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The Use of Behavior Management to Increase the Developmental Potential of Your Child

by

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Raising a child is one of the hardest jobs in life. It is arguably also one of the most important ones most of us will ever have. However this difficult and important job is one we enter into without any significant preparation and almost certainly without any formalized training. Indeed, it is no wonder that many parents feel overwhelmed and inadequate by the demands of parenting. And yet some parents and family units manage extremely well. So well that it is natural to wonder what is it about those families or those parent-child relationships that make the whole system work as well as it does.

Studying and mastering the techniques of effective parenting are crucial for the well-being of the child because parenting is one of the very few variables that shape children's lives over which we have any direct and meaningful control. We cannot control our child's genetic make-up (once they are conceived); and we have very little immediate control over their socio-economic status and the broader social and educational context in which they are raised; but we do have direct and significant control over the family environment in which they grow and develop. This family environment - rather than being insignificant to the child's future, has a pervasive and life-long impact on the child. There are numerous studies that show that parenting style and child-rearing techniques have significant effects on self-esteem, academic success, and social competence.[i] While we cannot review these studies here, the evidence is telling that children who are raised properly have greater independence, are more successful, and have richer lives for the simple reason that inappropriate behavior has dramatic social consequences on the part of peers and adults that affect the child throughout his or her life. The implications from these studies are clear: good parenting does not simply make your life easer, it makes your child's life better.

What is the essence of skillful parenting? In essence it is raising a child in a warm and contingent environment. By warm we mean the frequent use of demonstrative physical and verbal affection. By contingent we mean raising a child in an environment where he or she is held accountable for his or her actions. In this essay we shall try to show how to create a warm and contingent environment through the use of behavior management.

Skillful behavior management is productive for all children no matter how gifted, how loving, or how well-behaved. However, the "difficult" child, the child with special needs or the child with emotional problems present a special problem for the parent and the educator. The presence of these difficulties renders the already Herculean task of child-rearing especially difficult. This is due – not simply to the physical and financial demands of the disabilities – but the psycho-social demands as well. Because of their children's problems, parents are often led to treat them differently, setting up a cycle of inappropriate parenting routines that often result in concomitant behavioral problems. These problems exacerbate the already stressful parenting environment. Moreover, and this is the true significance of behavior problems, they can significantly influence the developmental potential of the child. We have found that successfully dealing with behavioral problems both in the school and home can measurably reduce the stress in the home on the one hand, and accelerate the developmental growth of the child on the other. This is because social and familial experiences have a significant impact on the child's development.

Take as an example, a child with an expressive language disorder or a learning disability who is often frustrated by his or her disability. This often, in turn, leads to a cycle of escalating, inappropriate behaviors

such as defiance, non-compliance, tantruming and aggression. These behaviors once established in the behavioral repertoire of the child, continue to influence his or her development because school and family usually accommodate to the deficits by "altering" the life-experiences of the child. For example, they avoid or reduce the number of occasions that they take their child out or they restrict the circle of friends to whom the child is exposed. The family and school environment can systematically fail to challenge the child in academic and cognitive activities due to learning style or behavioral resistances. All these factors ultimately have an influence on cognitive development, learning styles and academic achievement.

We are developmental psychologists engaged in the practice of behavior therapy and family therapy. Our clients are children ranging in disability from profound developmental disabilities to "gifted but spoiled brat syndrome." Over the years we have seen many family and institutional dynamics that dramatically affect the outcome of these children. Certain commonalities emerge over and over and are related to ultimate outcome. In studying these cases as well as the extensive literature on child-rearing, we have come up with certain patterns of parenting that seem to work and others that do not work as well. We have encountered many situations that are characterized by some form of non-optimal child management strategies and techniques that we feel significantly limit or reduce the child's ultimate developmental potential. One can think of these as "management errors." In this paper we describe nine such "errors" along with nine guiding principles of behavioral intervention. In describing these errors, we sketch out an approach that we believe works better for all children irrespective of whether they have any particular disability. This is because proper behavior management simply moves a child further along the developmental continuum. There is a common misconception that Behavior Management is a way of controlling behavior - of making robots out of children or adults. In our view Behavior Management is not about controlling behavior it is about promoting development.

I. THE NINE CLASSIC ERRORS OF BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

Error # 1: Adjusting the environment around the deficit of the child

One of the most common situations we encounter is a pattern where the family environment is "adapted around" the deficits of the child. While some adaptations are of course necessary, (a child with cerebral palsy cannot be “made to walk”) many are not and serve only to perpetuate and reinforce incompetencies that should be aggressively challenged so as to push the potential of the child's developmental limits.

For example, we have been involved with many children who have an expressive language disability who are often raised in an environment where language becomes progressively less important as the family compensates for the deficit by imaginative and creative understanding for their children. The irony is that many of these children should be reared in environments in which language is more important - an environment in which language is figuratively pulled out of the child. Children with special needs of course require special care and attention but often this care can be applied in such a way as to reinforce and promote the special need rather than assist the child in optimizing his or her developmental potential.

