

ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO CHOOSE “RIGHT”

First we must understand that children are born with “free will.” They are individuals from the moment of birth and as they grow become increasingly aware of their surroundings as well as the choices they are able to make. They are NOT blank slates on which parents write their destiny. Parents can significantly influence outcomes, but children are free to make their own choices no matter how poorly or how terrific they are raised.

Parents cannot control their children’s decisions. Parents can encourage, praise, reward certain decisions and administer consequences on poor decisions. Despite praise, reward, encouragement and negative consequences children are free to choose “wrongly.” Children from “good” parents can turn out not okay, and children from “bad” parents can turn out okay. “Good” parents increase the probability of good outcomes, but this does not guarantee good outcomes.

USE OF POSITIVE REWARDS: Praise (reward) is important. Children need to hear when they do things right. Often we tend to notice the “bad” choices more as bad choices speak louder to us parents. BUT praise must be utilized in moderation. Some parents praise (reward) so often it loses its significance. Some believe that praise (reward) will build self-esteem, when in fact if overused gives the child a false sense of themselves: “I am wonderful, perfect. I can do nothing wrong.” This becomes self-centeredness, not self-confidence. When it happens that they do something wrong, this does not fit their self-image and therefore must quickly find someone else to blame.

Some hold to the theory that ignoring bad behavior, praising good behavior will extinguish the bad behavior. If it gets no attention, it will go away. This may work early on when the circumstances were simpler, but once the child has established a pattern of troublesome, socially unacceptable behavior, positive reinforcement alone WILL NOT WORK. Why?

- Because, by this time the bad behavior is too complicated.
- The reward may not be great enough to make it worth giving up the secondary gains of the bad behavior.
- Bad behavior now fits their self-image.
- They lose the belief they can do good or that they deserve reward, praise.
- Praise is not accepted as it conflicts with the person they now believe they are.
- Praise is seen as “luck” not something they earned or deserve.

What we are looking for in the child’s behavior is simply socially acceptable behavior (respectful, responsible) and that should be its own reward. Being socially appropriate should not require a material or monetary reward. There is NO excuse for being disrespectful or irresponsible; nothing can make these behaviors okay.

There are some personalities that will not work for a reward, but will work to avoid a consequence.

USE OF CONSEQUENCES: Consequences are the natural outcomes of our behavior, our choices. They can be both positive and negative. Positive consequences encourage us while negative consequences hopefully deter us. Life is filled with natural consequences:

- Do a good job, you get paid
- Do a poor job, and you are likely to get fired
- Lose your temper while driving, you are more likely to get a ticket or have an accident
- Do your grocery shopping, there is food to eat
- Take on a mean, demanding attitude and people will shy away from you (this can be negative if you are social, and positive if you want to be a loner)

With children, they must learn that life has consequences. It is unrealistic to promote the idea that life rewards good choices and ignores the rest. This is a false perception that will be very hard on the child when they are confronted with how life really works.

Since children have free will and we parents do not have control of the child's decisions, the only control we do have is the administration of consequences. The more challenging the child's behavior, the more consistent the parents must be.

For some children threatening consequences will turn them around. For others consequences need to be administered as "strategically timed consequences." This occurs when a consequence is administered without forewarning and when it is more convenient to the parent. The only requirement is that the child be able to remember yesterday. For example, disrespectful behavior on Monday evening may result in consequences Tuesday while in school the child's video game is gone (grounded to the parent's cupboard.) No threats, no fighting or arguing, it just happens. Now you have the child's attention. In adulthood, disrespectful behavior toward a client or supervisor could result in immediate dismissal without warning. That is the real world.

CONCLUSION: let your child know you appreciate their cooperation, respectfulness, being responsible, good choices, but don't overdo this: "I love when you do your chores without a hassle."

If they are being anti-social (disrespectful and irresponsible) speak loudly, firmly and clearly with significant consequences backing you up: "your behavior and attitude is unacceptable. Until you learn to behave respectfully and responsibly your privileges (video game, TV,...) are grounded."