

Parenting Tricks from a Pediatric Occupational Therapist

By Joel Desotelle, OTR/L

As a parent and pediatric occupational therapist, I know that kids simply do not come with instructions. To compound matters, what works one day may not work another day. And as one issue is put to rest, there are 20 more brewing -- waiting to boil over!

For more than 12 years, parents have brought their children to me to address a wide range of disabilities. Though I have applied numerous strategies specific to each case, one general area that I find I consistently work on with all my kids is behavior. Regardless of the issue and the specific strategies being used, treatment is not possible unless you get those little people to cooperate! And it's even more challenging when the little girl or boy I am working with doesn't understand the complexity or the importance of the objectives.

Out of necessity as well as survival, I have become fairly skilled at addressing general parenting issues to get my little clients to improve their lives. I have also discovered that these strategies are not just useful for parents and therapists who work with disabled children, but for any parent!

Issues and behaviors can be difficult and complex and volumes could be written on the subject, but I will focus on are common mistakes and useful strategies to minimize some of those issues.

Limit Negotiations

First, as parents, we think as adults. Our frame of reference is pulled from a mature mind that has had years of experiences to develop and internalize strategies for ourselves. Children are naturally immature. They are at a disadvantage, because they do not have the same experiences as you and I.

When looking at specific problems, ask yourself: "Is this a common issue that a child this age would have?" For instance, dealing with a two-year-old is very trying because s/he is starting to develop skills that at least give them the impression that they are starting to master their environment. As a result, they become little control freaks – delegating orders while totally disregarding your directives. Parents respond in a very adult way by either poorly defining realistic expectations (for example, saying, "stop that, you know better than that!"), or by trying to negotiate with the child.

Children need stability. They need you in control of the situation regardless of whether or not they agree with you or comply with your directives. Negotiating with an immature little person empowers them with authority that they are not developmentally able to handle. Additionally, they learn the relationship between their behaviors and the ability to bring you to the negotiating table in order to get what they want. I am always willing to listen to a child's opinion or comments, but ultimately, there is no negotiation. The final decision is mine and the final decision is yours. Just be sure the decision is appropriate for the child's age and maturity level.

Kids are Constantly Developing

Children are in a constant state of development, but many parents react to issues as if they're permanent and need to be addressed at all cost. Kids are dynamically changing, and many of the issues you face are often age-related and subsequently short-term.

Issues do need to be addressed, but at times we as parents go a little overboard, creating a lot of unnecessary tension and other issues that would not have otherwise been there. Sometimes the best way of dealing with issues is to identify them, bring them to your child's attention, offer up your decision on the matter and move on. Several years ago my son told me that if I were a superhero with powers, I would be the "Super Lecturer!" This hit home with me, and I have had a lot more success at work and home by toning it down and shortening my time addressing such issues.

Remove the Emotion

Our current emotional state is crucial to successfully dealing with behaviors and issues. When we lose it, we send the wrong message to the child. Second, when we're upset, we don't make good decisions. Lastly, children read emotions like they watch cartoons; they have the innate capacity to define OUR behavior as well as how they can use it to manipulate a situation

I have seen many kids push their parents to the point of frustration knowing that once the parent has revealed this weakness, it is only a matter of time before they will sit down at the negotiating table and start working on a deal in exchange for the child's compliance! "If you stop crying, mommy will buy you a toy!"

Even worse, parents can allow emotion to get the best of them, usually unintentionally, resulting in potential abuse or words or behaviors that can negatively impact the child in a lot of unfortunate ways. If you can stick to one rule, it's to keep the emotion out of it when dealing with issues. When the problem is resolved, turn the emotion back on and give your son or daughter a hug and let him or her know how proud you are.

Be a Parent First

Many parents try to earn their child's approval. They negotiate, they buy them things, or take them places, or bend the rules. You don't have to be a tyrant to be a parent, but you do need to be a parent first and a friend second. This means not only handling situations consistently, but also being a good role model. If you don't want your child doing it, you shouldn't do it.

If you put a set of rules in place, stick to them. A lot of parents have good intentions, but don't enforce rules for the long term. Kids rely on inconsistencies in parenting to manipulate opportunities for themselves! Be consistent!

Finally, sometimes the kids have to win. This doesn't mean bending the rules so much as making sure you don't micromanage every little detail to the point that the child is unable to grow into his/her own person. The best way to parent is to manage the situation so that the child thinks s/he is in control, but really you are. This drastically helps the child's self-esteem while allowing you to maintain control and set the limits.

Obviously these are general strategies, and will take some time to think about and integrate into your own bag of parenting tricks. But they are important concepts that can be applied to any child regardless of whether they have a disability. The key is to learn how to use them and be consistent. Also, realize that they don't always work as well as you may want. You may have to accept something less than perfect because we, as parents are not perfect, and neither are our little angels, even though we want them to be.

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