This problem is not restricted to major developmental areas such as language. Compensating for the deficit of a child can take many forms. One such common and insidious form is "over baby-proofing" one's home. While it is not only desirable but necessary to protect children from accidents that can cause them or others harm (such as covering wall sockets, locking away poisons, etc.), there is no such argument in favor of "locking" the refrigerator because your child "won't keep out of it" or putting toys out of reach - because they make too much noise, or the kids are fighting over them. We have seen many families where the number and selection of toys that a sibling is allowed to play with is controlled by the tantrum reaction of another sibling. In these situations, the children's deficit (not being able to share or refrain from an activity that their parents don't want them to engage in), is being perpetuated and strengthened. Since it is not possible to "baby-proof" the world parents need to teach their children how to deal with life as opposed to a cocoon. Don't lock the

refrigerator; put the refrigerator lock in the child's mind. That's the one lock that can't be picked!

A child who does not how to properly play with a toy, or a child who cannot refrain from going into a place where he has been forbidden to go and even a child who has difficulty expressing himself; should be helped to overcome these deficits - not by avoiding difficult situations or compensating for them but rather by confronting the deficits - "head on" - and helping the child overcome them. This leads to the second great error of child management, avoiding confrontation.

Error # 2: Avoiding Confrontation (why redirection is almost always a mistake)

In the first error we discussed the issue of not adjusting the environment around the deficit of the child. Another form this takes is to avoid situations that are likely to provoke confrontations with a child's behavioral problem.

Consider the following scenarios:

If a given child does not get along with his cousin, you avoid situations where they will be together.

If taking your child to the supermarket is a "nightmare," then you avoid taking him and wait until you can go alone. You hope that as he gets older he'll stop having to touch everything and not wander off.

If your child hates being separated from you when you take him to a friend's house, you stay with him or you don't go back.

If you're child is walking on the couch with his shoes, you pick him up and put him in front of his toys.

If one child steals a toy from another, you try to distract the disappointed child with another toy.

If your child acts out in restaurants, you avoid restaurants and hope that in a year or so, he child will "outgrow" his problem.

Your son is verbally abusive but you know he really doesn't mean what he says.

The implicit child-rearing theory at work here, is that the child has a problem. Sooner or later, he'll figure out that it's counter-productive and then he'll change. This is a form of passive resignation. Very occasionally, a child may "outgrow" a particular inappropriate behavior (e.g., an 18-month-old's biting). But this occurs over geologic time! Who has the time to wait? And realize that by waiting, you deprive your child of rich and varied life experiences. When you avoid situations because of your expectation of your child’s inappropriate behavior, it is your child who ultimately loses. Furthermore, most children will in fact not "outgrow" inappropriate behavior. Indeed, their inappropriate behavior (e.g., not sharing, tantruming, acting out in restaurants, etc.) becomes a "style" that they generalize to other situations and children. A well-known law of child development is that the longer one waits to intervene, the more difficult the intervention will ultimately be.

One of the most common forms of avoiding confrontation is through the use of what is called "redirection." Redirection is a strategy employed in almost all school settings and most homes. Redirection is meant to take a child who is misbehaving and interest them in another activity that is more appropriate. There are two fundamental problems with redirection. They result in what we call the redirection boomerang where the behavior comes back to bite you. The first problem with redirection is that from a strictly technical sense, when redirection seems to actually work, it is because the activity that you redirect the child to is more

reinforcing (rewarding) than the activity that prompted the redirection. This then functions to reward the very activity that you want to eliminate. Secondly, redirection does nothing about the behavior that you want eliminated! If a child steals a toy or does not want to share, then this is a problem. Redirection does not address the real problem which impacts directly on the child's socialization skills. You are doing a disservice to your child by not helping him learn. Why not help the child to learn how to share?

We take the proactive view that if your child has a behavior problem and it restricts your child's opportunities, then for your child's sake, help him to solve his problem. Don't avoid confrontation, seek it. How else is the child to overcome his behavioral problem? And there is no time like the present. The longer you delay, the harder it will be to resolve. Inappropriate behavior grows something like hair. From one day to the next, it might not seem that your hair is growing, but month to month it is quite apparent. Tomorrow will be just a "little" bit harder than today, but over time, the momentum of inappropriate behavior and personality style grows ever more powerful and irreversible.

Error #3: Punishment used as retribution instead of rehabilitation. Punishment should be feedback.

