



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 4 REMEDIES FOR MISBEHAVIOR

Dear Parent,

Self-discipline is fostered or limited by identity formation. A child's perception of how well his basic emotional needs are met affect his behavior choices. Every child has the need (1) to be loved; (2) to be in control; (3) to be treated respectfully, justly, and fairly; and (4) to be competent and relied upon by the significant people in his life. These needs are pre-requisites for spiritual, social, psychological, and emotional growth. They are the essence of identity formation. A child who considers herself connected, responsible, respected and capable usually makes self-disciplined choices because the goal of her behavior is to maintain and strengthen her already developing positive identity. However, when a child feels denied a basic need, he takes action to have the need met, to protect himself, to retaliate for his pain or to hide his inferiority. In this sense, the misbehavior has a purpose, goal, or intention. Healing the child's inner wound requires the parent to identify the goal of the misbehavior; otherwise parent actions will treat the symptoms and remain unaware of the true need of the child. In such cases, misbehavior will continue and probably escalate. Proper diagnosis to determine the goal of misbehavior is crucial and guidelines for understanding this process were reported in the last issue of **Parent Partnership Handbook**. The focus of this newsletter is to identify effective remedies for re-directing behavior and to suggest preventive measures for avoiding misbehavior.

SECURITY VS. ATTENTION-SEEKING

All people need to experience themselves as loved, i.e., wanted, valued, preferred, and chosen. Ask yourself what experiences you need in order for you to perceive yourself as loved by another person. Might it be a sense of attention or involvement and belonging, or contribution, connection, or being noticed, having stability, or assurances of physical and psychological safety? These are the kinds of treatment that children need in order to believe that they are loved as unique, one-of-a-kind persons. They need to know from repeated experience that their needs will receive a predictable response from the significant people in their lives. When a child has these experiences, he has no need to seek attention through annoying or mischievous behaviors.

Parent practices that foster a sense of security within a child are those that are characterized by

- routine, procedure and system,
- consistency and continuity
- predictability
- boundaries and expectations

For example, regular expectations for bedtime, mealtime, homework, chores, and playtime contribute to a sense of

security. It is important that what you say is what you do and that you mean what you say and you say what you mean. Through practices that foster security a child experiences that she is loved, safe to be herself, that she has a place in the family, and that she can make legitimate and needed contribution that brings notice and appreciation. If mis-behavior occurs that is motivated by the goal of attention seeking, security practices serve as both remedy and re-direction.

AUTONOMY VS. POWER STRUGGLES

Standing on your own two feet and making decisions that are appropriate and useful makes a person feel self-reliant and capable. All children have a need for personal power, that is, an inner authority and a sense of respectful independence which allows them to make suitable decisions without the need of supervision. This is the meaning of autonomy. It is characterized by a sense of independence, self-reliance, self-control, decision making capability, and personal responsibility for behavior. A child who develops autonomy has no need to challenge authority or prove superiority, lash out in anger, or bully another.

Foster autonomy development through practices that are characterized by

- accountability for choices

- acceptance of logical consequences
- respectful assertiveness

- placing more emphasis on effort than on the results of an event
- the use of encouragement that is helpful, directional, empowering, and skill-related.

Under usual conditions, do nothing for your child that she can do for herself. For example, using a personal alarm clock or packing and carrying her own books to school creates a sense of independence, capability and personal power within her. By giving your child responsibilities, holding him accountable for his choices rather than

making excuses for him, helping him to practice self-control which implies boundaries, expectations and consequences, and teaching him how to assert himself in respectful ways that contribute to the family welfare, you are helping him to develop the element of autonomy. Negative control will not be an issue. And if misbehavior occurs that is motivated by the goal of control and power, sincere encouragement, enlisting help and cooperation, increasing responsibility and finding legitimate ways that your child can exert influence within the family and neighborhood will serve as both remedy and re-direction.

INITIATIVE VS. REVENGE-BASED BEHAVIOR

To be treated respectfully, justly, and fairly is a basic human need. Usually, when a child is treated in these ways she is interested in cooperating. When denied this treatment, she seeks revenge and attempts to make others feel the same hurt that she feels. For a child to invest himself in another person, group, or project he needs to believe that he is trusted to be capable of starting plans and conquering tasks and that he is treated reasonably, given consideration and recognition. A child is an active agent in creating this sense of respectability when she develops initiative. Initiative is the interior motivation to start plans and the capacity to act on the plans without the need of coaxing. Children with initiative develop a sense of direction and purpose from which comes self-respect and the recognition of others.

Parents can contribute a great deal to the development of initiative by exposing children to varied experiences so that they will recognize interests, skills, limits, and capabilities. Initiative implies the willingness to risk making a mistake. That attitude is encouraged when you

- praise ideas and process more than product
- demonstrate in your own life that mistakes are redeemable when we learn from them

- provide the necessary tools, materials, or resources to further varied interests
- permit natural consequences rather than punishment to be life-teaching.

Children will never view punishment as fair because it is reactive and appears arbitrary. Natural consequences, however, are in the control of the child; not parent-inflicted.

INDUSTRY VS. INADEQUACY OR DESPAIR

Experiencing inferiority can be depressing especially when a person has a pattern of inadequacy. All persons need to feel competent and relied upon or needed by others. They need a pattern of accomplishment, capability, skillfulness, diligence, and responsibility in order to experience themselves as competent and hopeful. The specific task is not as important as the diligence that leads to accomplishment and self-satisfaction. Industry is that identity element through which children develop the capacity to be persistent and follow through on tasks, fulfill responsibility, and create a systematic approach or method for problem solving. Children who lack a diet of industry are disappointed in themselves, feel inferior to their peers, and view themselves as helpless and hopeless.

Industry takes root by consistent practice of the following kinds of behaviors:

- steady care over time to a task, i.e., gardening, being “commissioner of family trash”, planning meal time desserts
- meeting deadlines
- finishing what you start

- managing time, instead of time managing you
- planning goals and strategies that will fulfill the goal

A child who learns to plan his work and then work his plan will create a history of productivity. Industry eliminates mis-behavior and sets a child on a path of life-long learning.

Ben Franklin said it well! “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Attentiveness to developing the identity formation elements of security, autonomy, initiative, and industry not only establishes a base for positive self-esteem by nurturing the emotional needs of children but it also is the effective remedy for misbehavior. When satisfied, emotional needs give way to life-giving behavior; when unsatisfied, misbehavior erupts.

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