It makes a person wonder why they chose teaching as a profession to begin with. Unfortunately, Mrs. Martin is not impressed by the fact that your daughter has a desire to earn her praise. That's too bad, because it really is so easy to give. Instead, Mrs. Martin would prefer to see her simply stay in her seat and do her work.

There are at least two ways to approach this situation. The first involves scheduling another appointment with Mrs. Martin. Don't you dread it already? As you prepare to meet her, please remember that you have already completed the third grade and that Mrs. Martin is not your teacher. That's not to say you shouldn't give her the respect she deserves (but you may make fun of her perfume or hair after you have left the building). Don't assume that you know more about teaching than she does, because unless you are an educator, you probably don't.

Explain to Mrs. Martin that your daughter has been blissfully happy in school up until this point, and now you are finding it difficult to get her out of the house. Continue by saying that you can appreciate how many other students she has to tend to, and that her job is difficult, but you are naturally concerned about your daughter and how she feels about school. Gently suggest that Mrs. Martin consider making her a special helper or otherwise make her feel a bit more at home. At this

point Mrs. Martin may actually begin to soften up, in which case she will probably do her best to raise your daughter's comfort level. There is also a chance that she will be just as stubborn and ornery as she was the last time you spoke with her. If that's the case be sure to make fun of her hair or perfume when you leave the building (but refrain from sharing these comments with your daughter), and move to the second strategy.

The second strategy involves explaining to your daughter that you understand why she has a problem with Mrs. Martin. Share that you had two meetings with Mrs. Martin and felt that she wasn't exactly being overly friendly to you, either. Tell her that, on the other hand, you don't feel as though Mrs. Martin is a terrible person. Go on to say that you meet all kinds of people while you are growing up—some nice, some not-so-nice—and sometimes you don't have a choice about which ones you have to deal with. Encourage her to share her feelings about Mrs. Martin often, so that she always has a sympathetic ear. Finally, try to involve your daughter in an activity that is supervised by an adult who can appreciate her fine qualities. Kids tend to generalize, and we wouldn't want your daughter to allow herself to think that all of a sudden Mrs. Martin accurately represents how all adults will react to her.

By the way, in this example, Mrs. Martin is not portrayed as an incompetent teacher, just as one who is insensitive to this particular child's personality. You might find yourself stuck with a teacher who is truly mean and is critical and hurtful to your child. If this is the case, your advocacy position must be

much stronger. If you feel that your child's teacher is damaging his or her self-esteem, make an appointment to talk with the school principal about it, and don't stop talking about it until you get a satisfactory resolution. Schools will often convey that they don't appreciate parents telling them what to do, but when it is clear that your child is being hurt, be persistent. This is definitely a case where the squeaky wheel gets the grease.

Attention

My second-grade-aged son takes three hours to do a twenty-minute homework assignment. He sits at the table and just tunes out. He sharpens pencils, walks around aimlessly, or doodles on his homework papers. When he does his work, his effort is poor and his work is well below what we know he is capable of doing. Why does he waste so much time, when he can be playing with his friends within a half hour after he starts his work?

It is possible that your son has a problem with maintaining attention and concentration. It would be a good idea to have him evaluated for a condition known as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). While many hyperactive children have ADD, many children who are not hyperactive also suffer from it (some estimate that it may affect one in every seven to ten children). The main symptoms are inability to focus, procrastinating over work, difficulty maintaining attention on even simple

tasks, "zoning out," and a high degree of frustration over simple but concentration-intense work, such as schoolwork.

Some common techniques that are used with children who have these problems include breaking larger tasks into smaller tasks, using checklists to help organize and complete work, removing distractions from the homework environment, allowing your child to dictate work that doesn't have penmanship as the main focus, and requiring smaller amounts of high quality work, as opposed to large amounts of work that will result in frustration and annoyance.

Contact your child's teacher to discuss ways of better structuring your child's work habits. Then contact your pediatrician, who will help you find a child behavior specialist who can evaluate your child, confirm the diagnosis of ADD, and suggest an appropriate treatment plan.

Hyperactivity

Last year our son was diagnosed as hyperactive. We have gone to counseling, worked closely with the teachers at school, and tried our best to structure our home in a way that addresses his needs. Our progress seems to have leveled out, and we are wondering whether medicating him with Ritalin is a good idea. How do you feel about Ritalin and medicines like it?

Ritalin and medicines like it are prescribed to thousands of children every year, and it has helped a good many hyperactive children settle down. Some research suggests that Ritalin works better in mild to moderate cases of hyperactivity. Some parents tout it as a wonder drug, but few drugs out there actually live up to that title

.This decision should be discussed carefully with your pediatrician. Like all medications, Ritalin does have some side effects. Two of the most common side effects are that it tends to sup-

press appetite (mostly during the initial phases of administration) and also tends to slow a child's rate of growth. It doesn't stop a child's growth, but in some children it will take them longer to reach their full height. (These side effects don't occur in all children who use the medication.) An additional concern for parents is something we call Ritalin crash. At the end of the day kids who are on Ritalin can become irritable and edgy as the medication wears off.

If you are satisfied that you have tried everything else, sit down and have a conversation with your pediatrician about the possibility of using Ritalin or another drug on a trial basis. Work with a child behavior expert who will observe and measure certain behavior before you begin the trial, and then again after it has started. The observations should be as objective as possible. If there appears to be measurable improvement, proceed through another period. The worst thing a parent can do in a situation such as this is use the pediatrician to write the prescription and then not carefully monitor progress.

Pediatricians shouldn't write prescriptions for Ritalin without clear treatment goals and a lot of information about the child's day-to-day functioning.

Sugar And Hyperactivity

Can sugar be making my child hyperactive?

Several studies have looked at whether processed sugar makes kids hyperactive. The results have been fairly conclusive in that this does not appear to be the case directly. Some believe that blood sugar levels can “crash” and cause irritability.

Be aware, though, that sometimes other foods that happen to contain sugar do contain substances that could "wire" certain children. These substances include additives, food dyes, and caffeine. Sugar does promote tooth decay and is not a very nutritious substance, so if you are looking for a reason to keep kids away from sugar there are plenty to choose from besides hyperactivity.

Learning Disabilities

Just recently we were informed that our nine-year-old daughter has a learning disability. My husband and I went to several meetings at the school, but we came away feeling more and more confused after each one. Can you explain what a learning disability is and where it comes from?

It is a lot easier to explain what a learning disability is than where it comes from. No one is that sure where learning disabilities come from, and to tell you the truth, we have made little progress trying to figure it out.

To understand what a learning disability is you must first understand the difference between the words potential and performance. Potential refers to the natural capacity a child has with regard to learning. This is sometimes measured by an intelligence test, which is given in school. Performance refers to how that potential is being expressed. For instance, perform-

ance tests will tell you at what grade level your child is reading. In other words, potential tells you how big the container is, and performance tells you how full that container is. The average IQ score ranges from about 85 to 115. A third grader with an average IQ should read on the third-grade level. By this we are saying that an average kid does average work in an average class, which is a pretty straightforward concept. When a child has a learning disability, he may be an average kid in terms of his measured intelligence, but he may be in the third grade and only doing first-grade reading work. His performance (first-grade reading level) is not consistent with his potential (since he has average intelligence, he should be doing third-grade work).

The second point necessary to understanding what a learning disability is has to do with the question: *"What is it that my learning-disabled child can't do that causes him to perform lower than expected?"* There are many types of learning disabilities. Some have to do with the systems of memory, attention, and concentration; some have to do with the way information is received or associated; and others involve the perception and understanding of language.

If there is a suspicion that your child has a learning disability, don't delay in having him or her checked out by a learning specialist. The place to begin is right at school. Services may be available to you at your school, free of charge, to help find out if your child has a learning disability. Next, it is important to get as much help as you can as early as possible. Learning disabilities are most successfully treated when they are treated

early. Please note that a learning disability has nothing to do with being mentally retarded. The great majority of learning-disabled kids have average to above-average intelligence. Many famous geniuses had learning disabilities: Albert Einstein is one example. Thomas Edison is another. (One of Thomas Edison's elementary-school teachers encouraged Mrs. Edison to take him out of school altogether because she said he was "feebleminded." It's a good thing Mrs. Edison didn't listen!) We have come a long way toward understanding the needs of children with learning disabilities, but we still have a long way to go. Be sure to read everything you can about learning disabilities, and by all means stay on top of your children's schoolwork.

Perfectionism

My second-grade-aged daughter is a perfectionist about doing her homework. If everything isn't exactly the way she wants it, she tears it up and starts all over again. She is very bright and an excellent student. We put absolutely no pressure on her to perform at this level. Why is she doing this?

Perfectionism is often an attempt to gain control during a time when you are anxious that things are out of control or about to become out of control. When she does her homework in this way, she is expressing a need to keep everything in order. The stress that is behind this need does not have to be coming directly from you. Is there anything upsetting in her life? How are things at home? Are there marital problems? Financial problems? Is she having problems with friends at school? Kids who are perfectionistic are very demanding of themselves. I suggest you spend more time with her. The more time you spend, the more likely you will hear about what-

ever is on her mind. A second suggestion would be to help her learn how you cope with difficult times. Tell her that when things get difficult for you, you think about how lucky you are to have such a great daughter. If she continues to fret over tiny mistakes or rip up completed homework over and over again, it would be wise to get some counseling assistance.

Too Cool For School

My eleven-year-old son has all of a sudden taken on a very nonchalant attitude toward school. He has been an average to good student all of his life, but this year he's really slacking off. What can I do to get him back on track?

Please remember that the operative developmental theme in the minds of most ten- to twelve-year-old kids is "coolness." Cool clothes. Cool hair. Cool shoes. Cool music. Cool computer games. Coolness at any cost (but preferably at the cost of your mental health). There is a cool version of everything—none of which you could possibly know about or even be aware of, because you are so totally out of it that whatever is cool sails right over your head. Oh, you can try to keep up, but you will always be at least a step or two behind, and you will be rewarded for your efforts with sarcasm ("*Oh, yeah, Mom, you're right on top of things— not!*"), snickering, and constant reminders of your rapidly advancing journey into

The Golden Years. If you get sucked into the trap of trying to be your kid's friend instead of his parent, I hope that you realize that you are looking for the Coolness Seal of Approval from a child whose hair is sticking up in every direction, whose jeans are dragging across the floor because they are three sizes too big, and whose idea of a gourmet dinner is two slices of pizza, three Yoo-Hoos, and a Snickers bar. You may be uncool, but at least you know how to stuff your face with good food.

Fortunately for you, the omnipotent being responsible for creating eleven-year-old kids has given you a secret weapon. It is called The Power of Embarrassment. About the same time you realize that you are completely uncool, you will also realize that you can create panic, terror, and mortification by doing something as simple as kissing your child good-bye in a public place. Eleven-year-old kids who are on the Quest for Cool do not like to be attended to by adults. That is why to get your child back in track on school, you must raise his level of accountability by making as many adults that contribute to his education as aware of him as you possibly can. Start by telling him that although you can appreciate what a low priority school has become since he has taken up the religion of Cool, you are ultimately the one responsible for casting him off into the world, and part of that responsibility is to make sure he gets a good education. At eleven years old, he is completely capable of sitting through a conference with his teachers and guidance counselors, so set one up. He will no doubt rather be eaten alive by red army ants (but no, that would be too easy!). Next, arrange for his teachers to provide a weekly progress re-

port which should be tied into his income stream. In essence, you are saying, if you don't pick up your work, you will have no money to purchase that gooey candy that looks like snot and comes packaged in a plastic nose.