How does one confront the deficit head-on?: Through the judicious use of positive and negative consequences (i.e., reinforcements (rewards) and punishments). Rewards and punishments are part of all of our and our children's lives. It is impossible to design an environment that does not have some punitive features. Psychologists define punishments and rewards in a technical (and circular) sense. If a behavior is followed by an event and the behavior's frequency subsequently declines, then the event was a punishment. If on the other hand, the frequency increases, then the event was reinforcing (rewarding). Punishments and rewards are defined simply by their effects or consequences. Because of this, what a parent might think of as punitive or rewarding might not be at all to the child. The only way to tell is to observe whether the behavior maintains itself, increases, or decreases. If the behavior persists or increases, then something is rewarding it. A classic school-based example of a potential "non-punitive" punishment is sending a misbehaving child to the principal's office where they escape a class assignment and are often given errands to do in the office. In the home, the most common non-punitive punishment is telling a child "No" or "stop that!" These commands may momentarily arrest or suspend the behavior in question (e.g., walking on the couch with shoes), but they will almost never reduce the likelihood that the behavior will recur.

Certainly not all of children's behavior should be allowed to continue unconstrained. To the extent that limits are needed, punishment is a useful and often necessary technique for teaching children where limits must be set - whether it is teaching them not to hit other children or grab their toys or run into a street, etc. Punishment in our view is simply a vehicle for learning. It is never meant to hurt nor to "get back at" a child.

Unfortunately, punishment is often delivered by parents and teachers in a mode that is akin to "compensatory damages." The child is punished "to pay him back" or made to do something in the form of restitution. While restitution can be appropriate for some behaviors (e.g., when the child messes-up his room in a tantrum or rips up things), we believe that the real point of punishment should be to teach. There are some non-intuitive implications of this. If punishment is meant to teach then there is no reason to withhold it in appropriate circumstances. What those circumstances are and how to maximize the effectiveness of punishment and rewards are discussed below.

Error # 4: Waiting too long and punishing too much

How often have you found yourself in a situation where you have told your child to do something or to stop doing something? Often, they continue and you remind them again to stop (or start). Time goes on and the non-compliance persists. Finally, in exasperation, you yell, "I've told you ten times to pick up your toys and

you still haven't done it. No TV tonight!"

This illustrates a situation that we see repeatedly. If there is one mistake parents make in punishment it is that they wait too long and then punish too much. The problem with this strategy is that it sends a mixed message to the child: sometimes you mean what you say (e.g., the tenth time), but most of the time you don't. But how is the child to know which time, this time is - since some days you react decisively on the second or third time and other days, the tenth? What this does is reward the child for resisting some amount of time - since you almost never react on the first time. The first casualty of parenting is timing. Everyone feels so guilty that they hold back punishment. But hesitation is a lethal mistake. The real cruelty lies in being unclear - in not rewarding and punishing your child when you should. We often hear the question of whether punishment is emotionally harmful to the child. The answer is that what is emotionally damaging to children is unpredictability. We are not saying "be mean." We are saying, "use discipline." Never, ever stop being a nurturing, loving parent.

A good rule of thumb to follow is that if you find yourself getting angrier and angrier with your child, and you have not intervened other than to tell him to stop, don't blame him for continuing, blame yourself! You are at least partially to blame. Because by not intervening on the first instance, you are fueling the behavior you want to eliminate. Ask yourself, from the child's perspective, why should he stop? Any child will seek to extend the scope of a desirable activity. That is his God-given right and need. It is the parent's responsibility to channel these needs into appropriate areas.

When you finally do punish a child in the above scenario, you are really punishing the several non-compliances that occurred before. Because of this, you tend to use a larger punishment than you would have, had you intervened earlier. But this creates its own set of problems. What often happens with punishments that are too big is that the child resents the magnitude of the punishment and tends to ignore the relationship that you are trying to draw between his behavior and the consequence. Children respond to the inequity of the punishment rather than to the lesson of the punishment ("I was going to clean up my room, later!"). Because the punishment is unfair the authority is "illegitimate."

There is a second reason that waiting too long and punishing too much is inefficient. This leads to our fifth "management error."

Error # 5: Non-proportional and non-incremental consequences (Think small!)

There is a common misconception that punishments and rewards need to be "big" to be effective. Big, however is not always better, it is in fact usually worse. There are two major problems with big punishments and rewards. One, they take much too much time and two, they are delivered "out of context;" that is, they are usually delivered in situations that are usually different from the ones that prompted them. Effective punishments and rewards (that teach) should be given quickly, take as little time as possible, and not interrupt the flow of behavior. This is especially important for young children or children with disabilities. As the child matures cognitively, the requirements of time become less important.

Generally when you punish a child for a "series" or history of bad behavior, you are not maximizing the usefulness of the punishment you choose (e.g., time-out). Small, minimal punishments delivered relentlessly (i.e., frequently and consistently) are far more effective than large, belated punishments. This is because you have more opportunities to teach the child just what aspect of his behavior you are objecting to. Let us do away with the fiction that time-outs should be given in one-minute-per-year-of-age increments. Five, one-minute time-outs are much more effective than one, five-minute time-out, because you have four more opportunities to teach. And remember, that is the purpose of punishments - to teach. By not punishing, early and often (and minimally), you are depriving your child of valuable learning opportunities.

