

# Problem Behavior

How do we understand it and what do we do about it?

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## Defining the "Problem"

- ▶ Start by asking ourselves why we see certain behavior as problematic.
- ▶ Whose problem is it, the child's or mine?
- ▶ Is the problem is contextually based?
- ▶ Is the problem embarrassing me?
- ▶ Is it a problem because someone important to me thinks so?

## Rethinking Discipline

- ▶ What is the goal of discipline?
- ▶ Most of us associate only punishment or consequences with discipline.
- ▶ The root word of discipline is “disciple” meaning student, pupil or learner.
- ▶ Discipline means to teach, to give instruction.

## When a child misbehaves, what do we as caregivers want to accomplish?

- ▶ Short-Term:
- ▶ We want the child to cooperate. We want to elicit cooperation and help the child stop behavior that is not acceptable and behave in ways that are.

## Is the objective to punish?

- ▶ It might be effective in the moment but won't work over the long-term.
- ▶ Do we want to teach that power and control are the best tools to get others to do what we want them to do?

## Are consequences the ultimate goal?

- ▶ Consequences are the primary method for most parents. Time outs, spanking, taking away privileges, grounding, etc.
- ▶ Science of the developing brain tells us that automatically giving consequences is not the best way to accomplish the goal.
- ▶ Consequences and punitive reactions are actually often counterproductive in terms of building brains as well as gaining cooperation.
- ▶ Kids act, parent react, then kids react.

## When a child misbehaves, what do we as caregivers want to accomplish?

- ▶ Long-Term:
- ▶ Help a child build resiliency and instruction to develop skills to handle challenging situations and frustrations without losing control.
- ▶ Help build internal skills that can be generalized beyond the immediate situation.

## Learning Essentials of Life and Relationships

- ▶ Children need to learn skills like inhibiting impulses, managing big feelings like anger and to consider the impact of their behavior on others.

▶ Siegel & Bryson, No Drama Discipline

## Building Resiliency Early: The Dance of Reciprocity

Alicia Lieberman, *Emotional Life of the Toddler*

- ▶ Baby's earliest anxieties are based on distressing bodily sensations: hunger, the urge to suck, gastric upset, elimination strains, fatigue, and the need for physical contact in the form of touch, holding and cuddling.

- ▶ The sensations created by these early experiences teach the baby a great deal about relationships. When a baby cries when hungry and is fed promptly and lovingly, the baby learns that there is a connection between his cry for help and a successful outcome in the form of an appropriate parental response.
- ▶ When repeated, the baby learns to wait with hope. The parents response helps keep his anxiety within manageable limits. The parents protect the baby from experiencing unmanageable anxiety before he can protect himself.

## Molding the Developing Brain

- ▶ Nature provided the basic architecture.
- ▶ A child's brain is constantly being wired and rewired and interpersonal experiences determine the structure of the brain.

## Repeat Experiences: Neurons that Fire together Wire Together

- ▶ Children need repeated experiences to wire their developing brains:
  - ▶ to help delay gratification
  - ▶ deal flexibly with not getting their way
  - ▶ contain their impulses to act aggressively.

## The One Constant

- ▶ The first step in effective discipline is to connect with our children emotionally.
- ▶ Our relationships with our children needs to be central in all situations.

## Connect and Redirect

Siegel & Bryson, No Drama Discipline

- ▶ Connection isn't the same thing as permissiveness.
- ▶ Children need repeat empathic connection combined with clear and firm boundaries.

- ▶ Giving children what they need means providing them with clear and consistent boundaries to create predictable structure in their lives and having high expectations for them.
- ▶ Children need to understand what is permissible and what's not.

## Having high expectations: Mentalizing

- ▶ A child has taken a stethoscope out of her mother's doctor bag and was playing with it. As she put the stethoscope to her ears, her mother thought proudly, *"she seems interested in medicine. Maybe she will grow up to be a doctor like me"*. After a time the little girl put the listening end of the stethoscope up to her mouth and exclaimed, *"Welcome to MacDonalds. May I take your order, please?"*
- ▶ The mother laughed about how easily we can project our ideas on one another.

▶ Kornfield, *The Wise Heart*

## AVOID at all cost

- ▶ Any discipline approach that is aggressive, inflicts pain or creates fear or terror.
- ▶ The stress hormone cortisol is toxic to the brain and inhibits healthy growth.
- ▶ Harsh and severe punishment can actually lead to significant changes in the brain such as the death of brain connections and cell death.