Help him set reasonable goals and reward them accordingly. Allow him to be as cool as he wants to be (within reason), but put your thumb down hard on him until he comes around. Having the input of your spouse is critical. This should never be a one-parent job. Keep the level of accountability high with consequences that keep him at a distance from his social life (restricted phone privileges, restricted use of your home for entertainment purposes). Most of all, reward good progress, and chin up—in your child's eyes, you will one day be cool again.

Please read the next question-and-answer topic as well. A serious decline in school performance can also indicate developing drug and alcohol abuse problems.

Difficult Parenting

There comes a point in your children's lives when so many issues hit all at once, and way sooner than you ever would have expected. It's the point at which you think your kids are growing up way too fast, but don't quite know how to slow things down. For these issues I would point you backwards to Part One of this book so that you can review the importance of limit setting and effective leadership. Hopefully the discussions which follow will offer a bit of a life line on these issues.

Drinking

My ten-year-old son has a friend who was just caught drinking alcohol on school grounds. Is this unusual, or do I have something to worry about, too?

You have something to worry about, too. Drug and alcohol abuse is one of the most serious problems affecting our teens and preteens. More than 50 percent of kids entering high school have already had their first drinking or drug experience with their friends. Many kids who develop drinking problems begin in the third or fourth grade. As kids get older, peers begin to have more influence over their behavior than parents do, so it is very important to start talking to your kids about drugs and alcohol very early—as early as they can begin to understand, which is about four or five years old. Teaching them to say no is important, but what is even more important is teaching them how to say no (*"I don't like the way it feels," "People develop serious problems when they drink," "I want to take good care of my body,"* etc.) and practicing as many

"What if..." situations as you can think of. Early warning signs of drug and alcohol abuse include your child becoming more distant and uncommunicative or lying about where he is or was, or a serious decline in school performance.

The worst mistake parents make in situations like these is that they fail to confront the issue until things have already gotten much too far out of hand. Don't make that mistake. Dealing with this kind of problem at its earliest stages when your child is ten or eleven years old is much easier than dealing with it in its advanced stages when he is sixteen or seventeen. Get help fast.

Friendship Triangles

My seventh-grade daughter seems to be caught up in a friendship "triangle." She was very close with one friend. Another friend came into the picture, and now both of them compete for this girl's attention. I know I should probably keep my distance from it, but I hate to see my daughter get hurt, and the other girl in the trio is a real backstabber. Should I say something or keep my mouth shut?

You can say something, as long as it is none of the things you feel like saying when you're angry. Kids tend to protect their friends. If you were to say something like, *"That Jenny is not a good friend. I don't like the way she treats you,"* your daughter's likely response would be, *"Jenny is a good friend. You just don't understand."* The best way of communicating in this situation is to talk to your daughter about what kind of good friend she is to Jenny. For instance, say, *"You know, I think Jenny and Carole have a lot to be thankful for. Whenever I*

see you girls, I look at the way you treat them and wish that when I was your age I could have had a friend like you."

When you say things like this, and Jenny and Carole treat your daughter badly, she will be more likely to say to herself, *"They really don't appreciate me the way they should."*

Another important tip is to be sure you do more listening than talking in these situations. Reflect back your daughter's feelings (*"I'll bet that really made you feel lousy."*). Ask for details (*"I can't believe what I'm hearing. Is there any more to this?"* or *"Tell me the whole story."*). Sometimes parents can be so quick to want to soothe hurt feelings that they forget that a sympathetic ear is what kids are looking for most.

Dealing With Bullies

Our eight-year-old son is being bullied by an older boy at school. I'm sure he's picking on my son because he's not a fighter and is a really sensitive kid. I can see it getting on my son's nerves, and lately he's been getting down on himself over it. What should I do?

Bullying is a problem which has become the subject of worldwide attention. It has brought many kids to the suicide and unfortunately beyond.

First, find out how much of the bullying is going on in front of your son's friends. Sometimes bullies isolate their victims. It's very peculiar to observe, but it is almost as if these kids develop a close one-to-one relationship with the kids they bully because they have no friends.

This is different from the kind of bullying that goes on for the purpose of gaining social power by ridiculing another boy in

front of a group. The reason for wanting to know this information is that it will help determine whether or not you or your spouse should have a talk with the bully yourself. This advice is more appropriate for kids ten and under. Kids will almost always protest this, especially when the bully is part of a larger circle of friends. When he's not, I think parents should intervene. A vague but very low-level threat will usually do the trick.

For example, you could say, *"Hi, Butch. [If you want your kid to grow up to be a bully, just name him Butch, or name him something else, then start calling him Butch.] I'm Tommy's mother. Tommy asked me not to talk to you about this, but I'm going to anyway. Tommy has been coming home upset and in a bad mood. He says you are pushing him around and taking things from him. I'd like to ask you nicely to stop this time, but next time there's going to be trouble. Do you understand me?"*

Carefully observe his behavior. The real hard-core bullies will act like they could care less. They'll break eye contact, look disinterested, or clean their automatic weapon right while you're standing there trying to have a conversation with them. The amateur bullies, those misguided kids from bad family situations, will show some remorse, and then it might not be a bad idea to reach out to them. Offer to invite the bully over for a play date so that he and your child can work things out. You never know—some good might come out of the situation. (On the other hand, he might just take the opportunity to come over to your house and beat up on your son right in your own

backyard. Use good judgment, or your son might arrange for the bully to spend a little time with you, too.)

The second scenario is much tougher. Schoolyard social etiquette is a complicated thing. Your son's friends might have some pity for him if he's being tortured by a bully. Even though they won't step up to the bully and save your son from a beating, they will feel sorry for him. If you make a big production out of going up to deal with the bully, your son's friends might think he is a baby, and that will make things worse for him. The best thing to do in this situation is sit down and discuss all the options. Many dads, being the manly brutes they are, will suggest a few fighting lessons and offer the philosophy that if the bully comes near you, take him by surprise by giving him the hardest kick you can to the nether regions and hope for the best. The theory goes that if a bully thinks he might get a hard time from you, he will move to easier prey. I believe that theory is correct, but there is always the chance that your son might make a half-hearted attempt, fail to achieve the desired goal, and wind up flattened and more terrified than ever. Then there's always the prosocial criticism that implies violence is wrong regardless of who is perpetrating it. I'd like to see how people who advocate nonviolence handle it when their kid comes home with a black eye every other week.

The next strategy calls for your son to inform whatever school official is in charge of monitoring the kid's playground activities. Anyone who has been doing that job for more than three or four weeks is probably smacking down handfuls of Thora-

zine, but there are a few school officials who are compassionate. It might even be worth approaching one of these monitors on the sly and asking her to keep an eye on what's going on. If your child complains to the monitor frequently enough, eventually some action might be taken.

The fourth and perhaps best strategy is to intervene, quietly, at the level of the teacher. If you know the bully's name, perhaps your child's teacher can discreetly communicate your concerns to the teacher who has the unfortunate job of managing the bully for the large part of the day.

I have seen these bullying situations last for entire school years and then beyond.

The dividing line on whether to intervene really has to do with how much damage the bully is causing. At the first sign of a mark or bruise on your child, you go for the bully and his parents. If your child is complaining about emotional torture to the point where he doesn't want to go to school, approach the teacher. If the complaints are manageable, encourage your child to keep away from the bully, or suggest a possible conflict-resolution strategy. Sometimes, the low-level bullies will find it very acceptable to call a truce, so long as your child is the one who suggests it. Meanwhile, as all of this unfolds, be sure to be supportive and nurturing to your child, and never ask, *"Well, what are you doing to Butch that's making him bother you so much?"*

Sibling Conflict

There must be a way to manage more than one child living under the same roof without the carnage, bloodthirsty screaming, and war-room strategies to get even—not to mention what goes on between the kids themselves.

One parent I know has come to the point that whenever she pours her boys something to drink, her normal way of distributing the beverages is to fill the glasses up to the very brink, so that as soon as they touch it some spills over. This is to avoid the "*He got more!*" arguments that were previously a part of the drink-pouring ceremonies.

These questions and answers are typical of parents' concerns over sibling rivalry, one of parenting's most difficult, white-knuckle

New Baby

We have a son who is three years old and an infant of three weeks. We did the best we could to prepare our older son for his new brother, but the sibling rivalry has begun already. The other day, we found the three-year-old sitting in the baby's crib, poking him, with an absolutely evil look on his face. Then, while the baby was on the changing table, he ran by and took a swipe at his brother for no reason. What's going on?

Nothing out of the ordinary—he's just trying to murder his younger brother. Seriously, though, your three-year-old was probably trying to find out just what this new baby is up to. If you don't have a sibling you can never imagine, and if you do, perhaps you have forgotten, how absolutely insulting it is to have to share your living space with a brother or sister. The nerve of you parents! Here is a sampling of the thoughts running through the mind of your three-year-old: Where did this

new baby come from? Why are you making such a big fuss over him? Throw him in the trash, or, if not, take him to someone else's house, so I can live in peace. How dare you expect me to be nice to him? I can't even get five minutes of your attention without you looking over your shoulder to see what's going on with "the baby." /want to be the baby. That's my crib. Move over. What's the matter with you? I said move over.

There's nothing more annoying than having someone horn in on your territory and steal the spotlight. That is one of the perceptions that makes sibling rivalry so common and so frustrating. You will try your best to make sure that the older child feels loved, but it will never be enough. You did something sneaky. You went out and had another baby, and now you can't be trusted. How does the older one know that you won't bring home a whole army of whimpering, slobbering, crying, new baby brothers and sisters? Then he'll have to spend the rest of his days cooking up Wile E. Coyote-type schemes to do them all in. Oh, yes, and there's another ironic wrinkle to this whole matter. Every once in a while, the little rug rat does something cute, and the older one is forced to feel good in his company.

These are just some of the minor complications parents face. Dealing with sibling rivalry requires a lot of patience and a willingness to acknowledge that conflict will be ongoing in the lives of the siblings. Here are some pointers that will help you through some of the rough spots. First, there will be times when you can clearly identify who the aggressor is. Often, your older child will probably initiate most of the aggressive

behavior. As he gets older, the younger one will learn how to defend himself, and be sneaky about it, too. Then it won't be so easy to tell who "started it." Whenever it is clear that one child is really getting pounded on, always give attention to the child who is the victim. Give the attention in the form of comfort, time spent alone, and special privileges. Do not reward the aggressive child with attention, even if it is negative attention. For example, don't spend ten minutes sternly lecturing the aggressive child, while the "victim" is sitting in the corner crying.

Second, when you can't tell who started it, ask for both sides of the story. While one sibling is telling you the story, interpret it to the second sibling. For instance, Jack pushed Billy and took his toy. While Billy is complaining about being pushed, you turn to Jack and say, "It sounds like Billy is upset because you hurt him and were trying to take away his toy." While Jack is complaining about Billy hogging the toy, you turn to Billy and say, *"Maybe it would have been a good idea to let Jack have a turn playing. You could have shared."*

After both stories are told, separate the children for a few minutes so they can both cool off.