Error #6: Rewards too big (and ineffective) or non-existent. Rewards should be feedback.

Just as punishments are often distributed in an ineffective manner, so too are rewards. Rewards are what increase the frequency of behaviors. Unfortunately, parents often confuse doing nice things with rewards. Doing nice things to your children (taking your children to McDonald's®, going to the park, or beach, etc.) is one of the responsibilities of all parents. These are important and essential for healthy development, but they are not terribly effective rewards in the technical sense. That is, they do not increase the frequencies of the behaviors that they are intended to. Just as parents wait too long and punish too much, they tend to wait too long and reward too much or not at all. The problem is that the behaviors that should be rewarded (such as playing quietly alone for five minutes, not touching anything in the aisles for one-minute, playing nicely with a sibling for two minutes, etc.) are not normally consequented. Parent will usually say something like "if you're good in the store, I'll get you a treat after," or "play nicely, this morning and then maybe we can go the park;" or "you had a good day, we'll go out to dinner." The problem here is that the time-scales are all way off and the rewards are relatively ineffective because they are out of the context of the behavior. A child who goes out to dinner because he had a good day will not necessarily have a good day the next day. Parents need to reward their children for specific instances of "good" behavior, not summary behavior over the span of hours (e.g., "you were very good this morning").

If all parents did was to over-reward or reward ineffectively, the consequences would not be terrible. Children need to grow up in a positive and happy environment. The problem is that as a result of over-rewarding; we have a tendency to "under-reward." That is, we do not reward children when we should.

There are at least three reasons why children are under-rewarded. First and most obviously, is that we simply do not notice good behavior. We take it for granted. When a child plays nicely with his or her siblings, or when he or she plays independently, or when he or she does not do something bad, we often accept the behavior without comment. Bad behavior is by definition noticeable. It's in our face and we react accordingly. Parents have to be vigilant in noticing specific instances of appropriate behavior and respond (minimally) as they occur.

The second reason that parents can often under-reward is that even when they do notice good behavior, many parents can't help but "hold grudges" against their child's recent bad behavior. This is especially true in situations where a parent has a difficult child. Difficult children "push" their parents and there are frequent struggles. In these cases parents understandably "resent" a child with whom they have been struggling for the past three hours. When the child is "good" for a few minutes, the parent does not respond. But children need positive feedback, too. They need to know just what specifically you appreciate about their behavior. Just as with punishments, you should not count on summary statements such as: "You've been good all morning." When you indeed do not "feel" like rewarding your child, we have a simple answer: fake it!

Third and finally, parents can under-reward because they simply do not want "to rock the boat." Parents often feel that a difficult child who is finally playing by himself or is quiet, should not be disturbed - because it will disrupt the very activity that they want to encourage. Going up to a child and giving them a hug for playing nicely can and does disrupt the activity, but it is necessary if we want that behavior to increase in frequency. We cannot depend on the intrinsically rewarding aspects of the activity to be sufficiently motivating by themselves.

The problem with under and over-rewarding is profound because rewards are one of the motive forces of appropriate development. Indeed, you should always try to reward much more than you punish. Punishments hold the line on inappropriate behavior but they do very little to directly improve the child's appropriate behavior. It is the reward axis that promotes behavior and moves the child further on the developmental continuum. The point of behavior management is not simply to achieve obedience but rather to enhance development in the very broadest sense.

Parents must keep in mind that it is punishments that make rewards valuable but it is rewards that make punishments effective. This is the yin and yang of child rearing. We sometimes liken this process to playing an accordion. An accordion must be both pushed and pulled to produce music. In this sense, behavioral development is similar. Pushing is punishment and pulling is reinforcement. You cannot maximize a child's development by depending on the child's intrinsic "pushing and pulling." You as the parents must also push and pull your child.

Error #7: Underestimating the potential of your child (or there are more gold medalists than there are gold medals)

One of the great challenges of child-rearing is setting appropriate expectations for our children. It is in this area that knowledge of child development can assist us in choosing appropriate standards of behavior. Obviously, two-year-olds cannot be held to the same standards as six-year-olds. A considerable amount of stress at home is however generated from the desire of parents for their children to be "more capable than they are." Indeed, this is often the source of spousal conflict. While not wanting to minimize this problem, our clinical experience has been more concerned with the opposite - and more insidious problem: parents not expecting their children to be able to accomplish certain tasks. This is especially true in families that have children with special needs. But the problem of not holding children to realistic standards is a pervasive and serious problem in parenting for all children. Consider the following scenarios:

I try to feed her fruits and vegetables, but she just won’t eat them!

Driving with the kids is such a pain. All they ever do is fight. It's gotten so that I don't take them places if I can avoid it.

My six-year-old son has a very poor attention span. He can't sit through dinner without getting up. We can't have a discussion with him because he keeps changing the subject and wandering off.

