



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

Parent Guide to Fostering Self-Discipline, Part 3 CONNECTING NEEDS WITH BEHAVIOR

Dear Parent,

Self-discipline and appropriate behavior are related. Observing a child throwing pebbles at a passing car, one person says "That child needs to learn discipline!" Another thinks "That child needs to practice appropriate behavior!" Authentically understood, discipline is the ability to listen to the voice of another, understand the message, and act upon it appropriately whether in private or in public. To understand misbehavior, however, we must understand basic human needs. After all, is it not possible for a child to correctly hear the teaching of a parent, understand exactly what the parent means, and yet choose to disregard the teaching and act counter to it? Misbehavior has a purpose or intention. Until adults understand the goals of misbehavior they waste valuable time eliminating one specific misbehavior after another. That is similar to winning the battle but losing the war. Parents need to understand the connection between behavior and need. Once parents understand the goal of the behavior they can respond with an appropriate approach of communication, consequences, or alternative behaviors. This newsletter presents the basic needs of all children; how parents can identify the need behind the misbehavior; and which parent approach is most appropriate for response. The next issue of **Parent Partnership Handbook** will identify effective remedies for re-directing behavior and avoiding mis-behavior.

Fundamental Needs

Like adults, all children have four basic needs, which left un-tended, fester into negative or withdrawing behavior. These needs are pre-requisites for spiritual, social, psychological, and emotional growth. They are of the essence of identity development; they are not cosmetic or optional to personal growth. They are:

- (1) **to be loved**, i.e., feel a sense of attention, involvement, contribution, and belonging
- (2) **to be in control**, i.e., to have a sense of power, autonomy, responsibility for their own behavior
- (3) **to be treated respectfully, justly, and fairly**, i.e., to experience trust, reasonableness, consideration, recognition
- (4) **to be competent and relied upon**, i.e., to have a sense of accomplishment, capability, skillfulness.

Three additional needs motivate the behavior of teenagers. They are (1) excitement, (2) peer acceptance, and (3) superiority. Explanation of these goals, advice for parents of teens, and responses to special problems with teenagers can be found in *Parenting Teenagers* by Dinkmeyer and McKay (1990). This newsletter limits its remarks to the basic four needs.

Psychologist Rudolf Dreikurs found that whenever one of the four basic needs is not met, a child displays misbehavior whose goal of (1) attention, (2) power, (3) revenge or (4) to display inadequacy corresponds to the perceived un-met need of the child. Learning how to recognize what motivates the misbehavior is the key to turning things around in the relationship between the child and parent.

Identifying the Need Behind the Misbehavior

The goal of misbehavior cannot be determined by the behavior itself. Any incidence of behavior can be related to any one of the four needs. In order to identify the goal of misbehavior parents need to become conscious of their own tendency in response; their own feeling during of the episode; and how their child reacts to the parent's usual attempts at correction. Consider the following guidelines to understand the goals of misbehavior. Imagine that your child talks out of turn and interrupts you while you are entertaining adult company. If the goal is **ATTENTION**, you feel annoyed and bothered. Interiorly you think, "Oh, you are such a pest!" You want to remind her or coax her not to interrupt. If you do respond, she stops temporarily. If her goal, however, is **POWER**, you feel provoked and angry and sense that your authority is threatened. You feel like gritting your teeth. Interiorly you feel like saying, "Who do you think you are?" or "You don't know your place; who died and left you boss?" You have a tendency to fight or to give in. If you challenge her, she intensifies her action because she wants to win. If her goal is **REVENGE**, you feel deeply hurt. You could cry. Interiorly you think, "How could she do this to me?" You have a tendency to retaliate and get even with her. She wants to get even and when she senses your hurt, she continues in

a hurtful way. If her goal is **INADEQUACY**, you feel despair and hopelessness. You feel like saying, “I give up”. “I don’t know what more I can do. I’ve tried everything with her.” “This is hopeless.” Your feeling identifies that she has already given up on herself. She feels inadequate; unable to do anything right. Your reaction demonstrates that you agree with her that nothing can be done. She becomes passive and shows no improvement.

SUGGESTED PARENT RESPONSE

Children are giving messages through isolated instances of behavior that are motivated by attention, power, revenge or inadequacy.

The child who believes that he belongs only when he is noticed or being served by the parent, acts out for **ATTENTION**. Instead of coaxing or reminding him, try these alternatives:

1. When possible ignore the misbehavior.
2. At neutral times give attention for positive behavior.
3. Avoid undue service. Establish, instead, routines, procedures, systems that involve his participation.
4. Understand that reminding, punishing, rewarding and coaxing are giving undue attention and rewarding him for inappropriate behavior.
5. Schedule time with your child on a regular basis.
6. Discuss the question: Could it be that the reason you ___ is to get my attention and to keep me busy with you?

The child who believes that she belongs only when she is in control or proving her position as boss is looking for **POWER**. Instead of fighting with her or giving in to her, try the following alternatives:

1. Withdraw from conflict.
2. Without speaking, act kindly, but firmly.
3. Redirect her to use power constructively.
4. At neutral times ask for her help; enlist her cooperation. Give her responsibility.
5. Understand that fighting or giving in only increases her desire for power.
6. Discuss the question: Could it be that the reason you ___ is to show me that you can do whatever you want?

The importance of spending time with your child on a regular basis cannot be overstated. The basic attitudes of presence, encouragement, understanding, and mutual respect are keys to the formation of self-discipline and self-worth. These attitudes convey the message that a child is loved, influential, respected and competent. When these needs are met there is no reason for misbehavior. If you believe that you will benefit from further development of the concepts presented in this newsletter, consult STEP literature (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) and *Positive Discipline* written by Jane Nelson, Ed.D. May the information shared in this newsletter affirm your parenting style and serve as a guide to understanding the connection between needs and behavior that supports the formation of self-discipline.

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When a child is hurt, he believes that he belongs only when he is hurting others. He does not believe that he can be loved. Consequently he lashes out in **REVENGE**. Instead of retaliating and getting even with him, try the following alternatives:

1. Avoid feeling hurt. Realize that the hurt you feel is a reflection of the hurt your child is carrying.
2. Withdraw from the revenge cycle; avoid retaliation and punishment.
3. Build a trusting relationship wherein you demonstrate respect for him as a person and dependency on his contributions.
4. Communicate with encouragement statements (clear affirmation about his specific strengths)
5. Separate the behavior from the person. Correct the behavior; love the child.
6. Discuss the question: Could it be that the reason you ___ is because you feel hurt and want to get even with me or someone else?

When a child feels incompetent, she believes that she belongs only by convincing others not to expect anything from her but, instead, to view her as unable and helpless. She **DISPLAYS INADEQUACY**. Instead of passive response or failing to respond to her, try the following alternatives:

1. Stop all criticism.
2. Encourage any positive attempt, no matter how small. Arrange for small successes.
3. Focus on her assets.
4. Avoid pity and despair.
5. Take time to train her in skills and accomplishments.
6. Discuss the question: Could it be that the reason you ___ is because you don't feel you can succeed and so you don't even want to try?