Third, learn how to recognize problems before they happen. Inoculate the children by identifying potential problems. You might say, *"If you guys are going to play Nintendo, I hope you are not planning to fight over it, because if you do, I'll tell you to cut it out once. The second time, I'll turn it off and*

both of you will have to get away from one another." Then stick to your guns.

There are about half a billion sibling situations, but only two or three major themes. It's usually:

- *He/she took something of mine.*
- *He/she got more than me.*
- *I want him/her out of my life.*

Read on for a sampling of these situations...

Pesky Younger Siblings

My three-year-old son is always in my seven-year-old daughter's things. He pulls out her dolls and toys, barges into her room and makes a mess, and is generally annoying. This has been driving her crazy. I have tried to explain to her that he is only a baby, and he just wants her attention. Don't you think she should learn how to be patient?

Let's face it, even Mother Teresa has a limit to her patience. Your three-year-old son is a baby, and yes, your daughter should have a degree of tolerance of him. However, he is more than old enough to learn limits and the word No. Don't lay everything on your daughter—that's not fair, and it will reinforce the notion that her younger brother is the favored child. You must step in and make sure that your toddler learns to respect his sister's private things. Time out either the younger one or the older one (by saying, *"It would be best to put those things in your room and close the door."*)

Good Behavior In The Car

Well, you can do what most parents do. Glare menacingly over your shoulder, keeping one eye on the road, while leveling the Stare of Death with the other eye. Then, begin threatening them with all of the things they shouldn't make you do. Here is a brief list: *"Don't make me pull this car over."* *"Don't make me come back there and straighten you guys out."* *"Don't make me turn this car around and go back home."* These techniques will result in cramped neck muscles, strained vocal cords, and, when things are really going poorly, damaged front and rear bumpers.

Alternatively, you can try to avoid the situation by leaving the kids with someone on the days you have to run errands. I know that parents hate to hear advice like this because they say things like, *"Who am I going to leave them with?"*

On the other hand, I know parents who run errands every day, when they could just as easily and with less aggravation run

their errands in one day. If you can do this, you can probably find another parent with whom you can leave the kids and return the favor for him or her at some other point during the week. The point is that creative solutions do exist, but sometimes you have to put in a little effort to find them.

Now, what about when the kids have you at their mercy and you have no choice but to have to deal with them in the car?

Here are a few suggestions:

Invest in some digital media with headphones. Purchase or download some stories and allow them to listen to them only in the car.

Fill two cloth bags with car toys and activities. Leave them in the car and designate them as in-the-car-only activities.

Make up a set of coupons. Give five coupons to each child at the beginning of the car ride. As soon as they start battling, ask them for a coupon back. The child can trade the remaining coupons for treats if you are going to the store, or for privileges after you return home. One parent I know solved the car battle problems by giving out five coupons on the way to the store and five coupons on the way back. The five coupons on the way to the store could be redeemed for snacks or privileges.

The five coupons on the way home allowed them access to the snacks or privileges (Remember, I am not too much in favor of giving kids food as rewards.)

Whatever method you use to reward behavior, it is always a good idea to rehearse what you will do on long trips or in situations where you know there will be trouble. Let your kids know what you expect in terms of behavior, as well as how they will be rewarded for good behavior.

Aloof Older Siblings

My seven-year-old son worships the ground my eleven-year-old son walks on, but my eleven-year-old won't give him the time of day because he is too interested in being cool. I am worried that my seven-year-old will develop an inferiority complex because my older son puts him down. How can I get my eleven-year-old son to be more sensitive?

The good news is that as your sons get older, the difference in their age will matter less. As time passes your younger son should be able to earn the respect of his older brother. Junior-high-school-aged kids, or kids between the ages of eleven and fourteen, are consumed by coolness.

I can't blame you for worrying that your younger son's self-esteem will suffer from being around his brother. One way you can mediate the situation is by pleading your younger son's case to his older brother. Don't beg the older child to be

more sensitive; instead tell him that you expect it, because your younger son's feelings are important to you, even if they don't seem to be too important to him. Second, you and your husband need to make up for the recognition your son is not getting from his older brother. Acknowledge his accomplishments, praise and reinforce him, and stick up for him when his brother gives him a hard time. Third, heap mounds of praise onto the older son when he does show sensitivity, any sensitivity at all, to his younger brother.

Pouularity Differences

My eight-year-old daughter is very popular, but my twelve-year-old daughter has trouble making friends. Every time my younger daughter has friends over, the twelve-year-old tries to ruin it for her and her guests. What can I do about this?

Parents always remark to me about how totally and completely different their children can be from each other. In this case, one of your daughters seems to be very outgoing and gregarious, while the other daughter has a difficult time making friends. Her reaction to your younger daughter's friends is obviously an expression of envy.

Many parents in this situation would advise the younger daughter to try to adopt the older daughter into her social life, so that, perhaps, the older daughter might learn to enjoy her sister's friends and therefore not feel the need to be so disruptive.

This is a tough one to pull off, especially with girls. Girls develop strong one-to-one relationships, and adding a "third" tends to create complications. Your older daughter should not have to rely on her sister to make friends. In time, they will both come to resent the situation. Instead, take your older daughter aside, perhaps even plan a special day with her, and find an appropriate time to express your concern over the fact that she doesn't have too many friends. Try not to interrogate her by saying things like, *"Why don't you think anyone wants to play with you?"* or *"Do you think that if you were a bit more sensitive people would want to play with you?"*

Statements like this will be taken as criticisms, and communication will be shut down. Instead, suggest that she invite someone over after school or for a sleepover. It would be ideal if this could be arranged during a time when her younger sister is out of the house or is busy doing something with one of her friends. It would be unfortunate to get your older daughter to the point of bringing over a friend and then have that friend gravitate toward your younger daughter.

Making Peace After A Fight

How can I get my kids to make peace with one another after a big argument or fight?

I have had some success having siblings sign a "truce" with one another. This is how it worked in one household: The Browns have two boys, Mark, who is ten, and Justin, who is nine. Mark doesn't like it when Justin plays his video games without his permission, and Justin doesn't like it when Mark trips him or teases him by calling him names. Mrs. Brown wrote up a truce whereby Mark and Justin had to promise not to do what annoyed the other one. The interesting thing about the truce was that it was tied to chores. If Mark broke the truce, he had to do Justin's chores, and if Justin broke the truce, he had to do Mark's chores. Neither child wanted to give the other the satisfaction of having to do the other's chores. After all, no amount of satisfaction gained by torturing one's brother would be worth the gloating that brother would do while he was watching you do his chores!

Playing Favorites

I have a five-year-old daughter who is perfectly behaved and a nine-year-old son who is very poorly behaved. I almost never have to reprimand my little one, but I am almost constantly on my older son's back. When I get on his case, he immediately accuses me of loving my daughter more and playing favorites. What worries me is that sometimes I feel that I do favor the little one because she is so much better behaved. Is this wrong?

These are hard feelings to face up to. We are all taught that it is essential to love our children exactly the same, but this, of course, is impossible. Your daughter gives you less grief and more pleasure while your son is a handful. On some levels, I'm sure you appreciate your daughter more. We human beings have such a hard time with the concept of love because it is so difficult to quantify. Each of your children influences you in a special way. One day, you might find yourself watching

your children and wishing that your daughter could be a little bit more spirited, like your son. You might worry one day that your daughter may be too passive, too trusting, or too naive. You probably already appreciate your son's perseverance and independence. So, you see, it's hard to make a judgment like that.

But that still doesn't help answer the question of what to do when your son accuses you of loving your daughter more. Of course, you realize that what your son is really saying to you is, *"Mom, I can't be as well behaved as my sister because I don't have that kind of control over myself. Do you love me even though I misbehave?"*

There is no need to respond to your son by denying that you love your daughter more. Instead, just take him aside and say, *"You know, when you say I love your sister more it really sounds very funny to me. I couldn't possibly love you or her more because I love you so differently. I will tell you that I enjoy not having to correct your sister's behavior, but that doesn't make me love her more. There are plenty of things I enjoy about you, too."*

Divorce

Some twenty years after we have begun to study the effects of divorce on children, the jury is still out as to what the effects of growing up in a divorced family are. We know that overall, statistically, most children survive divorce fairly well. The research shows that children from divorced families do, however, go through a period of one to three years of difficult adjustment. Their school grades suffer, they spend more periods feeling blue, and they tend to have acting-out problems. Several studies show that children from divorced homes tend to have problems in their own interpersonal relationships, and with behavioral adjustment.

In my clinical practice I have seen kids who are

Overnight Visitations

My ex-husband and I have a sixteen-month-old daughter. I don't consider my ex to be a very responsible person, and I do not feel that my daughter should be allowed to have overnight visitations with him until she is at least four or five years old. Wouldn't it be bad for her to leave me for an overnight visitation?

If you were still married and living in the same house together, and you had to spend the night out of the house, would you hesitate to let this man take care of her overnight? You say your ex-husband is not a responsible person. How so? According to whom? If he is very motivated and willing to show he is responsible, and if he loves your daughter, how could she be harmed by an overnight visitation? There might even be some benefit to be gained by overnight visits. For instance, it is better to get your daughter used to visiting her dad's house sooner rather than later. If you wait until she is five years old, she will be so used to spending all of her nights

at your house that she might be terrified of leaving. How much of a true picture of your daughter's growth and development will your ex-husband have if he is only allowed an occasional brief visit with your daughter?

Many counselors are beginning to specialize in the problems created by divorce. I suggest you seek one out. The counselor will evaluate the situation and listen to your concerns over whether your ex-husband is prepared to have an overnight visit with your daughter. If, for some reason, the counselor feels that the child's father isn't ready for that kind of responsibility, he or she will be able to work with him and bring him to that point. If your husband has relatives (such as your child's grandmother or aunt) who live nearby, perhaps they would be willing to help him get used to the idea of having a baby around.

Many fathers are now demanding to be treated as equals in divorce situations, and I believe they should be when all other factors are equal. Mothers often complain that their ex-husbands only take their children out for good times and then drop them off before any of the real parenting work is done, yet they refuse to give these dads the opportunity to participate. The judicial system is waking up to the rights of fathers and will often be very sympathetic to fathers who want equal parenting rights, as long as they have put in the work to deserve it..

Please explore your concerns with a qualified professional. I feel that parents should be restricted from their children, or

supervised during visitation, only when they have a history of violence, drug or alcohol abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse, or behavior that would clearly jeopardize the health and safety of a child.

Interfering With Visitation

I am a father who has visitation rights with my two sons, aged three and seven. When they are over at my house, their mother calls two or three times a day to check in with them. I resent this a great deal because it interferes with my time with the children. Shouldn't she be told to stop?

In general, I think telephoning your children during a weekend visitation is a good idea. It lets them know that the other parent cares and is thinking about them. A quick five-minute conversation is sufficient and does not have to disrupt anything. Telephoning several times a day is not appropriate, however, and represents a clear attempt to disrupt the visitation. It is fair neither to the children nor to the other parent.

Reasonable parents can have a civilized discussion about telephone conversations during visitations. It is fair for the parent being visited to provide a few times when the custodial parent

can call and check in. It would also be nice if the parent being visited suggests that the children make the call, just to show the children that everyone is capable of being nice to one another.