My daughter is just six-years old. She can't be expected to do chores!

My three-year-old can't seem to play by herself. She keeps wanting me to play with her.

My three-year-old is too young to know how to share.

My toddler is too young to sleep alone.

My two-year-old is too young to be toilet trained; he doesn't show any interest in it yet.

He's too young to...

He can't help it.

And so on. Parents are very good at recognizing where problems are. They will tell us that they wish that their child would be able to do "x." The reason that they give for their child not being able to do x is almost always an "endogenous" factor - something that comes from within the child. Either he's just built that way or he has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or that his temperament is such and such or that he is extremely shy, or that he has a language disorder, and any number of reasons for the behavioral deficit. In most cases, as clinicians, we are left with the impression that parents are systematically underestimating the abilities of their children. This is because they are generalizing from what the child does do to what the child can do. Psychologists call this the "performance/competence dichotomy." What we do is our performance level (e.g., our I.Q. score, or our grades) what we can do is our competence (e.g., our basic, raw

intelligence). For any number of reasons, an athlete might not make it to the Olympics; but that does not mean that they are not capable of winning a medal. In our clinical practice, we follow a basic tenet: Performance almost always underestimates competence. In other words, what a child does do is an underestimate of what they are capable of doing - if they were just "pushed" a little.

We believe that there is a profound analogy between behavior and physical skill. Much of moral behavior has to be "practiced" by the child before it becomes internalized. That is one of the responsibilities of parents: to transmit and teach moral behavior such as the importance of sharing, turn-taking, attention to others, non-self indulgence, independence, etc.

Imagine that you ask your child to do some "push-ups." All you say is: "Do as many as you can." Let's say that your child does five. Do you really think that this is the most that he or she can do? Of course it isn't! We virtually never perform at our maximum level from internal motivation. It is only when the demands of the situation exceed our own; that we can surpass what we have done before. If you offer your child a trip to Disney World if he does six push-ups, the odds are that he will. On the other hand, if you asked him to do 20, then the likelihood is that he would fail. The same is true of behavioral skills such as eating a whole meal while sitting at the table; or staying quiet during a church sermon, or playing ten minutes alone, and so on. Whatever the child does do, is the minimum standard to which they should be held. We do not want to hold too high a standard such that the child is doomed to failure (i.e., 20 push-ups) but we do want to hold them to a higher standard than they currently operate at. This problem of moderate challenge is part of the critical art of parenting: knowing when to push, and how high to push for.

The value of "pushing" (or pulling) a child beyond his developmental level is that it is normally the only way to both accelerate development as well as increase the ultimate developmental level. This is acutely true of children with special needs but even children without special needs benefit from increased social competence which in turn impacts their lives in many ways. There is a large body of evidence that moderately challenging tasks are more interesting, more enjoyable, and remembered better throughout the life-span (from infancy to adulthood).

One of the most common questions that we encounter in our clinical practice is how can we "make" a child do such and such, if he can't help the way he is. There is any number of reasons that we behave the way that we do. This is true of children as well as adults. But reasons are not excuses! Reasons are always interesting to know and to study - indeed sometimes they are truly fascinating. But rarely are reasons for behavior very helpful in changing the behavior. And we must rid ourselves of the fiction that they are somehow excuses for behavior. Imagine that you are in your car and that you have a blinding migraine, and you run a red light. A policeman happens to see you and he pulls you over. You tell him that the reason that you ran the red light is that you had this splitting head-ache and that you didn't see the red light. He says, "Sorry about your head-ache, here's your ticket." Life is tough. Sometimes we have to drive with headaches. The same is true of development. We have to deal with life on a minute to minute basis - not just when we are "at our best." It is certainly true that the ADHD child has more difficulty concentrating on his work than other children. It is certainly true that the dyslexic child has greater difficulty deciphering his letters than other children. If we can devise ways to assist them (and there are many such ways) then that is wonderful, but do not let the disability excuse itself! The bottom line is that they still have to learn to read and they must learn to pay attention and more importantly, no matter how well they do now, they are capable of doing just a little bit better. Hold them to that standard.

Take by way of illustration, teaching a young child to swim. Almost every child starts out by fearing water. We as parents know that swimming and water can be wonderful things. It is important for the child to learn this skill because his life will be the better for it. Do we wait until the child decides he is not afraid of water? How long will that take? And think of all the lost opportunities. Or do we push the child to realize that water is a terrific place to be? It is no different in many other areas of development. Many children are not good judges of when they are ready to advance to the next level - whether it be toilet training or dressing

themselves or sleeping alone or not eating with their hands, or sharing their toys or sitting quietly at the table.

