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ACCEPTING AND APPRECIATING OUR CHILDREN

A wonderful essay written by Emily Perl Kingsley (1987) describes the experience of raising a child. She recounts having a baby as being like planning a special vacation to a beautiful location, such as Italy. You study Italian and plan all the great places to visit once in Italy. Finally, when the special day arrives and you get on the plane, you discover that the plane will actually land in Holland. You cannot believe, after all your

plans, the airlines have diverted you. You heard everyone else talking of their past great trips to Italy and you feel tremendous disappointment. Yet you discover that Holland is not such a bad place—just not what you expected. And so now you busy yourself trying to discover all that Holland has to offer. If instead you spend all your time still wishing you were in Italy, you will never get to fully appreciate the joys of Holland.

This essay speaks to the importance of adjusting our expectations as parents so that we can truly appreciate and accept our children. It is only in the context of acceptance that we can help our children stretch themselves and learn new skills.

A parallel is found in the field of psychotherapy. In a recent review of 25 years of research into the outcome of psychotherapy, Lebow (2007) concludes that regardless of the type of therapeutic strategies used, most psychotherapy can be effective only when there is a strong, positive relationship between client and therapist. Some of the crucial factors that contribute to a positive relationship are acceptance, warmth, caring and the generation of hope or positive expectations.

How do we adjust our expectations so that we can develop and maintain a positive relationship with our own children? Three key issues are described below. We must:

- Be able to control our own frustration before we can reduce our children's frustration.
- Help our children feel competent with us and avoid "learned helplessness."
- Avoid constant power struggles.

Controlling Our Own Frustration

First we must be able to do for ourselves what we need to do for our children. We need to control our own reactions to our children's challenging behaviors. Constantly expressing anger towards our children for behavior that they do not yet have the tools to manage only breaks down the relationship. The difference between being a bit irritated versus completely enraged by our children's behavior has to do with how well we do three things:

- Expect challenging behaviors from our children as part of normal development. When we expect perfect behavior, we set ourselves up to be enraged, rather than mildly annoyed, by our children's behavior.
- Do not see our children's actions as threats to our own competence, but instead recognize it as a function of their inability to cope with frustration. Alternatively, if we take it personally, our upset with ourselves increases our anger towards our children.
- Understand that challenging behaviors are temporary until we can figure out better ways to manage and prevent those difficult situations. If we see it as an unending problem, we will surely be angrier.

All the methods we use to help our children reduce their frustration are also methods we must use with ourselves, or else we will end up contributing to further escalation of frustration. We must learn to prevent our outbursts and find ways to calm ourselves when we lose our temper. By expecting and planning for frustrating situations with our children, we can avoid overreacting. When we know our own triggers, we can ready ourselves to respond in thoughtful ways rather than automatically losing our temper. As you read through this book for ways to help your children, consider how you can apply each strategy to yourself to be a more patient and confident parent or educator.

Building Competence

When children feel competent, they work harder and are more motivated to listen to us. In general, we build this sense of competence by offering ample praise and guiding them to activities that are within their range of abilities. Specifically, we can:

- Involve them in daily household activities such as gathering the laundry, setting the table, preparing dinner, or helping to clean up. Even if their participation makes the chore take longer, ask for their assistance and offer praise for their great help.
- Determine areas in which they have some natural strengths and set up activities in these areas (consider athletics, music, dance, art, or certain academic pursuits).

- Avoid demands that are beyond their capabilities. Both at home and in school, we may need to modify the work demands so that we do not put students in the position of having to complete activities for which they are not ready. For example, students who are not yet reading or writing in early grades may need extra support, and should not be placed in embarrassing positions where they must perform beyond their ability in front of other students.
- Praise their effort (rather than just their ability) when they are working on a project or attempting a new activity. We want them to appreciate the idea of working hard and practicing, more than whether or not they have succeeded. The lesson is: success eventually comes to those who work hard.

Avoiding Learned Helplessness

If, instead of planning for success, we put them in situations in which they cannot meet our expectations and we constantly criticize them, they become less motivated, less likely to listen, and develop "learned helplessness."

The concept of learned helplessness was first proposed by Martin Seligman in the 1960s as a model for human depression. Seligman and colleagues showed, first in animals and then with people, that when individuals repeatedly experience frustrating events that they cannot control, they eventually develop a sense of "learned helplessness" and tend to give up even when later confronted with events that they really can control. For example, in a classic experiment, students given unsolvable word puzzles, compared to those given solvable word puzzles, showed less motivation, more upset, and a greater likelihood of quitting when later confronted with challenging but solvable puzzles. In fact, their performance was similar to that of groups of students who were depressed. This early experience of failure can induce a sense of helplessness. Similarly, parents who continually criticize their children can instill a sense of helplessness in them—they feel that nothing they do is "right," so they stop trying. Examples of overly critical statements include:

- "This is easy; why can't you do it? What's wrong with you?"
- "All the other kids can do this."

