



## "I was a Better Parent Before I had Kids!"

An Interactive 6-session Parenting Series exclusively for parents of our preschool with School Psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Dobkowski.



Parent Enrichment Program Session 5 Discussion Notes

## Topic: "Challenging Behavior in Children: Understanding, Preventing, & Responding Effectively."

This discussion was led by School Psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Dobkowski on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014.

The discussion notes below were written by Dr. Dobkowski.

### I. Introduction: Removal of the "myths"

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#### "My child is just being manipulative:"

- When a child goes against our wishes, we often explain the behavior by saying that the child is just being manipulative.
- A child's misbehavior is often designed to get their parent's attention. The manipulation is rarely conscious on the child's part.
- He is not thinking, "I think I will get some attention from my mom by driving her crazy. He may be thinking, I get attention when I do this, and I like attention."
- Parents often unwittingly reinforce problematic behavior and turn it into a pattern (we accidentally reward negative behavior by increasing our attention towards the child who is misbehaving).

#### Learn and accept your child's temperament:

- Many families have a child whose talents, tempo, and needs differ from what is assumed to be "normal." Parents need to raise their tolerance for differences.
- Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas found a wide range of "normal variations" in children's natures that begin as early as infancy:
  1. Emotional intensity
  2. Persistence-some children are easily redirected to a new activity, while others refuse to cooperate
  3. Flexibility-some children adapt easily to change while others reject anything new
  4. Sensitivity-some children are highly sensitive to loud noises, smells, rough or soft textures
  5. Energy and mood
  6. Sociability
- Too often parents interpret a child's behavior as rebelliousness when in fact he/she is being true to their nature.

#### Self-blame:

- The common assumption is that children are explosive because their parents are passive, permissive, or inconsistent disciplinarians.
- Science offers no conclusive evidence in support of blaming yourself as the dominant cause of your child's behavior. In most situations we cannot attribute a child's challenging behavior to a solitary cause.
- Taking the blame does not help change a child's misbehavior
- It is helpful to distinguish between original causes (how a behavior came to be a part of the child's repertoire) and current causes (what triggers and guides the behavior right now)
- Instead of focusing on original causes, parents can identify and work on current causes. Meaning we can treat a problem without necessarily knowing everything about its cause.

## II. Why do children misbehave?

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- 🌳 Certain children lack in some very crucial skill areas: *flexibility, frustration tolerance, and problem solving.*
- 🌳 Children do not choose to explode any more than a child would choose to have a reading disability.
- 🌳 A child's challenging behaviors reflect a "developmental delay" in the skills of flexibility, frustration tolerance, and problem solving. Children do well if they can! If they could do well, they would do well. If a child could handle disagreements, plans being changed, limit setting, and demands being placed, they would handle these challenges adaptively.
- 🌳 The most important thing that a parent can do to help an explosive child is to understand why he is explosive in the first place. If a child is delayed in reading, the first step is to figure out why the child is struggling and teach the skills he lacks. The same approach holds true for dealing with challenging behaviors. Figure out the why (i.e., difficulty handling transitions, difficulty considering a range of solutions to a problem, difficulty considering the likely outcomes or consequences of actions, difficulty expressing concerns or needs in words, etc.) and teach the skills the child lacking.

## III. Collaborative Problem Solving:

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Plan A: The imposition of will

The paradox is that the children who do not have the skills to deal well with demands that are being placed on them generally receive more Plan A.

Plan C: Dropping some expectations completely-Temporarily dropping low-priority expectations can help the child and parent become more "available" to work on higher-priority unsolved problems.

Plan B: Collaborative Problem Solving

- 🌳 **Empathy Step-** Gathering information from the child to help better understand his concern or perspective on a specified problem.  
"I have noticed that you have not been too enthusiastic about going to school lately, what is going on?"
- 🌳 **Define the Problem-**It is important to have the parent communicate their concern or perspective on the same problem. It is very common for parents, in an effort to get the problem resolved, to move past their concerns and immediately focus on solutions. This leads to a *power struggle* or a *dueling of solutions*.
- 🌳 **Invitation-** Parent and child discuss and agree on a solution that will address each other's concerns. You are solving the problem *with* the child rather than *for* the child ("let's think about how we can solve this problem").

## IV. The Positive Opposite: Reinforced Practice & Shaping

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- Instead of thinking of your child's behavior in terms of what you do not want, start thinking in terms of the behavior that you do want-*positive opposite*.
- Reinforced practice is an effective way to build up a behavior that you want. The idea is to provide the child with several opportunities to do the behavior and get rewarded for it.
- Even the most challenging goals, can be met if you think about shaping behavior in discrete steps. Success should be reinforced as you go, always looking out for and praising any aspect of behavior that comes close to the desired goal.
- ABC Formula:

- a. Antecedent: Everything that comes before a behavior including the way a parent models a behavior for the child, the instructions you give, and the context that sets up the behavior.
- b. Behavior: Identify the positive opposites, shape a behavior by breaking it down into more doable steps, and give the child more repeated opportunities to do the correct behavior.
- c. Consequences: Praise, attention, extinction (removing attention).