This general law is true not only of the child with cognitive or physical disabilities but the child with emotional or behavioral problems as well. Time after time, we are presented with the fact that some constitutional factor is the "cause" for a particular problem (an anxiety, a tic, an obsession, etc.). And yet by making children take ownership for their actions - regardless of the causes is one of the most effective ways we have of eliminating the cause. In other words, by controlling the extrinsic consequences of behaviors, we can change the intrinsic motivations for engaging in the behaviors.

This point is tellingly made in a recent study on Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (Baxter et al., 1992). This study compared the treatment of OCD patients given either behavior therapy or Prozac®. Two major findings emerged. First, behavior therapy was as successful as drug-therapy. Secondly, and more importantly, patients of both groups experienced the same neurophysiologic change in their brain chemistry as measured by subsequent PET scans. That is, the behavior therapy patients' brains were altered in the same way as if they had taken Prozac® (specifically, reduced activity in the caudate nucleus). This is a compelling example of how extrinsic (psychological) factors and behavioral consequences can dramatically influence the physiology of the brain. The patient with OCD will tell you that he "can't help" washing his hands over and over. The cause of the behavior is certainly in some sense in the neurochemistry of his brain. Yet we can alter the neurochemistry by stopping the behavior. If it works in these cases, it will work in others as well.[ii]

Error #8: Taking control away from the child

One of the most common concerns that we encounter is that the confrontational and controlling strategies that we employ somehow take control away from the child. In fact that is just the opposite of what happens. As we stated in the introduction, proper behavior management is not about controlling behavior it is about promoting behavior. By controlling the consequences of a child's behavior, you are teaching the child to take control. Rather than removing power, you are empowering him. Good behavior management is the beginning of self-control and self-efficacy. This is because your responses (both positive and negative) become predictable. More importantly the child comes to appreciate that it is his behavior that is turning on your responses. We sometimes tell parents to deliver punishments in a "mechanical fashion," as if they were just robots responding to the commands of the child. The child is turning "on" the punishment, you are simply an agent ("stop making me put you in the corner"). As the child comes to anticipate your responses, an "inner voice" inhibits his actions: he stops himself! Self-restraint is the beginning of self-efficacy.

Let us illustrate this point by way of a trivial example. Imagine that you have a young child who is blowing on a whistle. After a while, it starts to annoy you. You ask the child to stop. He continues. You repeat your request. He continues. You know the drill. At some point, in exasperation, you remove the whistle by force and put it out of reach. The whistling has stopped! But what has been learned? The child is not whistling because he cannot not because he chooses not to. This is the strategy that removes control from the child. What we would do is punish the child after the first request - minimally! Then we would give the whistle back and say, "now don't whistle." If the whistle repeated, we would repeat the mild punishment (e.g., a 30 second time-out), and so on, ad nauseam. At some point (and incidentally, our record is nine times), the child will stop whistling but - (and here's the rub) still have the opportunity to whistle. He then chooses to self-restrain. The control is now in him - not us. The child has made a behavioral advance. Preventing a child from misbehaving is like treating alcoholism with prison. A cured alcoholic must be able to refrain from drinking while having the opportunity to drink or there has been no cure.

Error # 9: The dilemma of Judo vs. Karate

With many of the behavioral problems that we encounter we often deal with a dilemma of whether to quickly eliminate a problem or to go more slowly and gradually. We refer to this question as the "Karate vs.

Judo problem." Karate is primarily an offensive art - a way of decisively attacking an opponent. For many behavioral problems such as aggression, defiance, verbal abuse, and active non-compliance, we recommend a Karate strategy as described above and below. There are many situations, however, where less invasive strategies can be implemented. In Judo one depends on the momentum of one's opponents to be able to "throw" them. In behavior management we depend on the "developmental" momentum of the child to help us in achieving success. For instance a child who is a severely picky eater, can be pushed into eating more foods but can also be "coaxed" using a variety of "Judo" strategies such as having him help in meal preparation, making finger-food variants of unwanted foods with dips, designing faces with different vegetables, etc. At the risk of pushing the metaphor too far, many parents err in choosing "Judo" when they should use "Karate" and vice versa.

The choice of a Karate vs. a Judo strategy often hinges on the developmental significance of the inappropriate behavior. We are primarily concerned with behaviors that act as "friction" to normal developmental growth. For these behaviors we generally choose a confrontational approach. For some children, self-help skills such as toileting and dressing might be priority issues, for others, it might be aggression or inattention to task.

II. RULES OF EFFECTIVE PUNISHMENT AND REWARDS

If these then are the "errors" in behavior management, what then is the "right way?" Below we list some "rules of the road that have proved clinically effective for us. These rules are based on many of the issues that we have just raised. Of course there is no one right way to raise children. There are any number of ways. Some ways work better than others for some children and do not work so well for children in the very same family. We are confident however that the strategies sketched out above and the operating principles sketched out below chart a reasonable course.

Rule # 1: Be selective.