Visits When A Child Is Ill

The other day, my son came down with a cold, and my ex-husband insisted that he go for his typical weekend visit. I didn't want to argue with him over it, so I let my son go. Shouldn't he be allowed to miss a visitation if he's not feeling well?

If the two of you disagree about your son's health, it should be your pediatrician's call, but really, it shouldn't have to come to that. Use common sense. If your son is miserable, cranky, achy, and irritable, why move him around, and, even more important, why expose him to the stress of the two of you fighting with one another?

Factors to take into account are things like the weather, the distance the child has to travel, and whether the child is just coming down with something or is at the tail end of something. I see absolutely no sense in sending a child who is contagious out for visitation, especially if there are other children in

the home that is being visited. When visits are missed, though, parents should cooperate so that they are made up.

Bad Mouthing The Ex

BAD MOUTHING THE EX

My mother loves my children more than anything else in the world, but she is very stubborn. She never got along with my ex-husband, and now that we are divorced, she makes no bones about trashing him whenever she can. The problem is that she won't control this behavior in front of my children. When they hear her say bad things about their father they get very upset, and they tell him about it. How can I get her to stop?

Your mother needs to learn how to control her temper. You must take her aside and explain to her that, although she probably thinks it is her responsibility to inform the children about what a terrible person their father is, she is actually doing a great deal of harm to her grandchildren. Children feel very loyal to both parents and will sometimes try their best to

protect them. When they hear negative things about their parents it makes them feel guilty; to absolve themselves of that guilt, they will often run to the other parent and retell what they have heard.

It would be a shame if it had to come to this point, but if your mother doesn't censor what she says about the children's father you will have to limit her contact with the children.

False Allegations

I am the father of a three-year-old child and just went through a very messy divorce. My ex-wife will do absolutely anything to keep me away from my son, whom I love more than anything else in the world. Lately, my son has been asking me why I hit him when I am angry. The first time he asked me this, I nearly fell off my seat. I have never laid a hand on him, and never will. Since my ex-wife and I have begun fighting for custody, she has made many false allegations about my behavior toward my son. The thing I want to know is: Is it possible for my ex-wife to convince my son to tell stories about me hitting him, even if they are not true?

Yes, it is possible for a person to encourage a child of three to tell stories that are not true. Three-year-old children are just learning to tell the difference between fantasy and reality and are very easily led when it comes to situations like this.

Unfortunately, it is very common for parents to make false allegations of child molestation and/or child abuse during high conflict custody disputes. Statistics vary, but some tallies indicate that as many as 60 to 80 percent of all allegations of child abuse during custody disputes prove to be unfounded.

Your belief that your ex-wife is behind your son's concerns does not suggest that women are any more likely to participate in these kinds of false allegations than men. I have seen it on both sides, so often that I am repulsed by it. As usual, the child comes out the loser in the situation, due to the confusion and anxiety the situation causes.

Your best course of action in this case is to consult your attorney, who may petition the judge to have a professional evaluate the situation. Many judges are fed up with false child abuse allegations and can penalize parents quite severely for making false child abuse claims.

Child Support/Visitation

My husband is angry at me for divorcing him and swears he will never pay me a dime of child support or maintenance, even if it means his having to go to jail. Since he refuses to pay me what I need to survive, I refuse to let him see our five-year-old daughter. Do I have to allow visitation if my husband is not paying support?

The answer from a psychologist's point of view will probably differ from that of a lawyer or a judge. It is obviously very wrong for a person to withhold support, especially when it is his legal responsibility to take care of you and your daughter after the divorce. It is, however, also wrong to keep your daughter away from her father. Money should never interfere with visitation. I know a lot of people are cringing out there, but the role of a psychologist is to make recommendations that are in the best interests of the child. Children's best interests are served when they are in contact with a mother and a

father who love them and want to be with them. The money issue is something that needs to be settled through appropriate legal channels. Agencies are forming in every state to deal with spouses who are delinquent with child support and maintenance payments. Explore your recourse with your attorney.

When Kids Won't Visit

Lately, when it is time for my seven-year-old son to visit his father, he complains and says he doesn't want to go. Should I force him to go on a visitation even when he doesn't want to go?

First you must try to find out why he doesn't want to go on his visits. For many children, the stress associated with changing residences for a weekend is what they are reacting to. Along these lines, if children sense there is conflict between the parents, they may be afraid to go on visitation for fear that it will create more problems than already exist.

Children may refuse to go to visitation because of a real fear that the parent they are leaving will not be there when they come back. They may also refuse visitation if something makes them uncomfortable in the other residence. A very common reason children refuse visitation is they might not care for or might be jealous of a boyfriend or girlfriend or a step-

mother or stepfather at the noncustodial residence. I always advise divorced parents to keep their children very clear of people they are dating until they are certain there will be a commitment (see the next question for the reason why). If your child won't tell you why he doesn't want to go on a visit, please consult a child behavior specialist who has specific experience working with divorced couples and their children. It might be you who is sending signals to the child to stay home.

It is always best when parents encourage their children to visit one another. This makes the transition from residence to residence much smoother and takes a tremendous amount of pressure off the kids.

Dating New People

I am a divorced woman with two kids, aged twelve and nine. I have been divorced for two years. I recently met a man who is also divorced and has two kids who are about the same age as mine. We are dating, but there are no serious commitments at this point. We would like to plan some trips and outings with all of the kids together. Could any harm come out of this type of experience?

When parents tell me that they would like their children to spend some time in the company of people they are dating I advise them to proceed very cautiously. There are some very big downsides to this situation that children should be protected from.

First, let's look at the obvious potential problem, which is, what if your kids don't like the person you are dating? In this scenario, virtually everyone will feel uncomfortable. You

might want your kids to like your date and accept him, but they might refuse, and you might resent them for that. Over time you might all overcome this problem and learn to tolerate one another. I don't know if this qualifies as "harming" your kids, but it is certainly a headache you can avoid.

Now let's look at the not-so-obvious downside. What if your kids really like this person? What if they even begin to love being around this person—but you don't? If you are like most people, you're not going to keep dating this person just because your kids like him. If you break off with this person and the kids like him, they will be disappointed, possibly even heartbroken. The breakup might reactivate feelings of sadness and loss from your original divorce. If this happens more than a few times, your children may begin to view relationships as heartbreaking and transitory. I believe that this is harmful to children; that's why I recommend that you keep your social life and your children as separate from one another as you can, until you are certain that the person is going to be around for a while. When you are certain, you can begin to encourage your children to adjust to the new person and the new situation.

Different Rules

My wife and I have been divorced for six months. I have custody of our two children, who are aged eight and ten. My problem is that my wife and I have two completely different styles of disciplining our children. I am stricter and require the kids to do their homework right after school, because I know that after dinner they are tired and the quality of their work suffers if it's done then. They visit their mom on Wednesday nights for a sleepover. My son's teacher called to tell me he has failed two tests, both of which he took on Thursdays. I know he failed those tests because my wife did not help him prepare properly. What should I do?

Parents in your situation need to cooperate by giving and receiving feedback about matters that are important to the children. Consider calling your ex-wife and explaining in a neutral way that you are concerned about your son's failing test

grades. If you think you will be met with resistance, make a copy of the tests and communicate in the form of a polite note. Suggest that you have had pretty good success helping your son study for tests by reviewing before dinner.

If you don't think this will work, you have at least two other options.

First, contact your child's teacher, explain the situation, and suggest that the teacher initiate a conference for the three of you to attend. Perhaps your ex-wife will take suggestions if they originate from the teacher.

Second, stay on top of your son's test schedule by keeping in close contact with his teacher. You may have to help him prepare for his Thursday tests on Tuesday nights when he is still with you.

Dividing Parents

I have one child who is eleven years old, and his father and I have been divorced for two years. We don't really communicate that well, and my son has learned to use this to his advantage. Whenever I won't give him something he goes to his father, and vice versa. I am at a loss for what to do.

It is never too late to begin establishing a more positive mode of communication between you and your ex-husband. Your son is developing a style that relies on manipulating the people he loves in order for him to get what he wants. This is not the kind of behavior you would want him to use in any of his relationships with his friends, peers, or potential girlfriends.

Begin a dialogue with your ex-husband by explaining to him that you have been feeling that both of you are being taken advantage of by your son. Express concern that the child is relying on manipulation to get what he wants. The solution to this

dilemma is quite straightforward. It involves more communication between you and your ex-spouse, and a willingness to share decision making. Both of you must feel comfortable enough to respond to your child with neither a yes nor a no when he requests something. Instead, reply, *"I'll have to put a call in to your mom (or dad) so we can talk about it."*

Threats To Move Out

Whenever my seven-year-old son gets mad at me for reprimanding him, he throws a temper tantrum and begins to scream, "I don't have to listen to you. I can go live with Daddy and do whatever I want." Sometimes I just feel like telling him, "Go pack your bags, and I'll call your father," but I am scared to death he will take me up on it. What should I do?

The custodial parent frequently takes the brunt of a kid's temper tantrums. Inevitably, when tempers run hot, a child will say, "I want to live with Daddy (or Mommy)," or you might even say, "If you don't behave, I'm going to go send you to live with Mommy (or Daddy)." Both statements made in anger are meant to cause fear in the other person, and they usually work. As a parent, you must learn to inhibit the threat of sending the child to live with the other parent. The best reason for doing so is that, in the event your child does have to go

live with the other parent, you don't want the child to perceive it as a punishment.

When your child threatens you with moving out, resist the urge to call his or her bluff. Instead, in a very calm voice, tell your child that when he calms down, if he still wants to talk about moving out, you will sit down with him and have a conversation about it. Most times the incident will blow over and your child will forget all about it. If your child does want to have a conversation about it, encourage her to express her feelings. When she is all done, say, *"I'm sorry that you're feeling like you don't want to live here right now. I am going to think about what you told me, and if I can come up with anything to make you feel better I'll try my best to do it. But I don't like being threatened and I won't listen to you if you do. Share your feelings but don't be a bully. I won't tolerate that."* Continue by saying, *"When we decided where the best place for you to live was, it was one of the most important decisions that was ever made about you. If it ever seems like the wrong decision, I'm sure we'll think about it again and change it to one that works better for you. Right now, though, this is what is best."*

When Kids Want Change

My twelve-and-a-half-year-old son has been living with me for the past five years. Lately, he has been doing a lot of talking about wanting to live with his father. This is not something he says in anger; it's just something that he really feels he wants to do. His father and I don't really get along, but I'm wondering whether I should let him explore the idea.

A possible change of custody/primary residence is something that should be handled very delicately. First, it is a good idea to let your son talk out his feelings. What he seems to be saying is that he desires more closeness with his father. Are there other ways of achieving that without a change of custody? Would a change of custody disrupt his life significantly? Would it mean changing neighborhoods? Schools? Friends? Walk your son through all of the different changes that would happen if there were a change of custody. Next, put in a call to his dad, and ask if he is aware that your son feels he would

like to spend more time with him. You might even want to arrange a meeting to discuss what the concerns are all around.

