

Central Psychological Support Service (Pre-school)

Clinical Psychological Service Branch

Questions and Answers to Behavioural Problems in Preschoolers

3 steps of Parenting:

Use of Instructions

My children just won't listen to me, what is the best way to teach them?

First, parents must remember the following two principles:

1. Adjust your perspective, see things from your child's perspective

From, "He is mean to me!" to "He is still young and does not know how to express himself well!"

From "He deliberately does the opposite of what I asked!" to "Every child is oppositional every once in a while"

From "He is so annoying!" to "I might worry about his intelligence if he did not know how to throw tantrums!"

2. Adjust your expectation, less oppression and more guidance

Instead of thinking "Children do not have a say, they have to shut up and not throw tantrums", try to think "Children can get what they want, but they have to listen to adults' instructions first!"

No matter what problems you are facing, parenting involves the same 3 steps:

3 Steps of Parenting

1. Acknowledge emotions

(Show understanding)

2. Point out mistakes

(Correction)

3. Guidance on correct behaviours

(Instruction)

3 Good Opportunities to Praise

After learning about [3 steps of parenting], Now it is about [3 good opportunities to praise]

1. When the child behaves well

2. Before the child misbehaves

3. After the child corrects behaviours

Bad habits of parenting

Parents need to be aware of the parenting methods they use regularly to understand their difference from the [3 steps of parenting]

For example, when you need to stop your child from playing with the electric socket, what would you say to him?

Reflection 1: I would habitually say “No / Don’t touch it / Don’t play with it”. But is it effective?

Saying “No” is a natural response, but when we say “No” to the child, this actually reminds the child of the misbehaviour again. Saying “Don’t touch the electric socket” only redirect the child to be focused on the electric socket. Same rationale, shouting “Stop running” to the child cause him / her to think about RUNNING. Saying “No” doesn’t stop behaviours, it only inadvertently puts the emphasis of the message on misbehaviours.

Reflection 2 : I would habitually try to scare the child – “You will get hurt from an electric shock/ it will be fatal”.

No matter how serious you look when you scare the child, it is not really convincing. Imagine when the child sees an adult plug an electric socket without experiencing pain or dying, what will they learn? “I won’t believe in adults; they always fool me!” Gradually, the child only becomes more and more disobedient.

Reflection 3: I would habitually give explanations - “The electric socket is very dangerous/ The electric socket is not a toy.”

Parenting nowadays emphasize on lecturing and giving explanations to children, however, when a child misbehaves, simply explaining to the child cannot get rid of the problem. When the child is not convinced, he/she will become more rebellious and willful. Elaborate explanations from parents usually train their children to be good at talking back, instead of obedience.

Direct guidance is the key of effective instruction

Effective parenting is to stop our mistakes and practice using direct guidance and feasible instructions, which is the most important third step (Guidance on acceptable behaviours) of the [3 steps of parenting].

How do we know if the instruction is direct enough?

If parents do not want the child to touch the electric socket, they have to clearly tell the child what they should do. If we said "Come to daddy/ mummy", "Go play with your toy cars", or "Go get a book to read" etc., these instructions would be direct, and the child would be more likely to cooperate with parents.

It is similar to read a sign "Please do not litter" on the street.

Although the sign reminds the public that littering is wrong, it does not tell what they should do with the rubbish. As a result, even if someone wants to be responsible, he / she may still have no idea of how to act properly. If the message on the sign were changed to "Please put the rubbish into the rubbish bin ahead", people will be clearer of how they should behave.

So, what about feasibility, what does that mean? When parents want to stop the child from touching electric sockets, they can instruct the child to "Come play toy cars": or say "Let's read a book together". Both are direct commands. However, since the interests and abilities of children are different, some children might listen to the former instruction, others might better cooperate with the latter instruction.

Therefore, parents must carefully consider which instruction your child would be more willing to listen to, so that the instruction can become feasible.

Even if an instruction is direct and feasible, parents must realize that it won't solve every problem and it cannot guarantee the child's cooperation every time. This is similar to the signs that say "Please put the rubbish into the rubbish bin": In reality, there are people who disregard the sign and litter everywhere. However, if instructions are not direct and clear enough, it will be very difficult to get children's cooperation.