Do not attempt to change you child overnight and to "cure" him of all of his behavioral problems at once. You will go crazy and so will your child. This will limit your efficacy. Prioritize! Take some time and consider: what are the issues that serve as "frictional variables" to your child's development? What are the things that are holding him back both in terms of his socializations, his academic success, and his emotional well-being. Choose a few behavioral examples of these issues and commit yourself to going "after" them - full force. These are the target behaviors. For the time being, commit yourself to only responding to them. You can address other areas later. Never get into a battle that you are not prepared to win. Because if you do lose, then you know that the next time you do battle, your child will be just a little bit stronger than he was the last time. It never gets easier.

Rule # 2: Be vigilant.

If the issue is important (and by rule 1, it is), then you need to notice and respond to the behavioral instances of the priority issues (i.e., the target behaviors). This means look for opportunities to punish or reward appropriately. Remember, your goal is to teach. You need to give positive and negative feedback to your child. This might mean rewarding and punishing your child for a behavior 20 times in an hour.

Rule # 3: Be swift.

In behavioral management, timing is everything. The quicker you respond, the less you have to respond. While it is true that life will always throw you curve balls and sometimes you will be unable to respond swiftly, the swifter you respond, the easier the child will learn the relationship that you are trying to make.

Rule # 4: Be minimal.

Punishments and rewards that take time, take time away from teaching. Minimize the duration of rewards and punishments such that your child is back in the life stream as quickly as possible. For instance we use rewards like one M&M or a pat on the back or a quick hug. We use time-outs on the order of 30 to 60 seconds for children up to 7 years of age. There are at least three problems with long time-outs.

1. The child forgets why he was punished.

2. The behavior can often escalate and the child resents punishment and is angry at parent. This in turn "muddies" the association you are trying to draw.

3 Lost opportunity for learning.

What is important is not that the child spends a lot of time in time-out, but rather that he go to time-out a lot!

Rule # 5: Be kind

Use the weakest force that is effective. But the key is that it has to be effective. If the punishment or reward is not working, i.e., the behavior persists or does not increase (in the case of a reward), then "up the ante." You must have a proportional and commensurate response to each of your child's target behaviors.

Rule # 6: Be specific

Avoid vague generalizations such as, "I don't like the way you treat your brother, "or, "You've been bad all morning, we're not going for ice cream;" "I really wish you wouldn't do that;" "Why are you acting this way?" The behaviors might be quite clear to you, but it is likely that they are considerably less clear to your child. If you don't like something, define it so that you're child can understand it. And avoid the persistent use of the negative imperative: "Don't do x." Give the child a positive alternative.

Rule # 7: Be utterly consistent (i.e., predictable)

This is one of those rules that despite the fact that everybody says that it's important, it's really true, it is important! With negative consequences, inconsistency simply fuels the behavior that you want to eliminate. It will come back to bite you. The situation is somewhat analogous to the use of antibiotics in the treatment of infections. If you take an antibiotic inconsistently, what happens is that the weak bacteria are killed, but the strong ones survive the first few onslaughts. Over time it is the strong ones that reproduce so that the infection ultimately comes back even more virulent than it was. The same is true of negative behavior.

While it is essential that you be consistent in the delivery of negative consequences, it is actually advantageous to be inconsistent in the delivery of rewards. When working on a difficult behavioral skill, initially reward each occurrence, but over time "thin" the reward schedule so that more instances of the target behavior are required before a reward is given. For example, if you are rewarding your child for playing alone for one minute, you cannot maintain this same "pay-off" for several months. We have to keep "raising the bar," always pushing the child to do just a little bit more than they have done before, but not so much that it dooms him to failure.

Rule # 8: Be informative

We feel that every child has a right to know why they are being punished (or rewarded). This is both ethical and effective. A child cannot learn if he is confused. However, an explanation is not the opening of a United

Nations Plenary Session debate. Explain, and then move on. To the extent that the explanation is more general than the transgression, this allows for generalization. The parenting literature bears this out; effective parents justify and explain their actions to their children. These both teach the child that they live in a rational world where rules are not capriciously applied and that there are stable rules of conduct in that world.

Rule # 9: Demonstrate your warmth and affection for your child

While this may sound painfully obvious, in practice it is often taken for granted. Remember you are punishing your child's behavior not your child. Love is constant, discipline is what is variable.

We are sometimes asked why we insist so much on physical affection and verbal praise for children while at the same time insisting on firm controls and discipline. This is probably due to the mistaken notion that discipline is the same as authoritarianism. The child-rearing literature is clear in demonstrating that controlling parents who are "warm" and demonstrable in their affection have children who in general, have better social and academic success later in life. As we said earlier: punishments are what make rewards valuable, but it is rewards that make punishments effective.

Yes you can achieve obedience without warmth. With significant power assertion and enough energy, you can bully your child into doing almost anything you want at any one point in time. But ask yourself, what do you want: a perfectly responsive robot or someone who has her own moral code that will know how to act when you are not around? You cannot learn a language via a phrase-book. What happens when the phrase you need is not in the book?