Even if everyone agrees that a change of custody is something everyone is willing to consider, before any change is made, you might want to arrange to have the non-custodial and son spend an extended period of time together—say, a few weeks or even a month— before any permanent arrangements are made or papers are drawn. Most of all, determine whether more quality time or a change of residence is the real issue.

Sex, Alcohol And Drugs

We are living in dangerous times. Two of the most common forms of experimentation during late childhood and early teen years, sex and drugs, can cut your child's life short or, at least, create some serious family crises.

The typical child begins to experiment with sex, alcohol, and drugs well before his or her thirteenth birthday. By the time most children leave their elementary-school playgrounds, they already have a wealth of knowledge through direct experience and indirectly from observing the lives of their friends. Once children reach adolescence, their friends begin to have more influence over certain parts of their lives than parents do. That's why it is absolutely essential to begin teaching your

My Boy Likes Girls Things

Our three-year-old son has taken quite a strong interest in our daughter's clothing and dolls. He enjoys putting on her dresses and prancing around the house, and, whenever he can get his hands on them, he rifles through her things and takes her dolls. When we go toy shopping he prefers girls' toys to more "manly" things like trucks or guns. Is there anything wrong with him?

Not at all. At three years old the lines that establish gender orientation and gender specific interests are not very clearly drawn. Boys sometimes don't express an interest in "boy things" until they are five years old or later. If you are wondering whether an interest in girls' clothing or girls' toys at his age is an indication that he might be showing homosexual tendencies, this is not necessarily so. And it is not true that a boy can become a homosexual by being around girls' toys or clothes.

Scientists, doctors, and researchers have mixed opinions as to whether homosexuality is a learned behavior or is strongly genetically influenced. In any case, the presence or absence of homosexuality does not imply anything about an individual's societal adjustment or mental health. It is unfortunate that we live in a society that causes us to worry if boys appear to be taking an interest in things that are pretty or feminine. It would be best if all of us learned how to cultivate or at least appreciate the traits of interest of both genders.

Interest In Genitals

My two-and-a-half-year-old daughter enjoys touching her vagina very much. She is so interested in this part of her body that she sometimes irritates her skin by rubbing or exploring herself. Should I be concerned about this behavior?

Many children of both sexes discover their genitals between the ages of two and four. They will usually go through a period of about a month or two when they are very preoccupied with themselves. Much like with any new toy, they lose interest after a while and turn their attention to other things. Your only concern, particularly with girls, is that they do not irritate or create a bacterial infection in the genital area. If you notice any redness, swelling, or discharge, consult your pediatrician.

Playing Doctor

The other day I was having a cup of coffee with a friend of mine, and our two five-year-olds were playing quietly in another room. My friend's child is a girl; mine is a boy. When things got a little too quiet, we poked our heads around the bend and saw that they were both stark naked and very interested in one another's private parts. Is this behavior normal?

Yes, this behavior is quite normal. Children are quite curious about one another's bodies and will play "house" or "doctor" and sometimes get carried away. The best thing you can do in this situation is remain neutral. Don't scoop them up as though they have just committed a crime. Simply present the situation as a matter of etiquette by saying, *"It's not polite to take your clothes off in front of your friends."*

Your body is private." No long explanations are needed. You may just leave it at that.

Always make sure you ask your children from time to time if anyone is touching their private areas. Watch for *overly* sexual behavior and if you see there is a preoccupation with talking about or drawing pictures with sexual themes consult your pediatrician.

When To Explain Sex

At what age should I begin talking to my child about sex?

That depends, in part, on what age they are when they start asking about sex. In general, the best rule of thumb is, when kids ask you questions about sex, give the answer to the question they ask, and don't volunteer anything else. However, make certain that they know the difference between good touch and bad touch and that no one should ever be touching their private area. If someone does, tell Mommy or Daddy right away.

One of the first (and almost inevitable) questions a child will ask is, *"Where do babies come from?"* The explanation for this should be fairly straightforward. When kids are between the ages of three and five, you may omit some of the anatomical details and go with something like this: "Mommies and Daddies get together and decide they are going to have a baby.

The Daddy and Mommy lay down with one another and touch each other in very special ways that only adults can do. A baby grows inside a special place in Mommy's body called a uterus and after a while the baby comes out through a the part of the body called the vagina."

Now, all of this is very confusing for even the brightest three-to five-year-old, but it is a start, and the gentle tone of your voice should be enough to begin satisfying your child's curiosity.

You might be wondering why I advocate using words like uterus and vagina. I have found that it can be very confusing for kids to hear words like egg and stomach in the context of having a baby. Most kids don't ask for tremendous clarification on points of anatomy. As a matter of fact, most, with the exception of natural-born OB-GYN specialists, could care less. Instead, they want to move right to the meaty topics like,

"Can I have a baby with you, Mommy?" or, as one rather creative three-year-old once asked me, *"Can babies make other babies, and then will they make other babies?"* or the ever-popular, *"Can I watch you and Daddy make a baby?"* The answers to these questions will always be short and sweet: *"No, you cannot make a baby with me. That's something only Mommies and Daddies can do,"* or *"No, babies cannot make other babies. Only grown-up Mommies and Daddies can make babies,"* or *"No, you cannot watch me and Daddy make a baby. That is something private that no one else watches."*

As children get older, they will express an interest in knowing some of the details. At some point you will give a brief explanation about how the penis is inserted into the vagina, and that is how the sperm gets to the ovum. This will, in most cases, cause your kids to swear off sex for a very long time or, at the very least, they will snicker at you behind your back. At around six or seven years of age you will want to include the notion of love in your explanation, as well as a warning about being careful that you don't get a disease called AIDS. Read on for more information about how to explain about things like AIDS to your kids.

AIDS AND STD'S

At what age do I start trying to explain about AIDS to my children?

Most kids as young as eight years old are ready to start learning about the dangers of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Unfortunately, the incidence of AIDS will continue to rise for the next several years, and the word AIDS will be in the news and a part of everyday conversations. It is hard to find a good balance regarding what to tell kids about AIDS without needlessly terrifying them. The main reason to talk to children about AIDS is to increase their awareness through their lifespan, so that they can make intelligent decisions during adolescence and young adulthood.

I think the best way to teach young children about AIDS is to make it the focus of a separate conversation that begins with the question: *"Have you ever heard anyone talk about something called AIDS?"*

Listen to what your child has to say. If the child knows nothing, say, *"I want to teach you a little bit about AIDS because later on, when you're a little older, it will be very important that you know about it."* Go on to say that AIDS is a very serious disease that people can get from having sex.

Of course, it would make no sense to have this conversation before a child understands what having sex means. At this point, though, even if you think your child knows what that means, you should go over it again. You will also want to mention that people can get AIDS from touching each other's private areas with their hands or mouths. Now, this is not entirely accurate, but it does communicate the idea that AIDS is spread through contact, and that is the important thing. You can always fine-tune for accuracy later when your child is capable of understanding some of the more complex aspects of human sexual behavior.

Another part of the conversation should focus on how people have to be very careful about having sex, and that before they have sex they can go to a doctor to see if they have AIDS or a disease that other people can get sick from. Try to avoid giving the impression that you can catch AIDS from a casual hug or a kiss on the cheek, or the next time your relatives come over, your child may inform them that he doesn't want to catch AIDS from them.

The conversation is a delicate one, and it isn't one that needs to be completed in one sitting. Your child may not seem in the least bit interested about either AIDS or sex, and that is fine.

Remember, your job is to start increasing awareness early. The biology of the process is far less important than the message: "Sex can be dangerous, so you must be very careful and see a doctor before you have sex with anyone."

Perhaps the most important thing about this, and any other conversation about sex, is your attitude and willingness to field questions. This will encourage your child to be open and honest with you later on, when your willingness to participate in such discussions will be even more important.

Protecting Against Abuse

What is the best way to protect my child from child molesters?

The best way to protect your child against molestation is to make him or her aware of a few very important facts as soon as he or she is capable of understanding them. For many children this can be as early as age three or four.

The first important things to teach boys and girls are the difference between "good touch" and "bad touch" and the definition of private spots. Children should be taught that their genital areas and their buttocks are private spots and that no one should touch them in these spots, except Mom and Dad when they are getting a bath or going to the bathroom. Explain that if anyone touches their private spots, they should tell Mom or Dad right away.

Next, children need to know about "good touch" and "bad touch." You would be surprised at how early children can

make these distinctions. "Good touch" is a hug or a kiss on the cheek or a pat on the head, or holding hands. "Bad touch," you can explain, is when an older person or adult kisses a child on the mouth or private spots, or rubs or touches their private spots or asks them to rub or touch or kiss their private spots. Going over this a few times will make an important impression on your children, and it is something you can do while you are getting your child ready for the bath or for bed. Reinforce that your children can talk to you about anyone who makes them feel funny or uncomfortable, even if it is someone like an uncle or a grandparent. Parents should be aware that the majority of child molestations occur by someone who is not a stranger, but someone who knows the child and/or the family.

Parents should, however, talk to their children about avoiding strangers and should teach them to scream as loud as they can and run away from anyone who touches their private spots or who asks them to touch or look at their private spots.

Disclosures Of Sex Abuse

I have a six-year-old son who just told me that three months ago, at summer camp, a seventeen-year-old camp counselor showed him his penis and asked him to touch it. My son wouldn't do it, and evidently the counselor got worried and left him alone, but warned him that he would be hurt if he told anybody. Could this experience have damaged my son? What action should I take?

First of all, the camp director should be notified immediately. This is probably not the first time this counselor engaged in this behavior, and unless he is confronted and stopped, it will not be the last time. Speak to the police about pressing charges against this young man. What he did was serious, and unless action is taken, he may more seriously abuse another boy.

With regard to any damage done to your son, I would take him to be evaluated by a child abuse specialist, just to make sure he's OK. Chances are the experience will not permanently damage him. Praise your son for speaking up, and let him know that by speaking up he has helped prevent this young man from hurting other children.

Parents should be aware of the warning signs of sexual molestation. These include a drastic change in behavior in any way; a preoccupation with sex, bodily functions, or nudity; fear of people he or she is close to; crying and depression for no apparent reason; or complaints from other parents that your child is behaving in a sexually forward way toward their children.

Menstruation

My daughter is only eight years old, but she is already starting to develop. When should I begin talking to her about her period?

Now. More than half of all girls reach puberty before the age of thirteen. You will want to start clueing your daughter in on the changes she may be observing in her body. When girls are unprepared for menses (the onset of menstruation) it can be a frightening and confusing thing. That is why it is important to prepare her ahead of time. Begin by asking her if she knows what it means to be having her period.

Explain that it means that her body is maturing to the point where it will soon be able to have a baby, even though she should not be having a baby for a very long time. You will need to explain about proper hygiene and the physical and emotional changes that having a period entails.

Don't gloss over it just to get the conversation over with because it may be embarrassing to you or your daughter. Have the conversation as part of a general conversation about growing up, taking responsibility, and taking care of her body.

Nocturnal Emissions

My twelve-year-old son is going through puberty. When I was in his room the other morning I noticed that he was trying to cover up a wet spot on his sheet that was obviously the result of a nocturnal emission. I am wondering how to start off a father-son chat about the experiences he is going through. What's the best way to do it?

