

Get Your Child to Say Yes

By ROBERT EPSTEIN

ONE EVENING, hearing six-year-old Justin scream, I ran down the hall in the direction of the cry. I found my other son Julian—two years older and stronger—grinning outside the bathroom door while his brother continued to wail from within. Suddenly angry, thinking that he must have done something awful to his brother, I shoved Julian away from the door so hard that he fell, his head grazing a nearby wall.

I flung open the bathroom door, expecting to see blood everywhere, but Justin seemed fine. He announced, “Daddy, Julian turned the light off on me!”

I’m a psychologist, supposed to know how to handle people, especially little ones. Yet I had lost control of myself and nearly injured my child over a silly, harmless prank, one that I had played a dozen times myself as a boy. I felt terrible about it.

Our children make us angry sometimes. They get lazy, they make mistakes, they do silly, mischievous or thoughtless things. But when we adults react without thinking, when we shout or strike, we usually accomplish little. And rightly so: we exhibit the very behavior we’re trying to discourage.

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Children do need discipline, but how can we get them to do the right thing without losing the calm, adult dignity that they need to witness in us? By studying the parenting styles of people who have raised happy, well-adjusted children, behavioral scientists have identified a

Here are nine effective ways to change behavior—without shouting or spanking

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number of techniques that are often more effective than punishment in teaching appropriate behavior.

The next time you feel the stream rising, one of these suggestions may work wonders on the child’s behavior and on the peace and harmony in your household.

1. Change the environment. A friend of mine has spent months reprimanding his toddler when he reaches for the family’s

VCR. Sometimes a tantrum results. Yet, putting the VCR on a tall cabinet or shelf will solve the problem immediately.

Many behavioral problems don't require shouting matches or even discussions. For example: "Keep away from that door!" (Why not add an inexpensive hook-lock?) "I'm not giving you the house key anymore because you keep losing it!" (I attached the key to my son's knapsack.) "I've told you not to eat sweets before dinner!" (Hide the snacks.)

Every time you catch yourself yelling at your child, make a note of it. Later, see if you can handle recurring problems with simple changes in the environment.

2. Rehearse the problem. Teach your children what to do and what not to do by role-playing situations with them. I've used this technique with good results on my own children. "Look, Julian," I said, "you be the art teacher, and I'll be you." We acted out an altercation that had taken place in school that day. He learned that he might have handled the situation differently—and I was reminded that it's not easy being a kid.

3. Teach them to breathe easy. Even a very young child can be taught to calm down by taking a few deep breaths. Siblings fight sometimes, and it's hard to figure out who's to blame. Rather than trying, I sometimes helped my children with a breathing exercise. I'd say, "C'mon, boys, let's calm down

together." Then I'd take a deep breath and motion to the children to do the same. When they'd follow, I'd say, "Great! Now let's let it out very slowly," and show them how.

Children of all ages can be taught diaphragmatic breathing. With one hand on the chest and one on the abdomen, some people find that only the chest moves when they breathe. Breathing with the chest can be a sign of stress. Teenagers can be taught to hold the upper hand still and breathe with the diaphragm so that only the lower hand moves in and out. Diaphragmatic breathing has been shown in clinical studies to have a rapid calming effect.

4. Teach them to take charge. "Self-management" skills that help adults achieve goals—increased productivity, better organization—can be taught to children.

Perhaps your daughter forgets to put her clothes in the hamper at night, and frequent reminders only result in arguments. Rather than posting cheerful reminder notes for your daughter, teach her that she can remind herself of what she's supposed to do by writing her own notes. If your son keeps forgetting to take out the garbage, help him make a chart to keep track of the days he does it. Many children feel great pride when they can see the progress they're making. They feel in charge.

5. Time for a timeout. When a child is acting up, a parent often

says "Go to your room" as a punishment. But a bedroom is often a favorite place, especially if it's filled with toys. The timeout is helpful if it's truly a timeout from stimulation. For a very young child, you're better off with the old chair-in-the-corner technique. It's very dull, and that's the point of a real timeout.

6. Hold on gently. Mental-health professionals sometimes use manual guidance to help change a child's behavior. For example, if you see your son reaching to grab food from someone's plate, gently move his hand back to his own plate, and say, "That's good. I like it when you keep your hands where they should be."

If your child is taking too long to comb her hair when you're in a hurry, don't sound off at her. Put an arm around her and say, "Honey, I'm in a rush today. You can finish that in the car." Then guide her away from the mirror. Again, gentleness is key. Too rough, and you're back to punishment.

7. Give them a signal. Children can get into trouble because they don't have clear signals. At times, you don't mind the kids bursting into your bedroom; at other times, it's the worst thing in the world. The solution is a technique called discrimination training.

Teach your children that it's okay to burst in when the big green "OK" sign is on your door, but that they need to knock first when the red "STOP" sign is out. Even a two-

year-old can get the idea. The challenge is to let your children know when certain behavior is okay.

8. Carrots, not sticks. My children work hard in helping to run our home, in part because of clear, established incentives. Julian, now 12, does three loads of laundry each week as part of his regular chores; I pay him a small amount for each additional load. Some weeks there are no extra loads, but he still has an incentive for doing the first three: to try to get beyond the minimum number. The money I pay him is a good investment in his future.

9. Let's make a deal! The "behavioral contract" is another successful technique. On a piece of paper jot down: Problem, Target Behavior and Deal. If your daughter's room is usually a mess and this causes arguments, the target behavior might be to have her clean up once a week. Under "Deal" write down what your child is supposed to do: "Chris will clean her room thoroughly every Friday afternoon, completing the job before 6 p.m." Then add what you will do in return: "Mom promises not to spend all week nagging Chris about her messy room. When the room is neat, Chris gets to choose the desserts on Friday and Saturday."

Once the deal is struck, you and your child sign the paper and post it. Put a time limit on the contract. Circumstances have a way of changing, and you can always renew.

One of the most powerful ways

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children learn what to do and what not to do is by watching you. As you "model" various behaviors, sooner or later your children will imitate you. If you shout to get your way, you can expect your children to do the same. If you watch television instead of mowing the lawn, your child will likely put off a home-work assignment. If you want your children to read, read. If you want

your kids to apologize to you, apologize to them when you make a mistake.

And take a few deep breaths yourself! It's hard to think clearly when you're angry. You might forget every sensible thing you know about child-rearing. In the end, one of the very best ways to become a better parent is to learn better ways of handling your own stress.

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