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NINE MISTAKES PARENTS CONTINUE TO MAKE

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by Larry F. Waldman, Ph.D., ABPP

I have been working with children and their parents for 40 years. I began my career as a staff member for a boys' home in the late 1960's, taught "emotionally handicapped" teens in 1971 and 1972, served as a school psychologist for the Scottsdale (Arizona) School District from 1973 to 1979, and have since conducted a private clinical psychology practice in Phoenix, which is largely child-centered. I have written two books on parenting, teach graduate courses for Northern Arizona University, and speak nationally on parenting. One constant over the years is that parents continue to struggle with child management and discipline and continue to make some of the same mistakes I have seen over the past four decades:

1) Parenting According to the "Sleeping Dog" Philosophy

The sleeping dog adage counsels that when the dog is sleeping leave it alone. Parents have misapplied this philosophy to their children: "When the child is behaving leave him/her alone." What results from this improper management perspective is that the child receives all sorts of attention and recognition related to misbehavior, but gets little if any parental attention for behaving well. Since children live what they learn, they come to exhibit more bad behavior than good—and the parent cannot understand why their child frequently misbehaves.

2) Parenting Inconsistently

For too many parents every day is a new day with respect to child management. How behavior was dealt with yesterday has little bearing on how behavior is handled today. The rules change depending on how the parent feels or how much sleep they received. Parents say "No" several times to a request of their child but ultimately they capitulate if the child continues to whine—or threatens to tantrum. Inconsistent parenting yields high rates of poor behavior because the child will test the limits to determine where the limits are (that day) and the child has been taught (like a gambler) that if they keep asking, nagging or whining, "No" might become "Yes." Once again, the parent is confused as to why their child "is so stubborn."

3) Communicating Abstractly

Parents continue to give directions and provide reinforcement by speaking in abstract terms. Telling a child to "be good" as you walk into a grocery store, or to "behave" in the physician's office, does not convey to the child what their behavior should "look like." By the same token, verbally rewarding a child with statements like "way to go," "I'm proud of you," or "nice job," does not qualify as reinforcement because these abstract comments do not educate the child as to what they can do the next time they are in a similar situation to earn the reinforcement. Parents must direct and reinforce their children by speaking in concrete terms such that the child knows what the targeted behavior "looks like."

4) Rewarding Materialistically

Parents still reward with money, candy, or toys. Rewarding good behavior with the above does not qualify as reinforcement because an essential ingredient is missing—parental attention. If parents mistakenly reward with money or candy etc., two problems arise: When the parent asks the child to do something, the child may ask, "What will I get?" and the child chooses to behave for some material reward rather than complete the task for the satisfaction of a job well-done and to please their parent. The best reinforcement is contingent parental attention.

5) Using Delayed Reinforcement

If an overweight person ate a low-calorie meal, immediately weighed themselves and noted they lost two pounds, it would be relatively easy to continue eating in that appropriate manner. This is the power of immediate reinforcement. Unfortunately, weight loss does not occur so quickly so proper eating is difficult to sustain. If delayed reinforcement blocks adults, it certainly will interfere with children's behavior. Rewarding a child for good behavior on Tuesday with some promised award the following Saturday will not be effective. Reinforcement is most effective when immediately paired with the appropriate behavior.

6) Over-Reacting to Negative Behavior

Many parents regularly allow their children to "get their goat." Over-reacting to misbehavior provides children with undeserved intense attention and control. Parents must strive to "keep their cool."

7) Failing to Use Extinction and Logical/Natural Consequences

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Most misbehavior takes the form of pouting, procrastinating, whining, and arguing with their sibling—with the primary purpose of gaining parental (negative) attention. Parents often provide that negative attention whenever the child desires. The best response to this misbehavior is no response—no attention (“extinction”). For decades when I tell parents this, they think I’m crazy. However, if they follow through with extinction, they are always amazed at how powerful doing nothing is.

By ignoring mild to moderate inappropriate behavior, parents allow logical or natural consequences to come into play. For example, siblings who squabble are left to work things out themselves; the child who puts off their social studies project is left to be confronted by their teacher; or the child who announces they won’t eat what is being served for dinner is told to leave the table. Parents must learn to use extinction and allow logical and natural consequences to occur.

8) Punishing Non-Specifically, In a Delayed Manner, with Emotion.

Punishment, like reinforcement, must be applied specifically and immediately. Punishment must be provided such that the child clearly understands what their misbehavior looked like. Punishment should be short, usually no more than for the remainder of the day, so the child can connect their misdeed with the consequence. If the child cannot watch TV or use the computer on Friday for some misbehavior on Monday, they likely will not recall or appreciate their misdeed. Finally, if the parent punishes with emotion, the child will focus on the parent’s affect and not on their misbehavior. Labile punishing will also absolve any guilt the child might have.

9) Teaching Responsibility through Coercion

For 40 years parents have mistakenly believed that they teach responsibility by nagging or coercing the child until the task is done. For decades I have been telling parents, “If you have to make a child responsible, they’re not!”

Children learn responsible behavior by choice and consequence. Clearly and specifically state the task once and let the child decide how they will respond. If the child reacts in a responsible manner, reinforce them; if the child behaves irresponsibly, then apply the appropriate consequence. It is expected that children will, at times, respond irresponsibly; this is how children learn. Child management works if the child behaves appropriately and is properly reinforced, or if the child behaves inappropriately and is properly consequence.

Larry F. Waldman, Ph.D., ABPP is a licensed psychologist who has practiced in the Paradise Valley area of Phoenix for over 35 years. He works with children, adolescents, parents, adults, and couples. He also provides forensic consultations in the areas of family law, personal injury, and estate planning. He speaks professionally to laypersons, educators, corporations, and fellow mental health professionals. He teaches graduate courses for the Educational Psychology Department for Northern Arizona University. He is the author of “Who’s Raising Whom? A Parent’s Guide to Effective Child Discipline;” “Coping with Your Adolescent;” “How Come I Love Him but Can’t Live with Him? Making Your Marriage Work Better;” “The Graduate Course You Never Had: How to Develop, Manage, Market a Flourishing Private Practice—With and Without Managed Care;” and “Too Busy Earning a Living to Make Your Fortune? Discover the Psychology of Achieving Your Life Goals.” His contact information is: 602-996-8619; 11020 N. Tatum Blvd., Bldg E, Suite 100, Phoenix, AZ 85028; email: LarryWaldmanPhD@cox.net; website: TopPhoenixPsychologist.com.

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