The best way to do it is by sitting him down and telling him that you are very proud to notice that he looks like he's growing up. Since you have already gone through the experience yourself, that qualifies you as an expert and as someone who can make your son's recent life make a whole lot more sense. Begin by asking him if he knows that puberty is a time in a boy's life that signals his body is changing. You can tell him that puberty encompasses a lot of changes: changes in his voice, because his vocal cords are thickening; in the size and

thickness of his muscles; in the length of his penis; and in the appearance of hair on his face, arms, legs, and pubic areas.

You might want to share your recollections of life at his age, and in particular you might want to mention what a wet dream is -- beginning with that it is something completely normal that happens at around this age. If you are at a loss as to how to explain it, simply say that as your reproductive system develops, this is your body's way of letting you know that it is up and running.

By the way, while it is commonly assumed that nocturnal emissions or wet dreams occur in response to erotic dreams, this usually isn't true. In fact, the majority of nocturnal emissions do not correspond to erotic dreams.

Masturbation

I was very embarrassed to walk into my son's room while he was masturbating. I made believe I didn't notice, and I casually turned around and walked out. I'd like to reassure him, as his Dad, that there was nothing wrong with what he was doing. On the other hand, I don't want him to be embarrassed by the fact that I noticed. What, if anything, should I say to him?

This one is tougher than it seems. I understand that you are in a bit of a bind. On the one hand, if you say nothing, the situation will probably just blow over, and he will be grateful that you didn't mention it. The problem with this approach is that it might convey to him that you let him off the hook for doing something that is shameful and wrong. On the other hand, you could have a conversation with him about it, and in that conversation communicate to him that what he was doing was perfectly normal. A lot would depend on what kind of relationship you have had with your son in the past. It's really during

times like this that you can appreciate the value of having developed an open and honest relationship with your kids.

Another strategy would be to wait a couple of days, until any anxiety or embarrassment has subsided, and have a general talk about some of the things that go on during this time of life. You might want to share some of the experiences you had growing up, and talk mostly about yourself. This way you could still discuss sensitive topics like masturbation without actually blurting out that you saw him.

If you choose to say nothing about it, you are not being irresponsible. Likely he will be relieved at the thought you might not have noticed.

Occasionally I will encounter a parent who tells me that their son is not very discrete about his auto erotic activity. Then a conversation about “doing private things in private” is absolutely required.

There is also the possibility that sexually maturing kids will become interested in pornography and use it during masturbation. People have a lot of strong opinions about pornography, and research shows that porn combined with aggression does create negative and unhealthy stereotypes about women. Some people distinguish between pornography and erotica.

Whether you have a conservative or liberal attitude about sexual explicit materials, be aware of what your kids are viewing. The internet pushes sexual content across our screens constantly and millions of sexually explicit images and movies are

available at no cost and with no controls whatsoever to prevent kids from viewing them.

If you want to learn more about how to keep porn off your computer type in “porn blocking software” into your favorite search engine and read about the many software options available.

I recommend that parents who want to monitor the computer activities of their children:

- *Keep the computer in a public area of the house*
- *Demand that computers and smartphones be turned off at a certain time*

When kids become untrustworthy and violate the rules I recommend that parents install a “key logger” on the computer the kids use. A key logger is a program that will send you all of the computer activity happening on a computer so you can see what your kids do and what sites they visit.

Nudity

s there anything wrong with a father taking a shower with his toddler-aged daughter? Our family is kind of uninhibited when it comes to walking around the house naked. We feel it's a natural thing and don't think twice about it. Some of our friends, however, think we're nuts and are messing up our kids.

There is nothing inherently wrong with taking a shower with your toddler-aged daughter or walking around naked. Being naked doesn't always have a sexual connotation, and some people feel more comfortable with their nakedness than others. Parents should not shower with their kids once the children have reached a certain age, and that age varies from child to child and situation to situation. If you see your child looking uncomfortable, ashamed, or embarrassed, or if your child protests about taking a shower with you, or makes non-stop inquisitive comments then it is time to stop.

Sexting

I have heard of something called “Sexting” and I hear it is a problem for a lot of kids. What is it and what can I do to prevent it?

Sexting is when kids send each other sexually explicit messages and pictures of themselves. Aside from being provocative and exhibitionistic one of the most dangerous aspects of texting is once a picture is sent, it can be sent to hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of other people and result in embarrassment and mortification that has led some kids to commit suicide.

Sexting is not necessarily a “teen” phenomenon. It is also rampant in “tweens,” (ten to twelves).

Kids who act out, act out in more than one way, so if you have an acting out child and they own a phone with a camera on it you need to explain to your child that they cannot own a phone unless you have access to checking what is on it. Mind

you, it is not the “typical” acting out kid who might be engaging in sexting. Peer pressure for this kind of behavior can be very high.

You will get a lot of advice from a lot of expert on whether it is invasion of privacy to check your child’s digital meanderings. It is. So what? Freedom and responsibility are two concepts that go hand in hand. It is not necessary to conduct daily “room sweeps.” However, you should always leave yourself the option as a parent to see what your kids are up to and what they are stashing in their drawers, closets and clothing if you have a reasonable suspicion.

Dating

My son is in the fifth grade and wants to go on a date. I was sure this was much too early for him to start dating until I overheard his friends talking about going to the movies and going for pizza afterward. My husband doesn't seem to think there's any harm in it, as long as we know where the kids are. What do you think?

I think the key is to understand what your son means by the word “date.” For many kids his age a date is when a group of boys and girls go out together and do something. Many fourth, fifth, and sixth graders have dates, as well as girlfriends or boyfriends that last a week or two. From what I can observe, being part of the dating scene is more of an issue of status than anything else. As kids enter the sixth and seventh grades, they become more interested in having a boyfriend or a girlfriend, and they begin to appreciate the companionship and intimacy of a close relationship.

This is the age when parents feel that they need to supervise things a bit more carefully. It's also the time when many kids begin experimenting with sex by playing kissing games at parties and making out.

Although you would think that AIDS has probably made preteens and teens more aware of the dangers of experimenting with sex, it doesn't seem to have affected their curiosity. Some people have speculated that preteens and adolescents don't have a very good understanding of their own mortality and therefore deny that they could actually be killed by something like AIDS. This makes it all the more important for parents to keep the issue of AIDS at the top of kids' minds.

Interest in Crudity

I was picking up my ten-year-old's books the other day and came across a set of pictures and diagrams he drew of naked people and of people having sex. He had also written some crude words and phrases on other pages of his notebook. What does this mean?

It means that your child is coming into contact with some of the cruder characterizations of sex and with sexual terms that are heard in the playground and on the street. Oftentimes, a child's understanding of these terms and phrases is limited, but because he's heard them and knows they have something to do with sex, they have importance. Boys his age and even younger become keenly interested in the vocabulary of sex and have decreed that talking tough and using adult sexual imagery and vocabulary makes them cool.

There is a possibility that a preoccupation with sex can come after an incident of sex abuse, so an inquiry into this possibility is recommended.

Once ruling out the possibility of sex abuse, I prefer to handle such situations as an issue of etiquette rather than sexuality or gender politics. You may communicate to the child that off-color language and sexual comments are best left to private conversations with like-minded people, preferably behind a closed door.

Homosexuality

HOMOSEXUALITY

Our twelve-year-old son recently went through a period where he was very depressed. One day, while his father was working, he began crying and confessed to me that he believed he was gay. I tried to comfort him because he was so distraught, but I must admit I was numb. Later that evening, when I spoke to my husband about it, my husband refused to acknowledge the possibility. He had a private chat with my son and concluded he was perfectly "normal." Is there anything more we should do?

Your family needs some counseling. There could be something to your child's belief about being gay, since many people become aware of their preferences very early in life. Your husband saying he's "normal" evidently suggests he cannot accept

this preference. Ironically, your child is "normal" because being gay does not make you "abnormal."

Homosexuality is not a mental illness. Rather, it is a preference for intimacy with a member of the same gender. Many parents are shocked, disappointed, and hurt when they learn their children are gay. While therapy will certainly help the family adjust to the information, it will probably not "make your son straight," as some parents mistakenly hope for. Sometimes people can be so distraught about homosexual feelings that they try to pursue a heterosexual lifestyle and that can be a difficult life at best. I don't know many parents who would want that type of suffering for their child.

Adolescence is an extremely difficult time for teenagers who are conflicted about their sexuality. Please find a competent therapist who has experience in these matters.

And, most importantly of all, find it in your heart to accept your child's preference without judging him or her.

Should Parent's "Host"?

SHOULD PARENTS "HOST"?

My husband allows our kids to have a sip or two of his beer at dinnertime. His theory is that if you let them have a little now, they won't think it's anything special later on. I tend to agree with him but worry that they might develop a liking for the taste and want more of it later. Are we doing the right thing?

I have reviewed studies examining whether introducing children to alcohol at an early age made them more or less susceptible to problems later on and came up with nothing very conclusive. Some cultures, such as the French and the Italians, often think nothing of allowing kids to sip a glass of wine at dinner. I'm not sure that this kind of exposure will either deter or encourage alcohol abuse later on. Instead, I think other factors play a much larger role.

These factors include a family history of alcohol abuse (children of alcoholics are seven to ten times more at risk for developing alcohol-related problems), a high degree of conflict in the family, and low self-esteem.

Children from all types of family backgrounds and socioeconomic strata can fall prey to alcoholism in their pre-teen and teen years. If you see any of the warning signs of alcoholism in your child, act quickly. You may consult your pediatrician, or you may contact a local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Please be advised, letting your child have a sip of beer or wine at the dinner table is a lot different than hosting a keg party at home so you can keep a watchful eye on your underaged kids and their friends. This scenario is now a crime in many states, under statutes which define "hosting" laws. Suffice it to say that it is impossible to know how many drinks kids will consume whether they are being watched or not and it is foolish of any parent who thinks they can manage the safety of kids who drink in their home or backyard and then send them off on their merry way (especially if they are driving).

Teaching Kids To Say No

What's the best way to teach my child to say no to alcohol and drugs?

The first important step is to start early. Begin by explaining to children as young as three, four, and five that alcohol is unhealthy for your body when you drink too much of it. Explain that it can make you dizzy and sick. Also, begin preparing children for specific situations that will come up.

Practice and rehearse situations by asking things like, *"When you are in school people will ask you if you want to drink beer or alcohol with them. What will you tell them?"* As your kids get older, you will realize that "just saying no" is not enough. Other kids in the peer group can put a lot of pressure on them. That's when kids need to be able to give solid reasons for not wanting to drink. These reasons can include: *"I don't like the way it makes me feel," "I don't want to ruin my*

body for sports," or "I think when people are drunk they act stupid."

The more time you spend discussing this while your kids are growing up, the more your children will rely on these talks and strategies, and the less likely they will be to fall prey to peer pressure. The key is to make drug and alcohol abuse awareness an important part of family discussions throughout your child's growing years.

Alcohol Advertising

Recently, my nine-year-old son has begun to collect advertisements from a company which markets alcohol based drinks in sugary concoctions. I worry that these advertisements are making him more sensitive to the product and more likely to drink. What can I do about it?