Without your child's certainty that you love him and without relentless physical evidence of that, all the precepts and rules will be for naught. They may bring temporary peace of mind or obedience but they will not bring about moral growth.

III. APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES: A MASTER BLUEPRINT

1. Identify the target behaviors and quantify frequency

The first step is to identify which behaviors of your child are serving as “developmental friction.” We call these the negative or inappropriate behaviors. Tantruming or non-compliance to reasonable requests such as, “please pick up your clothes;” or “you need to turn off the T.V. now.” Do not target all of your child’s difficult behavior, but do go after the most serious ones. Next create a list of positive behaviors that you would like to see increased. Of ten the positive list is simply the reciprocal of the negative list (and vice versa). For example, if one of the items on the negative list, is “stop fighting with his sister,” then the reciprocal item on the positive list is “play appropriately with his sister.”

2. Specify when and in what circumstances they occur (antecedent conditions).

It is always helpful to know the conditions under which the target behaviors occur. This is generally more crucial in situations that are difficult to control (i.e., school-based settings). The point of knowing the precursors to behavior is not so that we can avoid situations that produce these behaviors, but rather to structure learning sessions where we make the behaviors more likely, and respond with appropriate consequences. For example, let us say that your child is very difficult in a supermarket. Well then, we schedule “field-trips” to the supermarket! However, we go there with the luxury of not having to really buy anything. We design the situation so that we have the time to work on the behavior and not carry the additional constraints of having to get critical shopping done by a certain deadline.

3. Identify effective rewards and punishments (Think small!).

One of the great “tricks” of effective behavior management is to “cut-up” natural rewards such as T.V., money, food, etc. into small chunks. The key to effective distribution of these rewards is that they should be delivered in real-time and should not disrupt the stream of behavior. Rewards and punishments should, in the ideal case, take no time. This runs counter to our intuitions. Taking a child to Disney World is a wonderful thing to do, but it is not normally a very effective ”reward” in the technical sense of increasing the likelihood of the behaviors that preceded it. Rewards and punishments distributed as the behaviors occur are generally more powerful in directing those behaviors (i.e., in increasing or decreasing the probabilities of their recurrence).

4. Attach negative and positive consequences to small time periods and for each occurrence of the target behaviors. Test: does each occurrence have a consequence?

During this first phase we need to have as close to a zero-tolerance as we can manage. There are some exceptions to this if the target behavior is of extremely high-frequency. But in general, the more predictable your responses are, the easier it is for your child to learn the relationship that you are trying to teach. For negative target behaviors, we actually raise our standards. We expect more rather than less from the child

5. Increase the reward flow (DRO, DRL).

For high-priority target behaviors, it is crucial to open up two channels of feedback to your child. Your child needs to be both punished for the occurrence of a negative behavior and rewarded for the non-occurrence. This can be difficult, because it requires us to be vigilant for those situations when the child is acting appropriately and to reward them for it. This may sound like rewarding someone for not stealing, and it often is just that!

6. Thin the rewards, increase the time intervals.

Over time, we “raise the bar.” If we were rewarding a child for sitting at the dinner table for five minutes, we increase the interval to 10 minutes and then 15 minutes, etc.

7. Re-prioritize the target behaviors.

As the child gains control over his or her behaviors, we need to keep up with these developments and continually reassess our interventions. The standards of one developmental age are not those of the next. We find it useful to categorize behavior into three broad “Types.” Type 0 behaviors are those that require both negative and positive feedback from us to help the child gain control of his behaviors. These are the target behaviors that we seek to help the child master. They represent his ideal developmental level. Type -1 behaviors are those that are below the developmental level of the child. These are behaviors that we “take for granted” in that we assume the child has mastered them (such as being toilet-trained, or not swearing, etc.). When they occur, we would punish them but not reward them for not occurring. Type +1 behaviors are those that are “above” the child’s developmental level. These might include the use of two-word utterances, sitting quietly through dinner, etc. For these behaviors, we would reward their occurrence and not punish their non-occurrence. Over developmental time, Type +1 behaviors flow into Type 0 behaviors and Type 0 behaviors flow down into Type -1 behaviors. The following chart illustrates this process.

This chart represents developmental progression. As the child advances developmentally, new skills are acquired and previously difficult tasks become routine. The environment of behavioral consequences adjusts accordingly.

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ENDNOTES

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[i] . For a sampling of these studies see Baumrind (1967, 1971, 1973, 1977) and Maccoby, 1980. Baumrind characterizes parenting styles as "authoritarian," "permissive," and "authoritative." The first two styles have less desirable outcomes than the third. Our characterization of skillful parenting borrows and expands upon Baumrind's "authoritative" parenting style.

[ii] . This is actually not as counter-intuitive as it might first appear. Anxiety reduction through repeated exposure to the anxiety-producing stimulus must work in much the same way.