- "Just try harder," when children are failing at a task beyond their current ability. What they may really need is help in understanding what to do, or a more basic task to prepare them for the harder task.

Just being exposed to frustrating events such as criticism may not be enough to induce a helpless attitude. Many researchers have demonstrated that how one explains failure is crucial. If a person sees failure as a result of his lack of ability, this leads to a more helpless/depressed orientation, but if he explains failure as a result of lack of effort, it may result in greater motivation (Abramson et al., 1978). In fact, the students in the word puzzle experiment above exhibited a less depressed mood when they explained their trouble with the puzzles as due to lack of effort rather than to intellectual shortcomings.

Carol Dweck and her colleagues (Dweck, 1975; Diener & Dweck, 1978 & 1980) in a series of experiments have shown how some elementary students respond to frustrating work as a challenge and seem to enjoy it in an effort to learn more. In contrast, other children view frustration as a sign of personal inadequacy, and thus avoid challenging work, and develop a helpless attitude towards future work.

The 80/20 Rule

To help our children feel motivated and competent with us, we must first give them work they can achieve rather than unsolvable work. In the field of education, this is often referred to as the 80/20 rule. First give them the 80% work they can achieve before giving them the 20% that is more difficult for them. A concrete example of this comes from a study on the effects of how one orders test items on an exam. Firmen et al. (2004) showed that, when you put difficult test items before easier test items, students score lower and give up earlier than if you put the easier test items first. We must first build students' sense of "can do" before challenging them to help them stay motivated.

I recall when my own son began 1st grade and he was having difficulty learning to read. I tried too hard to teach him the sounds of all the letters and to begin sounding out words in the first month of 1st grade. In essence, I applied the exact opposite of the 80/20 rule, giving him very challenging work to do rather than beginning with work he could

accomplish. I ended up turning him off to books and reading so that the mere sight of me began to anger him. I became associated with frustration and helplessness for him. Any efforts to read with him quickly escalated to meltdowns. When I finally got him help from gifted reading tutors, they applied the 80/20 rule, exposing him to tasks he could do in a game format. He regained his motivation to approach the skills of reading and began to progress. I backed off and, fortunately, he and I can now enjoy reading together.

Anticipating Frustration as Part of Learning

Elliott and Dweck (1988) have shown that they can induce children to become more focused on evaluating their "abilities" or, instead, focus on their "efforts" to learn, and this subsequently affects how they respond to challenging tasks. Those concentrating on their ability get frustrated more easily. In contrast, those attending to their level of effort respond to frustration with more motivation and positive feelings. Their research shows us that getting kids to think of ability as something that gradually changes with effort is key to reducing frustration and helplessness. In contrast, when kids see ability as a fixed entity that does not change, then frustrating tasks are seen as a sign of personal inadequacy.

As parents and teachers, we must help our youngsters to expect failure and frustration as an initial part of the learning process. Then we must instill a sense of hope that continued effort will help them get past these challenges. We must praise their continued efforts rather than simply praise their current ability.

Despite my pushing my son too fast with reading early on, I did at least understand that he would eventually learn with the right strategies. I impressed upon him from the beginning that reading is a skill that can be taught and "you are not supposed to be able to do it now, but with practice eventually you will." I told him about my uncle who was unable to read for the first several years of grade school and initially became very frustrated. But because he never gave up, with practice he learned to read and eventually became a talented college professor. I tried to give my son hope

and a vision of the long-term effort involved in learning to read. As a result, he persisted in his efforts and learned to read proficiently.

When to Avoid Power Struggles

Constant power struggles create stress for everyone and slowly break down the relationship between adult and child. One of the toughest questions parents and teachers ask is when should they push a child to do something and when should they avoid a power struggle. My rule of thumb is:

If children are prepared for a challenge and have been taught skills to cope with that situation, then we can try to push through their resistance and endure the power struggle. If children do not have the skills to cope with a challenging task, then we should avoid the power struggle.

For example, if a child resists homework, but we have simplified the tasks involved, taught him or her to ask for help or for a break if necessary, and we are starting at a reasonable hour, then we can feel more comfortable withholding playtime until the child cooperates in doing schoolwork. On the other hand, if a student is resistant and the work is at a level that is too difficult, and he has not been taught how to ask for help, then it would not be wise to engage in the power struggle.