## Consequences are ineffective when Emotions are running high.

- ▶ Helping a child calm down will increase their receptiveness and understand what you are telling them quicker than punishments or lectures.

## Redirect

- ▶ We connect and help them become calm and self-regulated. Then they can hear us and understand.
- ▶ Then we can redirect to more appropriate behavior and help them learn to handle strong emotions and manage their behavior in the future.

## The Integrated Brain

- ▶ When different parts of the brain work together in a coordinated and balanced way.
- ▶ Easy to identify when the brain is not working in an integrated way:
  - ▶ Tantrums
  - ▶ Meltdowns
  - ▶ Aggression
  - ▶ Dis-integration

## Horizontally Integrated

- ▶ Left brain logic and right brain emotion.

## Vertically Integrated

- ▶ Wiring the higher parts of the brain that can thoughtfully consider actions with the lower parts of the brain that are connected with instinct, gut reactions and survival.

## Lower “Subcortical” Brain

- ▶ Contains centers that regulate internal functions, arousal of the nervous system as a whole, and elementary sensory-motor processing.

## Puzzling Behavior

- ▶ Unusual sensory processing differences are frequently found in individuals with problems behaviors as well as disabilities.
- ▶ Analyzing those differences plays a key role in understanding puzzling behaviors that have proven difficult to change.

## Sensory Integration

- ▶ The organization of sensory input for use. Through sensory integration, the many parts of the nervous system work together so that a person can interact with the environment effectively and experience appropriate satisfaction through an adaptive response.

## No Drama Discipline Model: Siegel & Bryson

- ▶ 8 Basic Principles

## Discipline is Essential

- ▶ Kids need clear and consistent boundaries and high expectations to help them achieve success in relationships and other areas of life.

## Effective discipline depends on a loving, respectful relationship between a child and adult

- ▶ Discipline should never include threats or humiliation, cause physical pain, scare children or make them feel the adult is the enemy. Discipline should feel safe and loving.

## Goal of discipline is to teach

- ▶ We use discipline moments to build skills so kids can handle themselves better now and in the future. Instead of punishment we encourage cooperation by helping them think about their actions.

## First Step is to pay attention to emotions

- ▶ Being attentive to the emotional experience behind a behavior is just as important as the behavior itself. Addressing kids emotional needs is the most effective approach to changing behavior over time.

## When children are upset or having a fit that's when they need us the most.

- ▶ We build trust and a feeling of overall safety when we show them we are there for them at their absolute worst.

## Sometimes we need to wait until they are ready to learn

- ▶ The worse times to try to teach are when a child is upset or out of control. Our first step is to help them calm down so they can regain control and handle themselves.

## We help them be ready to learn by connecting with them

- ▶ Before we redirect we connect and comfort. We validate their feelings with lots of nurturing empathy.

## After we connect, we redirect

- ▶ Once they have felt the connection then we can redirect and talk with them about their behavior.
- ▶ We help them gain insight into themselves, empathy for others, and the ability to make things right when they made mistakes.

## All parents mess up

- ▶ The only people who think teaching or parenting is easy are those who have never done either.
- ▶ The most important jobs in the world are also the easiest to get wrong.

## Discipline Mistakes

- ▶ Discipline becomes consequence based instead of teaching based.
- ▶ We think that if we're disciplining we can't be warm and loving.
- ▶ We confuse consistency with rigidity.
- ▶ We talk too much.
- ▶ We focus too much on the behavior and not enough on the why of the behavior
- ▶ We don't focus on HOW we say what we say.
- ▶ We communicate that children shouldn't experience big feelings.
- ▶ We overreact and our kids focus on our overreaction, not on their own actions.

- ▶ We don't repair,
- ▶ We lay down the law in an emotional, reactive moment, then realize we're overreacted.
- ▶ We forget that children may sometimes need our help calming themselves down.
- ▶ We consider an audience when disciplining.
- ▶ We get trapped in power struggles.
- ▶ We discipline in response to our habits and feelings instead of to our individual child in a particular moment.
- ▶ We embarrass our kids by correcting them in front of others.
- ▶ We dismiss our kids experience.
- ▶ We let "experts" influence us more than our own instincts.
- ▶ We're too hard on ourselves.

## Recommended Reading

- ▶ No Drama Discipline. Daniel J. Siegel MD and Tina Payne Bryson, PhD. 2016 Bantam Books
- ▶ The Whole Brain Child. Daniel J. Siegel MD and Tina Payne Bryson, PhD. 2012 Bantam Books
- ▶ The Emotional Life of the Toddler. Alicia Lieberman, 2018 Simon & Schuster