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Family Focus

By Margie Ryerson



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. Contact her at (925) 376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. She is the author of "Treat Your Partner Like a Dog: How to Breed a Better Relationship" and "Appetite for Life: Inspiring Stories of Recovery from Anorexia, Bulimia, and Compulsive Overeating."

Getting our children to cooperate with us is one of the biggest challenges for all parents. It starts as early as the diaper-changing stage where a baby resists our efforts by twisting and turning and trying to get away. We want the best for our children, but unfortunately they don't always think in these terms and follow our program.

In our previous look at this topic, we discussed how over-explaining, lecturing, blaming, and ordering interfere with our mission of gaining cooperation. When our children can see us in a sympathetic light, and when we are giving messages in positive ways, they are more likely to comply. If messages contain anger, negativity, or are overly authoritarian children will naturally have some resistance. After all, don't we react this way as well?

Many parents are reactive instead of pro-active. Being pro-active means having a disciplinary system in place ahead of time. It needs to incorporate positive incentives and consequences and be explained in detail to your child before there is any misbehavior. You can give your child a choice of rewards for specific behaviors so that he will feel a part of the decision-making. You can involve your older child by letting him select a consequence from your list. Collaborative discipline works best.

Another feature of a behavior plan is to draw or cut out pictures of what you want your young child to do to earn a star or sticker toward a reward. Older children can have a written list, but it is best to make it colorful and noticeable in some way. We all need visual reminders at times, and reinforcement is always valuable.

Anna was in despair at not being effectively able to parent her 3-year-old daughter, Evie. Anna reported yelling and screaming at Evie regularly with poor results. In addition to feeling like a terrible mother, Anna was convinced that her daughter had serious problems and needed therapy. With the help of a positive plan of action, Anna gradually became calmer and realized that Evie was just behaving like most young children would in similar situations.

Anna started simply, with one goal - that Evie stop jumping on the couch. Evie laughed and defied her mother's attempts to get her to stop. Anna knew she should ignore this behavior, but it was hard because Evie was wrecking her nice couch.

We set up a system of positive reinforcement that gave Evie a star for each day that she didn't jump on the couch. The days didn't need to be consecutive, and we established a total of three days for a reward so that Evie could receive quick reinforcement. Anna posted a picture of a couch high on the refrigerator and put the stars next to it. She only needed to do two series of this positive reinforcement before Evie stopped jumping on the couch altogether.

The rewards were simple: going out for ice cream and playing a game together. Next, she tackled another problem - getting Evie to stay at the dinner table and eat most of her dinner. Again, systematically approaching the behavior correction helped Anna control her temper and

focus on being more positive with Evie.

Yelling is not effective and actually reinforces behavior you want to extinguish. Children, even at a young age, often derive some measure of satisfaction at having the power to get their parents upset and out of control. In essence, they have won in some small part and you have lost - not at all what you intended. It's the normal power struggle or battle of wills that takes place between parent and child at various times.

When you feel like you are blowing a fuse, stop and refer to your plan of action instead. Consequences can include time-out, going to a bedroom, or loss of privileges (such as TV time, computer, cell phone, or electronic game use). Take your time to think about what restriction to choose and for what length of time. A short time is better so your child will be able to redeem himself more quickly. He has a better chance of learning from the experience than if you make the punishment too long.

Sometimes a long punishment can engender anger and alienation if it feels too heavy-handed and unfair to your child. You can always add on extra time if needed or give additional consequences, but it isn't a good idea to hand out a long-term punishment unless there is good cause and you are going to stick to it. Too often, parents relent before the time is up which sends the message that they are not really in charge after all and are capable of being manipulated. If children see parents back down too often, parental authority can be undermined.

The beauty of having a defined system in place is that it gives family members structure to lean on. There can be more cooperation and understanding, and better relations within the family, when parents can be calm and children can know what to expect.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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