

Behavior challenges

• DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

Leah entered Grandpa's living room to discover her seven-year-old son and his cousin stomping in dirt from a plant they had accidentally knocked over while chasing each other. Furious at the mess, Leah yelled at the boys, spanked her son and was upset that the children had continued to play, seemingly unaware that what they were doing was wrong.

Sarah was becoming increasingly concerned and angry. Her eight-year-old daughter should have been home already from school. They were definitely going to be late for her chug. She finally walked in, not apologetic about being late, cradling her lunch box in which she had lovingly placed a snail that she found on the road.

These stories reflect typical parental complaints. When a child does something "terrible" in his or her parents' eyes, the parents are angry, exasperated and may yell or hit their child. Often upset, afterward they wonder what their children were thinking, how they could have been so thoughtless and disrespectful, and what they as parents could do about it.

Smiling at these stories, I'm unperturbed by these typical children and wonder how I can have the parents see their little criminals and their crimes differently.

When our oldest child was three years old, he and his friend were having a play date while his mom and I were nursing our newborn babies in a nearby room. Hearing giggles, we were delighted that the boys were playing so well together. After 30 minutes, the other mom went in to offer the boys a snack, only to discover the children joyfully smearing petroleum jelly all over a piece of antique furniture.

We boring, stressed, inflexible adults no longer see the world through [a child's] eyes

What young child doesn't enjoy stepping on leaves, or into puddles? Through a child's eyes, a snail, a new game or a jar of goop are all amazing. We boring, stressed, inflexible adults no longer see the world through those eyes, as we're in a hurry, rushing to get somewhere and don't share their sense of wonderment. A leisurely walk with a child can be a special experience. Children unencumbered by adult norms ask great questions. In the examples above, the children's behavior was completely age appropriate. Adults often fail to see or enjoy their creativity, imagination and joy. Sometimes it's difficult for adults when children behave like children (and all the more so when adults behave like children). Even with close supervision, curious, sweet children nonetheless get into trouble. If it's okay to mark on a small piece of paper, why wouldn't it be okay to color on a wall, which has infinitely more space?

HERE ARE a few thoughts to help you get through those tough days.

1. Appreciate your child's creativity by trying to see the world through their eyes. Children aren't always attentive to adult concerns, such as the integrity of property, time, safety, sanitation or health. It's your job to teach what's acceptable and why. Sometimes this



WHAT YOUNG child doesn't enjoy stepping on leaves, or into puddles? (OakleyOriginals/Flickr)

will only happen after the initial damage was done.

2. If you discover that your child has done something wrong and you're upset, stop, take a deep breath and allow yourself time to calm down while redirecting his/her behavior. Your goal is to respond with intentionality, not simply to react.

3. Recognize that whenever you scream or hit your child, it's likely you're not responding intentionally, but are out of control. Stop, take a step back, walk away, breathe and count to 10 until you're able to calmly cope.

4. The message you want to give your child is that a specific action or behavior is unacceptable and why, and that there are alternative, appropriate behaviors. For example, "We don't hit, hitting hurts. We talk about what makes us sad or angry. If you hit, David could get hurt, hit you back, and may not want to play with you again." You want your child to understand that all actions have consequences, (both good and bad) and to think before he acts. Impulsive children often act before they think. You also want to develop your child's ability to be empathic. "How do you think they may feel in a similar situation?" or "How would you feel?" often provide prompts for reviewing their actions.

5. While I define discipline as teaching a child appropriate behavior, there are times when natural consequences of their behavior aren't enough and a child needs to be punished – often through losing a privilege. It's never acceptable to hit a child, which teaches, among other things, that hitting is an acceptable way to problem-solve.

6. Punishment should fit the crime and ideally be meted out close in time to the crime. Nonetheless, sometimes you'll need to wait for everyone to calm down, discuss what happened, and only then determine what the consequence should be. If you punish hastily because you're angry or upset, your punishment will likely be excessive. Worse, you may ultimately retract it. I often like to involve the child, hearing their suggestions for how they should be pun-

ished. The child that made a mess of grandpa's room may choose to write a note or draw a picture for grandpa, or perhaps do a chore to earn money, or take from his savings, to show he's being accountable for helping clean it up.

7. Any dangerous behavior should be stopped immediately. If your child runs off, you must go after him (children under three often won't come to you just because you called their name). Yelling or hitting is not the way to teach your child to hold your hand, but rather teaches him to copy your behavior.

8. A child himself is never "a bad child." His behavior may be unacceptable. Your relationship with him has the power to help him feel good. Negative words such as "abrupt, impetuous, stubborn and nosey" should be reframed as "quick, determined, persistent and curious." If you cannot catch your child doing at least five "good" things in any given day, then you are not looking hard enough for good behavior.

9. Parenting a young child requires being able to make up games on the spot. "Let's see how quickly you can..." "Do you want to wear this or that?" Choice is important to children. Make sure that either choice is acceptable to you.

10. When children are tired, hungry or unwell, their behavior may deteriorate.

11. Never be afraid to apologize. Children need to know that you, too, are human and make mistakes.

12. Once you hit or yell at your child, it becomes easier to do it again the next time. Notice your triggers and take control now.

Play is a child's opportunity for exploration and creativity. Share in his excitement and you'll be generously rewarded. ■

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