I have been concerned about the marketing strategy alcohol purveyors use to target kids for a very long time. It's hard for me to believe that the people behind these products and campaigns do not know that it is appealing to children. I know one eleven-year-old girl who has an entire scrapbook collection of vodka ads, labels, and other memorabilia. I asked this girl if she thought about drinking the vodka or if she just liked collecting the ads. Her response was, *"I think it would be really cool to drink the vodka, but I know I'm too young to get my hands on it. When I'm a little older I know that this is the only brand of vodka I'll drink."* When I asked her if she

thought she would wait until she was twenty-one before she drank it, she just laughed and said, *"Nobody waits until they are legal drinking age before they drink."* When I pressed her and asked how old she thought she would be before she took her first drink, she giggled and said, *"It's not like I've never had a drink. I took my first drink last year. It's just that I'll probably be fifteen or sixteen before I own my first bottle."*

This conversation was a real eye-opener for me. At eleven years old this girl had already sampled the product, identified with it, and had very strong perceptions of how she would like to associate with it. These are the very kinds of reactions advertisers stay up all night praying for. People always ask me whether I think these ads were designed to attract children to the market. My opinion on this is that these ads are not actually specifically designed for children this young. I do believe, though, that they are designed to attract --"new" drinker who are still underage, and I think there is a side effect in that the ads attract even younger kids than the advertisers intended.

I don't believe advertisers and liquor companies are so evil that they are designing their ads to pull in eleven-year-old children. On the other hand, I think that by now they are fully aware that children are very attracted by the ads, and I don't see them doing anything about that.

One way to sensitize your child to the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse is to review newspaper clippings that recount, in detail, alcohol-related car accidents. Ask your child to attend an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting with you or to participate

in the organization Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD). Your daughter needs to see that there is another, less glamorous and potentially deadly, side to this issue.

Take the time to write to your congressperson about things like this, and copy the person in charge of marketing for the company behind the ads and the product itself.

Alcoholic Parent

My husband has been a heavy drinker for the last fifteen years. We have two children, aged six and nine. I am concerned that living in the house with someone who is an alcoholic will make them more susceptible to developing a drinking problem themselves. What can I do about it?

You do not mention whether or not your husband has ever been in treatment for alcohol abuse, but it certainly seems as though he should be. Your children need to understand what it means to live in the same house as someone who has the disease of alcoholism. The best way to do this is to attend a few meetings of Alanon. Alanon is the branch of Alcoholics Anonymous that tends to the children and families of alcoholics. There is also a branch called Alateen, which is for the teen-aged children of alcoholics. You can find out where the nearest Alanon meeting is by looking up Alcoholics Anonymous in

either the white or yellow pages of your phone book and calling them. Please do this right away.

Cigarettes

My son's guidance counselor called to tell me that my son and four of his friends were caught smoking cigarettes on school grounds. He's only ten, and I am very worried that this could be a sign that he's headed for serious trouble. What should I do?

The majority of kids who smoke start before their thirteenth birthday. Some of the statistics on kids and smoking suggest that the fastest growing population of new smokers is pre teen and teenage girls. The first place to look for what might be influencing your child is right at home. Do either you or your husband smoke? If so, you have been providing a model for his smoking for the past ten years.

Unknowingly, you might have even provided him with his first cigarette.

If you do smoke, encourage him to stop now, because waiting until he is older will make kicking the habit harder. This

might be a good opportunity to ban cigarette smoking for everyone in the family. It is generally not helpful to try to scare kids into giving up cigarettes by showing them pictures of diseased lungs or telling stories of people who die of lung cancer or heart problems, but I usually go through the whole routine anyway. What I have found is that after kids finally do give up smoking, the reason they will give is often, *"I didn't want my lungs to be so black and disgusting."*

If you don't smoke, it is easy to ban cigarettes from the house and institute a consequence like grounding if you catch him again. One parent I know sent her twelve-year-old daughter to the library to do a report on smoking. She couldn't be positive that doing the report was an adequate deterrent, but at least she was sure that her daughter got important information about the physical and emotional habits that cigarette smoking creates.

As with drinking, cigarette smoking comes under the influence of your child's peer group. That is why it is important to talk to your son about these things when he is very young.

Hard Drugs

We live in a fairly upscale neighborhood. I worry about my child drinking and smoking cigarettes, but should I also be educating her about hard drugs?

At about nine or ten years of age, children should be taught about some of the hard drugs and their effects. There is the possibility and even the probability that your child will be exposed to these drugs as well as to cigarettes and alcohol. Be sure to include some information about marijuana (it makes you hallucinate, and it is psychologically addicting), crack and cocaine (two very dangerous substances that give you a fake feeling of being powerful, when what they are really doing is making you very sick), heroin (it is like a medicine that takes away your pain and makes your body feel good, but it causes your body to need it so much that you could die without it), and LSD and angel dust (they affect the way your brain works, they make you hallucinate, and they can damage your brain).

There is a lot of controversy over whether or not some of the softer drugs (like marijuana) are “gateway drugs.” Opinions are divided on this but when people ask me what side of the divide I am on I say, *“if you think getting high feels good, you are naturally going to gravitate to other substances that get you high. If you start with marijuana you are on the bottom floor of a department store with many other options. Yes, marijuana is a gateway drug.”*

Parenting Challenges

The period between early childhood and adolescence is one that can be marked by many different fears, phobias, idiosyncrasies, and true emotional conflict. Parents need to know which of these things will pass and which ones should be given professional attention. Seeing some of these questions and answers will probably be a relief to those of you who have been going through some trials and tribulations of your own.

Clinging And Anxiety

My fifteen month old was such a friendly, outgoing baby, but now she seems to have a negative reaction to almost any one but me. Her fearfulness is especially distressing to her grandparents, who want to interact with her. She just wants nothing to do with them. Is there anything wrong with her?

Kids go through two phases of separation anxiety—one phase occurs at around six to eight months, when infants show very clear preferences for their mothers or primary caregivers. The second phase, which is characterized by “stranger anxiety,” peaks right around fourteen to eighteen months, and then declines from there. Until then, grandma and grandpa should be just a little bit more low-key.

Anxious, clingy behavior is one of those traits that can be influenced by genetics. That doesn’t mean your toddler won’t grow up to be social. It just means that she might have a shy, less

outgoing personality. There is nothing “wrong” with that. Ask any kindergarten teacher about the differences in little ones and you will hear that some are “bossy,” some are “people pleasers,” some “slow to warm up,” and some who are “shy and introverted.” Your challenge as a parent will always be to help kids understand their natural characteristics and do the most with them.

Fear of Animals

We would like to get a dog as a family pet, but our toddler is absolutely terrified of animals. To our knowledge she's never been bitten or chased by an animal, so her behavior is hard to understand. Are there any ways we can get her used to the idea of having a dog around the house?

With a little work and reassurance you should have no trouble at all. Perhaps she was frightened by the sound of a barking dog or by a cartoon characterization of a dog. Sometimes a single frightening experience or perception can become firmly rooted in a child's mind.

You will need to spend some time with some friendly-looking stuffed animals. Use the animals as part of your play sessions, first as minor characters, then as more central characters. Try to get your child to sleep near or with the stuffed animal. Give

it a name, talk to it, and make believe you are feeding it and taking care of it.

Supplement your activity with a few stories or cartoons about friendly animals.

The next big step is either visiting someone who has a very friendly dog or taking a trip to the pet store. Consult with someone who is a breeder or who knows a lot about dogs before making a purchase. Some animal lovers that I know tell me that mixed breeds (mutts) have the best temperaments and are the easiest to take care of. I was surprised to learn that poodles, which look like they would be relatively gentle and benign, are responsible for the most dog bites of any breed. My mailman has provided me with an informal and unscientific validation of this finding. I know this will probably draw ire from all of the friendly poodle owners out there, so I will apologize in advance.

Needing A Night Light

My daughter is six years old and still cannot get to sleep unless there is a night-light on. The other night, the light went out and she went into a panic. Shouldn't she be able to sleep without the night-light?

The light is evidently something that she has gotten used to and that gives her comfort and security. Some children remain fearful of the dark for a very long time (some adults I know aren't too crazy about sleeping in the dark either). Many times such fears can be traced back to other scary things (separations, move to a new house) that happen in childhood. If this is your daughter's only "little weirdness,"

give her a break and let her sleep with a night-light. Eventually, she will forget that it is even there and she won't be concerned about it any more.

Childhood fears come and go all throughout the developmental continuum. Be a good listener. Let kids talk about their

fears longer than you feel like you are willing to listen. Do not make your kids feel foolish if they are brave enough to tell you what is on their minds.

Fear of Toilet Flushing

Our three-year-old toddler has a terrible fear of flushing the toilet. Every time the toilet flushes, he runs away from the bathroom screaming and crying. I'm afraid that this is going to interfere with his toilet training. What should I do?

I have heard many stories about fears that kids develop during potty training. One three-year-old child I knew would use the potty but refused to let anyone flush the bowl, because he was emotionally attached to his "BMs." As a way of getting him interested in going to the potty, his mom used to tell him stories about his bowel movements, and the two of them used to sit there and name them! I swear this is a true story. Well, the child began to worry about what would happen to his bowel movements after they were flushed, and he refused to let anyone send them away. Go figure.

Your child was probably taken off guard by the noise made by the toilet. The best way to handle the situation would be to wait until he's out of the bathroom, close the door, and muffle the sound of the toilet flushing. In time his fear will pass.

Fear Of The Water

My seven-year-old son had a very difficult experience at camp this summer. While he was swimming in the lake he became exhausted and started to drown. A counselor jumped in and rescued him, but the experience left him very shaken up. We live near the water and want the kids to feel comfortable with it, but he has vowed never to even put his toe in the water again. What should we do?

Give it a little bit of time, but not too much time, and then suggest that he get back in the water and learn to overcome his fear. Acknowledge that it is a very scary feeling to go back into the water after almost drowning, but since you live around water, it is important for him to know how to take care of himself in the water, so that he doesn't have another bad experience.

One key to getting him back into the water is taking it very slow. Before you even go back to the water, you and your child

should spend some time with your eyes closed, just relaxing and thinking about the water in a positive way. When he's comfortable visualizing himself swimming (if he can't get to that point on his own, tell him to imagine that he has a pair of magic "water wings" that will keep him floating), then take him down to just look at the water. It is important to remember not to let him feel too anxious. After several times of going in just a little bit, you should suggest holding him in the water and helping him learn to float, and then get him back to the point of taking regular swimming lessons. The process will take a while, but you may be surprised that in the middle of it all, he might just decide to jump in and take up where he left off before he had the problem.

If his fears are uncontrollable, you might want to consider enlisting the help of a behavior modification specialist to get him back in the water. This specialist will probably use a slightly more structured program, but one that is very similar to the one I described. This is called systematic desensitization, and it works very well with many types of fears and phobias.

Anxiety About School

On the first day of kindergarten my five-year-old son wouldn't leave my side. He kicked and howled all the way into the classroom. The teacher told me that once he got inside, he was fine, but the next day he was screaming again, twice as loud. If it gets any worse I might consider leaving him home. What should I do?

The best thing for you to do would be to keep bringing him to school, even if he is kicking and screaming. If the teacher is accurate in reporting that he settles down within half an hour of being in school, then eventually he will adjust.