The following story demonstrates the futility of engaging in an escalating power struggle with a child who is not prepared for a challenging situation. In an inner-city school system where I worked years ago, there was a 5th grader with reading problems. On weekends, he attended a recreation program run by a man who taught me more about developing positive relationships than any book I read or graduate school

training I had. He became a big daddy to a lot of fatherless children and knew how to help them feel valued and competent. His recreation program offered supervision for sports, arts and crafts and academic work, but made no demands on the students to perform in any of these areas. In general, the program offered a place to relax and feel supported, praised, but not pushed to perform for a grade, as was the case during the school week.

During the week, this man worked as the security guard at the school. The particular fifth grade boy in question had modifications to his language arts class from a teacher who understood his difficulties with reading. One day, as she often did, she told the class, "Take out your language arts folder and do the following three paragraphs," and then whispered to the boy to just do one of the paragraphs, which he accepted because he knew she was choosing the work that he could do. However, the next day there was a substitute teacher who said, "Take out your language arts folder and do the following three paragraphs; your teacher told me you did not finish this yesterday." His hand went up and he said, "I don't have to do this." She said, "You have to do it just like everyone else." He became angry and shouted, "No I don't, and you can't make me do it!" As the student began to feel threatened, she too began to feel threatened, and worried that she would have a mutiny on her hands if she did not take a stand, so she became angry and said sternly, "You need to do the work like everyone else, young man!" He got more angry and shouted again "You can't force me to do anything!" She then did what many substitutes do in that situation; she sent him to the principal.

Now the principal had already seen nine kids that day. He had told all nine kids that they needed to do their work or else they would miss recess and their parents would be informed. All nine out of nine kids did what they were told. They just needed an authority, who they knew would follow through, to reiterate the rules and discipline plan. However, this boy was different.

When he came down to the principal's office, already agitated, the principal said, as gently as he did to all the others, that he must do his work or miss recess and have his parents called. He yelled, "I don't have to do that work and you can't make me!" Now, truthfully, he did not have to do the work, according to the modification plan that was in force,

allowing him changes to his language arts curriculum—but with the regular teacher out, no one knew this.

The principal couldn't believe the boy's harsh tone of voice and was thinking that this boy would be going to middle school next year and needed to learn here and now how to respect authority. The principal asserted, "Young man, you may not talk to me this way. When you are in this building you must respect all the adults. It is as if we are your parents during the school day." The boy reacted, "YOU ARE NOT MY FATHER!" standing a bit too close now to the principal. If things had continued like this, the boy might have shown the principal his middle finger (as he had once in the past) prompting the principal to suspend him, which would only serve to teach the boy a reliable way to get out of school.

Instead, the security guard saw the escalating power struggle as he passed by the office, and he intervened. The principal knew the security guard had a way with children and did not mind letting him take over. The security guard said to the boy "You're right; you really should not have to do that work." The boy's temper calmed a bit as he perked up and listened to the security guard. The two of them walked and talked about TV shows and other interests until the boy was calm, and then the guard (also unaware of the modifications the boy was entitled to) convinced the boy to do some of the language arts he did not even have to do. The guard was able to do this because he knew how to handle the situation, to deal with the emotion before using any reasoning.

What this guard initially did to avert a meltdown was to validate the boy's feelings rather than continue in the power struggle. A very popular book, titled *How to Talk to Kids so Kids Will Listen*, describes essentially this process of showing understanding and empathy for children's feelings before they will listen (Faber and Mazlish, 1999). Words one can use include:

- "That makes sense."
- "I can understand how you feel."
- "I wish I could make it better."

To avoid an escalating power struggle, we may need to deal with the emotions before we can use reason and enforce rules. Sometimes we do this by making validating comments to our children and sometimes we find ways to distract them from the triggers to their upset.

More ways to calm children in the throes of a meltdown are addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter Summary

- When we accept and appreciate our children, we help to establish a positive relationship through which we can help them to learn. The following strategies all involve ways in which we may have to adjust our expectations of our children so we can maintain a good relationship.
- Control our own frustration by:
  - Expecting challenging behaviors from our children as part of normal development.
  - Realizing our children's challenging behaviors are not threats to our own competence, but instead are a function of the youngsters' tenuous ability to cope with frustration.
  - Understanding that challenging behaviors are temporary until we can find better ways to manage and prevent those difficult situations.

- Plan for children to approach simpler, confidence-building tasks before challenging them with more difficult tasks.
- Teach them to expect frustration as part of learning rather than a sign of failure.
- Avoid power struggles when the child does not yet have the skills to cope with a particular situation.