Empathy before Reasoning, Acknowledging Emotions

So what's the use of the first step (Acknowledge emotions) of the [3 steps of parenting]? "Empathy before Reasoning" is a very important principle in parenting. If parents are able to take the child's perspective, understand his / her motivation behind misbehaviours, and talk to the child in an understanding and non-confrontational attitude, the child's problems would become easier to handle. If your child touch the electric socket because of boredom, you can say "You seem very bored and want to find something to play with"; if your child touch the electric socket because of curiosity, you can say "You seem to think the electric socket is interesting and want to look at it".

Compared with scolding the child and saying "No/Don't/Can't", acknowledging emotions allows the child to feel understood by parents, and avoids triggering further misbehaviours. As a result, the child will be more willing to accept parents' instructions (the third step of parenting). Moreover, when parents work on acknowledging emotions, they can understand their child's needs better, so that they would become wiser in choosing the most appropriate instruction in the third step [Guidance on acceptable behaviour].

For example, the child touch the electric socket due to boredom, the instruction parents give after acknowledging emotions should be:

“Go play with a new toy”

or “Let daddy and mummy play with you for a while now”

If the child is curious about the electric socket, the instruction after acknowledging emotions should be:

“Let daddy/ mummy hold your hand first, then we can look at it/ touch it together!

Application of the [3 steps of parenting]

Let's try to solve the following common behavioural problems with the [3 steps of parenting]:

Example 1 – The child runs around in a shopping mall

1. Acknowledge emotions

“You are very excited and want to run around!” (Show understanding)

2. Point out mistakes

“But you cannot run everywhere you want!” (Correction)

3. Guidance on acceptable behaviour

“Come here and hold mummy's hand, let's walk together!” (Instruction)

Example 2 – The child throws the ball wherever he wants

1. Acknowledge emotions

“Wow, you think it is fun to play with the ball this way!” (Show understanding)

2. Point out mistakes

“But you cannot throw the ball wherever you want!” (Correction)

3. Guidance on acceptable behaviour

“You can throw the ball gently into the basketball hoop!” (Instruction)

The application of giving notices in advance

[3 steps of parenting] can also help handle children when they whine about buying stuff or refuse to cooperate. Parents just have to change the third step [Guidance on acceptable behaviours] to [Give notices in advance].

1. Acknowledge emotions (Show understanding)
2. Point out mistakes (Correction)
3. Give notices in advance (Set expectations)

Example 3 – The child whines about going to McDonald's

1. Acknowledge emotions
"You are so eager to go to McDonald's right now." (Show understanding)
2. Point out mistakes
"But we are not going today!" (Correction)
3. Give notices in advance
"We will go this Saturday!" (Set expectations)

Example 4 – The child refuses soup

1. Acknowledge emotions
"I know you don't want the soup!" (Show understanding)
2. Point out mistakes
"But you cannot waste food!" (Correction)
3. Give notices in advance
"Finish two more spoonful and then you can go!" (Set expectation)

Keep your promise and avoid giving ineffective instructions

Advance notice is a kind of promise and the effectiveness depends on whether parents keep their promises. If parents promised the child to have McDonald's on Saturday, parents should keep their promise no matter what. Parents should remind the child about the promise even if the child has already forgotten about it. Some parents think that children are very forgetful so they do not need to be too serious with their promises. However, in reality, children often realize that they were fooled and may throw temper tantrums; even if they are really forgetful, this is not something to be happy about either. It is always easier to destroy than to create a trustful relationship, so parents should keep their words and treat promises seriously. We also have to be aware if we have the habit of "raising the standards" on the spot. For instance, in example 4, when the child cooperated and took two more spoonful of soup, would we be tempted to ask the child to take another two spoonful?

The key of giving effective notices in advance does not depend on the length of time in advance, parents can give a longer notice to the child or a short notice, depending on the level of trust between the parent and child. Therefore, promising the child to "go to McDonald's tomorrow" and to "go to McDonald's this Saturday" are both appropriate notices. However, for some children, they might show strong resistance if they wait for a few more days to go to McDonald's. Parents should be firm and follow through with the instructions delivered before and only satisfy the child's wishes after the waiting time is up.