It would be important for you to find out the reason your son is having separation difficulties. Sometimes (not always), parents send out signals that they, too, will be upset without the child around during the day. Just about the worst thing you can do with a child who develops a phobic reaction to school is

keep him home because he looks upset. He will never adjust to going to school if he thinks that making a fuss will get him out of it. Resist the urge to walk down the hall and peek into his classroom to make sure everything is all right. Schools are used to handling this problem because it is a fairly common one. Try to coordinate your efforts with the school psychologist or social worker if your school employs such a person. Oftentimes the school psychologist or social worker will set up a behavioral incentive program so that the child can earn prizes or privileges for coming into school and settling down.

Be aware of stress that may be coming from an outside source, or from another family problem that is contributing to your child's behavior.

Nervous Tics

Lately, my third-grade-aged child has begun to move his head in a funny way. The pediatrician told me that it was a tic, and that it comes from stress. Can you tell me anything more about it?

A tic is a nervous habit that is brought about by stress and rarely from a neurological disorder. Tics can be seen in the form of jerky head movements, eye blinks, or throat clearing. Third grade seems to be a very common age for kids to develop tics. The stress causing the tics can come from school itself, from the family, or from other social arenas. In most cases, tics disappear on their own. If the tic is very noticeable, or if it lasts more than a few months, it should be evaluated first by your pediatrician and then, if it is warranted, by a neurologist or behavioral specialist. In rare cases, this behavior can be caused by Tourette's syndrome, a neurological disorder that produces tics and, in severe cases, uncontrollable vocalizations that sound like barking, or even uncontrolled swearing.

Death Fixations

My nine-year-old seems to be fixated on death. She is constantly worried that her father and I are going to die, and she's constantly asking questions about when her grandmother and grandfather are going to die. Her questions are difficult, if not impossible, to answer, but I'm afraid that if I tell her I don't know, it will make things worse. How can I put her at ease?

A lot of very sensitive kids go through a period where they become almost obsessed with death and dying. It's almost as if they wake up one day with the realization that everything in life is pretty fragile and can be destroyed in a moment. It's probably not surprising to hear that during military crises, or right after natural disasters like hurricanes or earthquakes, the incidence of kids reporting these fears rises dramatically. We live in an age of terrorism, nuclear war, AIDS, and violent crime. Some kids seem to tune into all of this and go through a very bleak and pessimistic period.

The best way to talk to kids when they get like this is to ask them to tell you everything that's on their mind. Be supportive, but don't be too quick to offer pat advice or to dismiss them as being dramatic (that's the worst thing you could do). Instead, acknowledge that you have some of those same worries sometimes. Continue by saying that when you go through those times, you have to actually force yourself to think good thoughts. Thinking negative thoughts all the time just makes things get worse and worse. See if your child can come up with positive thoughts to "battle" some of the negative thoughts. One positive thought can surely be "I have a mother and father who love me." If the focus of the thoughts is on a fear that Mom or Dad will die, reassure her that although there are never any guarantees in life, you are very positive that you will be around for a long time. See if you can spend just a little more quality time with your child to reestablish a sense of stability and permanence in her life. That should be enough to make the difficult time pass.

Be aware that some children are quite somber and pessimistic by nature. These kids have to be actively taught to look for the bright side of things.

Self Directed Anger

The other day, my eight-year-old son was totally out of control, so I sent him up to his room for a time out. After he was done with his time out, he was very mopey. When I asked him what was wrong, he started saying things like, "I'm so stupid, I don't even deserve a spot on this planet," and "I wish I could die. I hate myself, and I hate everything in this house. I'd like to take a knife and chop my head off." This kind of talk frightened me so much I didn't know what to do. Is there really any danger of my son killing himself?

That's hard to say without more information. Is he sad and mopey most of the time? Does he frequently talk about hurting himself? When he gets mad or upset does he do self-destructive, impulsive things? It sounds like your son left his time out in a rage. Perhaps he was mad at himself for not being in control of his behavior, or maybe he was mad at you for

making him take a time out. It is important for you to explain to your son that what he was saying was very serious, and very upsetting. When he is calmer, ask him again whether or not he is still feeling like he wants to hurt himself. Kids between seven and ten can go through periods where they stomp around, feeling sorry for themselves, and throwing temper tantrums, and then, in the middle of the tantrum, yell at everyone for treating them like a baby. This is fairly typical behavior. What isn't typical are long periods of depression and rage that are acted out against oneself. Impulsive, self-destructive behavior and verbalizations about wanting to commit suicide are a very dangerous combination. If you see or hear any of this, call your pediatrician immediately.

Depression

For the last six months my twelve-year-old daughter has been down in the dumps. She has stopped calling her friends and always complains about feeling awful. She really has quite a good life, so I don't understand what is going on with her. She is a good student but constantly refers to herself as stupid. Her father and I love her very much and we tell her that all the time, but it just doesn't seem to make much difference. Last week she gave away all of her favorite clothing, and now she just mopes around the house in a warm-up suit. What should we do?

The one thing you shouldn't do is assume that she'll grow out of it. Six months is a very long time for a child her age to be down in the dumps. Your daughter is showing some very strong signs of clinical depression: she has stopped calling her friends, she has given away her possessions, and she expresses a strong feeling of sadness and hopelessness. Counseling is ab-

solutely essential in her case. Not only is she depressed, but she is at risk for self harm.

When A Loved One Dies

My children are five and nine, and their grandfather is very ill. The doctors say he will probably not survive more than a month. Both kids are very close to their grandfather, and have never experienced the loss of anyone close to them. I am worried about how their grandfather's passing will affect them, and I would like to know how to prepare them. What can I do?

The children will experience grief very much like the rest of us do. They will miss their grandfather, cry, and become upset and confused over the loss. Talking to parents about the loss of a loved one is one of the most difficult things for me to do as a psychologist. My training points me in the direction of trying to comfort people who are upset and giving them solutions on how to live a better, happier life. When parents talk to me about death, I have no solutions. I frequently remark that our feelings about losing the people we love really don't change

much from childhood to adulthood; it's just that the more we experience it, the more we come to expect it from time to time. That doesn't make it any easier to understand. It just makes it a bit more familiar.

Your five-year-old will have a different experience from that of your nine-year-old. At five years of age, children may not fully understand the finality or permanence of death. Be sure that you don't equate their grandfather's death with sleeping, or children might be afraid that if they go to sleep, they will die. By the same token, unless it is a formal part of your religion, try not to say that the person died because "*God wanted them to.*" If you tell a young child that, he might get angry at God, and if it is your intent to foster spirituality in children, this might not be the message you want to send.

Your nine-year-old will no doubt be sad and upset. He also might not know how to react, so it is a good idea to prepare him for the events that will take place, whether it be a wake, a funeral, or some other religious service. Going to a wake might be a very troubling experience for a boy of nine, so I would tend to make attendance at such a ceremony something optional. Different religions have different traditions. It is always helpful when a parent can tell a child that this is the tradition when people pass away.

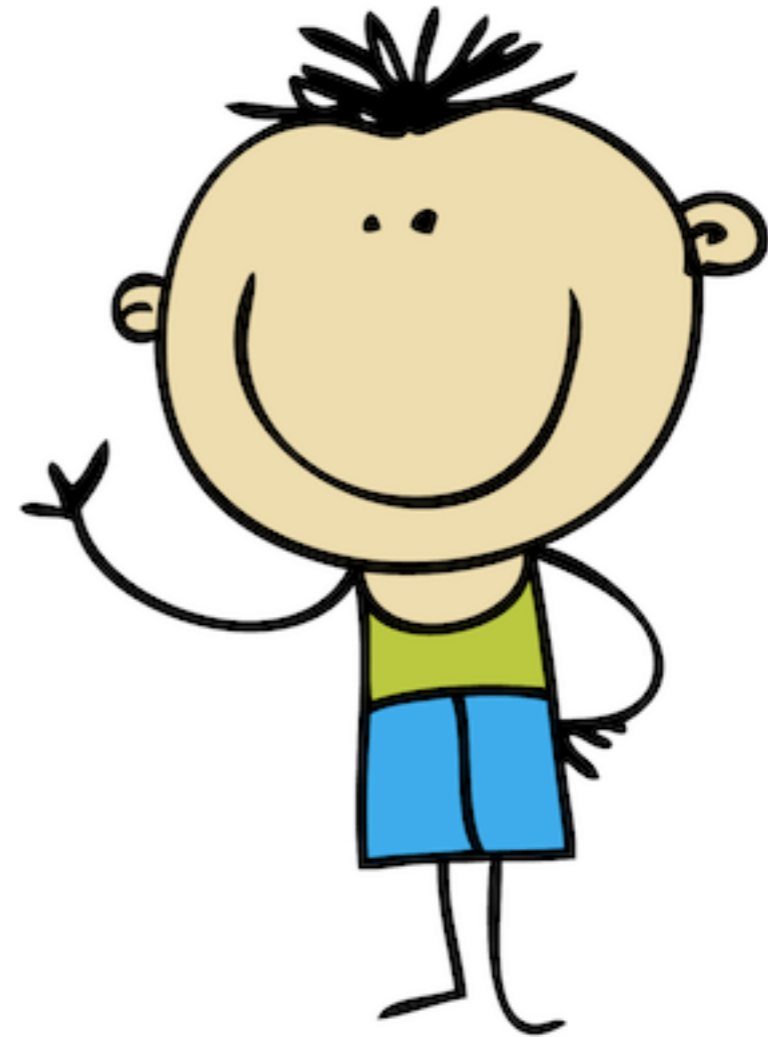
Now, regarding the question of what to tell the children about their grandfather: I don't think there are many options. Begin by saying that you are sure they know that Grandpa is very sick. Gently tell them that you have recently gotten some up-

setting news, which is that the doctors think he might die very soon. You might want to discuss the possibility of visiting him, but be aware that hospitals can be very frightening to young children, especially if their grandfather has tubes or other life-support equipment attached to him. Their grandfather's general level of discomfort or awareness should also be taken into account. Let your children express their grief and discomfort without telling them things like "Be strong." Sadness and crying are appropriate expressions of grief and should never be inhibited.

Final Thoughts

*What you cannot enforce /
Do not command.*

Sophocles



Inspiration:

John Quincy Adams once said, *“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.”*

There might be more fitting quotes to end a parenting book which emphasizes leadership, but I think this one does the job just fine. You are an inspirational figure in your children’s lives -- and that is what makes your job so, so hard.

So, then you sit down and you think about your intentions, perhaps you might want to focus some of those intentions on being inspirational.

And, of course, my goal is to inspire you to be inspirational.

Visit www.tribecakidcoach.com to download information which helps you become a better parent and an inspirational leader.

All the Best,

Peter J. Favaro, Ph.D.

About the Author: Dr. Peter Favaro

“Dr. Peter” has written more than a dozen books on parenting, conflict resolution and education. His website Tribeca Kid Coach (www.tribecakidcoach.com) is dedicated to helping parents create strong “team leaders” within their families. His approaches combine problem solving, humor, leadership and practical information.

Dr. Peter Is a native New Yorker who practices in New York City and lives on Long Island. He has been a popular parenting expert, relied upon in the media for more than 25 years, and is a strong believer in giving back to his community.

This book, and many other publications that Dr. Peter produces are free.

Look for Dr. Peter's training seminars and parenting classes in your community, and if there are none, invite him over! You can get more information on how to run a seminar in your community by contacting Dr. Peter at pfavaro@aol.com.