

DAVID ELKIND, a wise psychologist once wrote:

*Children feel  
like we do,  
but think  
differently.*

# COOPERATION AND RESPECT

Toddlers Through Young School Aged Children

Dear Reader,

I AM A PSYCHOLOGIST, who has worked with children and families for over 35 years. Over time I have found myself making use of certain premises that when shared, have been of help to parents. My aim in writing these short pieces is to make the ideas accessible and easy to remember. I know that what I have written may not be true or helpful for everyone. All families are different but families also share similarities. The suggestions I have made reflect these similarities and my hope is that these ideas make it easier to understand and enjoy your child.

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## COOPERATION & RESPECT

LET'S TALK ABOUT TWO IMPORTANT PARENTAL OBJECTIVES:

Raising a child who will listen and engage with you in a cooperative manner and raising a respectful child.

SOMETIMES THESE TWO OBJECTIVES PLAY OUT IN DIFFICULT WAYS. Parents will give a command or request and the child will ignore what has been said. The child now appears to be both uncooperative and disrespectful. They aren't listening and parents are certain they are being disrespected. Next, this idea can jump into mind – if my child is acting like this at 4 or 5 what can I expect when they are 13 years old?

SO WHAT DO I KNOW about helping a child listen? What do I know about generating respect for a parent's opinion? And how can that help you in the moment. The first thing to remember is that any behavior has to be put into perspective. We do not expect one or two year olds to follow instructions. Instead we assume that although they may understand our words, "pick up the ball" they may not have the understanding to follow

a command or they may not "want to." This is acceptable for children until the age of three. It is when we know that a 4 or 5 year old child understands, but still doesn't do what we ask, that the problems start – parental irritation and anger, questions of respect, questions of authority – "do it because I say so." Simply put, our expectations change as the child grows older. And in fact, children do gain a better understanding of the words, but that

does not mean their understanding of an appropriate response meshes with our own. It takes time, development, experience and cultural norms, all working together for a child to meet expectations with appropriate behavior.

WE CAN START with 6 simple premises, ideas which constantly inform my work. Then I will suggest how we might handle difficult situations with children.

*AS PARENTS we should remember that the things we appreciate in others are the same things children appreciate in us.*

No one likes to be told what to do.

Sometimes you have to give up your preferences for the good of others.

Children need help cleaning up.

Children like to play and children like to win.

Never take a child's negative behavior personally.

Why a child disobeys is not as important as how you handle it.

# USEFUL PREMISES

# 1

No one likes to be told what to do, and no one likes to be told what to do all the time. We prefer to be engaged in activities of our own choosing.

Agency or autonomy is the ability to set our own tasks and goals and is an important motivator at all ages. Children, even young children, prefer to follow their inclinations (which can vary from day to day, hour to hour) • Think about yourself. Adults typically prefer work which allows them the independence to generate and develop their own ideas. A workplace where you are told what to do and how to do it can become unpleasant and burdensome. • It is important to distinguish between being told *what* to do and being told *how* to do something. Being told what to do can feel intrusive. Being told how to do something, (and here I am talking about instruction in something we want to learn) encourages, develops and augments an individual's sense of agency.

# 2

Socialization demands that you (sometimes) give up your preferred activities for the good of others.

To become a functioning member of society the desire and push for autonomy has to be tempered and restrained. We have to learn to listen to parents, teachers, and employers. • I am reminded of an exchange between a just turned four year old boy and his preschool teacher. It was his turn to help set the tables for snack. The teacher asked for his assistance. He replied, "No, I am too busy counting the stripes on my socks." This little story has a happy ending. The teacher simply told him, firmly but lovingly, that he could count his stripes later but right now he was needed to help. He acquiesced.

# 3

Children often need help cleaning up. They need help with simple tasks of organization.

Children can become overwhelmed with the look of things. For example, being asked to put away toys strewn over a play space can present an almost insurmountable obstacle. To the child's eye there are so many toys that it appears it will take forever to put them away. Some direction as to how to start and manage the task is needed. (It helps to remember that when as adults we are faced with a messy desk or closet it can take time to begin the necessary organization and that once started it is often easier than it first appeared.)

# 4

Children like to play and children like to win.

