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Family Focus

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easily on positive or interesting messages than on negative or repetitive ones. The challenge for parents is to give short, to-the-point, positive messages that our children can easily absorb.

For example, if your son got a D on an exam and you know he didn't study well for it, you could say, "That's too bad, Bryan. You've done well in algebra up to now. Hopefully, the next test will be better."

Lecturing him on his failure to study enough or worrying aloud how this might mean a lower semester grade is not productive. Or in dog-speak, rubbing his nose in it doesn't help. By the time your child is in sixth or seventh grade he knows if he didn't study enough and what the implications are when he gets a low grade. Pointing out the obvious to your child will tend to produce anger and resentment - not a great recipe for turning around his lack of effort.

An example of a short, disciplinary message for a child who failed to feed the family dog two days in a row would be, "I'm upset that Coco had to go without food for so long because you didn't feed her. Does it bother you when she is very hungry? You're usually so caring and I know you love her. Please be sure to feed her every morning, OK?" And then get confirmation from your child that she will comply.

Since we may not have our thoughts well-organized if we are talking spontaneously, we need to plan out what we want to say and how to say it. Of course, this is impossible to do all of the time, but we can tell older children that we need time to think about what they just said or did or didn't do. They'll pay more attention if they have to wait for your response, and you will have time

There's an old Far Side cartoon by Gary Larson that shows a man giving verbal commands to his dog. The next panel shows what the dog actually hears: "Blah blah Ginger, blah blah blah Ginger . . ."

Sometimes parents set up a situation where our children are the ones who hear "blah, blah, blah." Then we may wonder why our children fail to listen and cooperate.

Our community is highly educated and articulate. Parents typically have an excellent command of language. I see many parents, out of perceived necessity or sometimes pure frustration, offering excessive explanations and lectures to their children.

We want our children to understand not only what we are saying but why we are saying it. We want them to develop respect, cooperation, self-discipline, self-awareness, generosity, compassion, and so many other values and attributes. In addition, we want them to be motivated in school, sports, music, and other pursuits. We have so much to impart to them, and understandably we want to instill as much as we possibly can.

But even the best and brightest children can only tune into us for a limited amount of time. Therefore, it is important to choose our words carefully and sparingly when we are instructing or disciplining our children.

In addition, we all stay focused a lot more

to figure out an appropriate message.

It also helps to have your child occasionally repeat back to you what he heard you say, just to check for reception and accuracy. Occasionally ask him what went wrong or what he's thinking or feeling. A child will be more willing to share his thoughts and feelings with you if he thinks you will listen in a positive way and not lecture him.

In a future Family Focus column, we will look at the importance of using action rather than words to encourage your kids to listen and cooperate.

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