Another important principle of giving instructions / giving notices in advance is:

to avoid giving unfeasible instructions or notices.

Example 5 – You are holding a lot of things and rushing back home after picking up the child from school, and you simply cannot handle any of the child’s temper tantrums. Parents can try to give the following instructions to the child:

- 1. No need to acknowledge emotions**
- 2. No need to point out mistakes**
- 3. Simply give an instruction that matches with the child’s wants**

“We will go to McDonald’s first, and then go straight back home after eating.”

The advantage of this handling is that the child may experience that he / she gets what he / she wants (i.e. go to McDonald’s) by following parents’ instructions, rather than throwing a temper tantrum. There would be one less incident for the child to get what he wants through throwing a tantrum, and one more incident for the parent to experience effective parenting and thus maintaining the authority as a parent.

The nutrients for growth: Praising your child timely

When the child behaves well

Before the child misbehaves

After the child corrects misbehaviours

Being praised is an important “nutrient” for growth and development. Every child desires parents’ attention and appreciation. Inside children’s hearts, a hidden voice is saying, “Daddy, mummy, do you see me behaving so well?” Unfortunately, parents often miss a lot of children’s good behaviours due to their hectic lives. In our daily life, we often focus our attention on correcting children’s mistakes and emphasize on correction or reprimand, leading to an unnecessarily negative parenting atmosphere. Parents should focus on the positive behaviours of children. Rather than repeatedly scolding the child, “Why don't you listen to me and keep running around”, why not wait for the child’s cooperation and praise the child “Good job walking slow”? Remember that [Praising your child timely] provides a golden opportunity to give “nutrients” for the child’s growth.

[Praising your child timely] can be applied together with [3 steps of parenting]. While parents (Guidance on acceptable behaviours / Give notice in advance), which is the third step in [3 steps of parenting], when the child cooperates with the new instructions or is willing to wait, the opportunity to praise - (After the child corrects misbehaviours) appears. Parents should immediately praise the child and give the child affirmation for his cooperation.

Example 6 – You held onto the child when he tried to run away

1. Affirm after child's corrects behaviours
"You did a good job holding mummy's hand!"
2. Acknowledge emotions
"Mummy knows you want to walk by yourself!"
3. Give notices in advance
"After we take the escalator, I will let you walk by yourself for a while!"

Moreover, before the child has temper tantrums, praise can be given timely (Before the child misbehaves), and then give instructions and notices in advance

Example 7 – The child was attentive when doing homework, but he might get distracted soon

1. Praise before child's misbehaviours
"Son, you are very attentive when doing your homework!"
2. Acknowledge emotions
"I know you want to watch TV soon!"
3. Give notices in advance
"After you have finished your homework, mummy will let you watch TV immediately!"

As for praising (When the child behaves well), there isn't much to explain. Parents just need to spend more time paying attention to their children, and they will find countless opportunities to praise

children, for example, when the child smiles at you, tidies up toys by him/herself, keeps quiet etc.

Relationship building – TRUST

Say yes and mean it, say no and mean it.

Is your parenting OK? Check whether you can “Say yes and mean it, say no and mean it”. This helps build trust in parent-child relationships. On the contrary, if parents say “yes” but turn out to mean no, or say “no” but turned out to mean yes, their parenting must be problematic because trust, an important building block to develop emotion connection with people, will then be absent. Remember, trust is vulnerable and requires great effort to build.

Parenting is a process of discovering how to get along with children, and an art of co-regulation between people. Parents have to find a way of communicating with their children. Apart from managing misbehaviours, the parents can also regulate the children’s emotions and satisfying their needs. They can truly enjoy the happiness of a trusting parent-child relationship.

Hope the 3 steps of parenting would be helpful to you!

Hope the advice in this booklet was helpful for you in handling your child's behavioural problems.

Nevertheless, children's behaviours are affected by developmental problems and other factors. For further advice and support, you are welcome to contact a clinical psychologist through Integrated Programme teachers at your child's school.