

Teaching children how to behave

Tabula rasa defines the idea of having no preconceived ideas or understanding. At birth, children are said to be blank slates, meaning they are without the advantage of interpreting the world or how they are expected to interact in it. In order to teach children, adults must guide them in a way that develops their ability to act and behave in preferred ways. Debate on how best to teach children has and will undoubtedly remain undetermined, thus often confusing the path adults can and/or should take. As such, this article will look at a range of strategies whilst looking at the benefits and limitations they offer.

Consistency

Traditionally speaking, teaching children how to behave relies on developing rules, each of which dictate how children are expected to behave, interact and cooperate. While some rules are viewed as being moderately important, others will be deemed extremely important. Knowing the difference between these will determine the level of consistency needed to successfully implement and reinforce said rules. Not surprisingly, an adult's consistency levels will influence how likely children are to follow the rules in the future. As such, adults with a proclivity to enforce rules often and frequently will typically yield the best outcomes. Naturally, those with the tendency to be less consistent will often face more adversity, especially when they have a child with a determined mindset. The fact, however, cannot be overlooked that being consistent is difficult and requires a great deal (on the adult's behalf) of determination, gumption and time. For this reason, being consistent can often fall by the wayside.

While consistency is one key to success, it does not remain the only factor. In fact, the effectiveness of promoting or extinguishing certain behaviours is highly dependent upon the methods to reinforce household rules.

Verbal reminders

One parenting method that is frequently observed is that of an adult telling a child what to do or to stop doing. The idea of telling children how to behave suggests that children have the capacity to comprehend and interpret an adult's words and translate them into action. Yet this assumption is often ill-conceived because when children are told what to do, the only skill they are developing is to recite the words that are being said to them, hence the reason many adults often say children know the rule but still break it anyway.

The upside of this method is, that one day, children tend to join the missing dots and apply the rule to real-life situations. Meaning that it is a matter of maturation and not telling them that enforces their ability to act in preferred ways.

(Note: Teenagers have the capacity to think abstractly and join the 'missing dots', however, hormonal changes will make it harder for them to resist the urge to act impulsively and break rules (at times), especially if they were not good at following them when they were younger)

Positive and negative reinforcement and punishment

Alternatively, traditional parenting methods include the use of positive and/or negative reinforcement as well as the use of punishments. Positive reinforcement refers to the way in which an individual is rewarded for their efforts. It may come in the form of verbal praise, hugs, high fives, or possible monetary or material gain. It cannot be denied that this strategy can yield success (some more than others depending on what motivates individuals). The downside of this type of strategy is that preferred behaviours may disappear when rewards no longer exist.

At the opposite end of the scale lies negative reinforcement. Before delving into this concept, it must be noted that negative reinforcement does not include punishment. Punishment involves the removal of something (a strategy used to weaken, not eliminate, unwanted behaviour) whereas negative reinforcement involves taking away unwanted stimuli. For example, if a child does not like the taste of spaghetti sauce but the adult wants them to become more tolerant of varying foods and their accompanying smells, the child can be taught to ask to have it put on the side of the plate. By getting the child to ask for this variation in food placement, the negative stimuli (the sauce) is removed from the problem area and the behaviour of getting them to tolerate the look and smell of different foods is reinforced. Alternatively, if punishment was the key motivator, the child might get sent to bed early for not eating their dinner.

Despite the slightly confusing nature of reinforcement, the idea is that children learn to behave because they are motivated towards doing something. Naturally, praise, the removal of a problem and/or the introduction of a punishment tends to be more successful when consistency is created. As such, the previous concerns about consistency apply in this situation. In short, without someone present to monitor and police behaviours, children might make less preferred choices when adults are not around. Despite some negative connotations, there are positives to using these strategies. For one, each can act as a good motivator and can create permanent change providing the strategies are used until the unwanted behaviour desists.

Developing habits

If adults want to teach children the rules and how to behave, they can consider an alternative approach. Rather than telling, rewarding or punishing children, they can show and get them to demonstrate the desired behaviour. For example, rather than telling a child that they need to walk inside, get the child to turn around, retrace their steps and walk. The advantage of this strategy is that it simultaneously reinforces the rule whilst creating a habit that can be repeated in the future.

Habits are extremely important because the brain likes to chunk behaviours together so that it does not have to think about everything it does. For example, you no longer need to think about which hand you pick a pen up with as the muscles remember on your behalf. A similar thing occurs when children are asked to reverse their steps and repeat the action in a preferred way. The more children are encouraged to repeat an action in a preferred way the more the brain will put their actions on autopilot (otherwise known as automaticity) and have them act the same way in the future.

While the benefits of this strategy are plentiful, there are some drawbacks, mainly in regards to the fact that this strategy requires adults to be present and think about what they are doing. Telling, punishing and reinforcing strategies are easily enforced because we are familiar with how they work and the formula needed to indoctrinate them – A (action) + B (broken rule/followed rule) = C (consequence). Getting someone to repeat an action until they get it right, however, does not follow a familiar sequence – A (action) + B (broken rule) = R (redo the action correctly). While the idea of rote learning is not favoured in society today, it can be noted that the more individuals repeat an action, the more likely they will be to perform an action using the concept of automaticity. When automaticity is achieved, children will no longer need reminding as they will simply act out of habit.

Summary of ideas

Children start life with no concept of right or wrong. This lack of knowledge means they are reliant on adults teaching them how to behave in certain settings. There are many ways to teach children. Some include but are not limited to telling children what to and not to do, rewarding or punishing children's efforts or devising plans that remove an unwanted stimuli from the environment. While these methods have been used with success over the ages, there are other alternatives that can glean equal success. One such method is by teaching children what to do. Teaching children requires adults to get children to perform the desired action.

When the desired action is repeated enough, automatic behaviours are developed. The benefit of automaticity is that once a behaviour is developed it becomes a subconscious action, meaning that ongoing reminders and monitoring will not be necessary.

M.J. Fisher

Child and Family Therapist

B. Soc. Sc.; GradDip Teaching; Dip. Care and Ed.

www.whatmjdoes.com

© What MJ Does