Enjoying play and wanting to win has useful applications and can serve to encourage cooperation. One autumn day, a mother I know was walking her four and a half year old boy home from school. Still several blocks away, he stopped, refused to walk another step and insisted she carry him home. Her refusal in turn got nowhere. Then she remembered play and winning. She said "I bet I can pick up more leaves than you." That was all he needed to hear, took off running, and gathered leaves all the way home.

# 5

Never take a child's negative behavior personally.

Sooner or later, you will refuse to comply with a child's request or you may insist they comply with one of yours. • If tempers are high, the youngster may well respond with "You are the worst father/mother in the world." Hearing "You are the worst," followed by "I wish I was not your child" will cause the strongest parent to rethink everything they have done. Never believe the protestations, they are said in the heat of the moment. Your best defense is to maintain equilibrium and a sense of humor. For example "Well I am doing the best job I can," "When you have your children you can give them ice cream before dinner," etc. etc. etc. (A wonderful poem by Shel Silverstein, titled "Clarence" captures this perfectly. You might try reading it aloud when things have settled down.) Remember, your child is not picking up his toys, or helping you set the table because he wants to disobey you personally. They do want to disobey, that much is clear but why is less clear. Too busy doing something else? The pleasure of saying no? The practice of saying no (without understanding the consequences?) Your guess is as good as mine. But this does bring us to the next and the last premise.

# 6

The motivation for why a child is disobeying is not nearly as important as how you handle it.

It is a given that children will disobey and in fact we often overlook a young child's oppositional behavior. However, in situations where cooperation is important or necessary it helps to remember that a willful disrespect of authority is part of childhood and not a precursor of teenage behavior. Try not to exaggerate the child's intent or conjure up an unruly teen. A child's behavior can easily increase in intensity simply because they do not yet know how to back up or how to calm down. Given the child's immaturity, it becomes important for the parent to hold their temper, model firmness, insist on appropriate behavior and if it is not forthcoming to develop a consequence. Chances are good that if you can keep your temper, stay in the moment, not exaggerate future behavior, and maintain a sense of humor, the consequences you develop will be appropriate.

*OK. Let's assume we are in agreement as to these basic ideas or premises. How can they be used to make life easier?*

## HOW TO HELP A CHILD PAY ATTENTION AND FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS (i.e.cooperate)

### Lay The Groundwork

If interactions with your toddler or young child consists of giving directives – "do this," "do that," "don't do it that way," "do it this way," – they will eventually stop listening. Instead, try to develop conversations that are mutual or interactive, increasing opportunities for shared experiences and for compliance.

Ask the child to show you what they are doing, teach them something that interests them, play together or simply sit quietly nearby while they are engaged. In other words, listen to your words and develop ways of interacting that are not "top down." Instead, make time for interactions where there is some mutuality.

Now I am not suggesting that you never give a child directives. I am saying that if this is all you say and all they hear, be prepared to be tuned out. Think about supervisors you have had in the workplace. Frequently any boss or manager that tries to micro-manage and tell you what to do and how to do it is marginalized. They are avoided and disregarded whenever possible and they would not be the first person chosen to help you think through a problem. Compare this personality with a different type of boss, one who trusts you to come up with solutions, who waits to offer advice until they are asked, who leaves you alone to do your job. Which of these two personalities are you more likely to listen to when a top down directive is a necessity?

- 1 Listen to your voice, listen to what you are saying.
- 2 Encourage rather than demand cooperation.
- 3 Children need help with simple organization.
- 4 Children like to play and children like to win.

### Example #1 • Cleanup

There are toys over the floor that need to be picked up. You have said "pick up your toys and put them in the basket" and your child did not follow the request. Try to remember that to a 3, 4, or 5 year old, a space strewn with toys can look like more work than it actually is.

Rather than repeating yourself and becoming annoyed in the process, you can help organize the task and make it a game. "You pick up all the red and blue things, I will pick up all the green and yellow things and I bet I will win." My guess is that you will have a young child eager to pick up the red and blue items as fast as possible.

### Example #2 • Getting Dressed

You have asked your child to get dressed and were met with no cooperation. But if you suggest a contest against you (who can get dressed faster) or against a clock, it becomes a game.

Just to be clear: I am not suggesting that everything becomes a game; sometimes kids just have to get into the car. But if all interactions are directives they will stop listening. If levity is introduced frequently, and as a matter of course, then when there is no time for games, and your voice indicates this has to be done "now" the child is often more willing to comply. This important request isn't being heard as "I am being told what to do yet again." Will these suggestions work perfectly all the time? Most likely not. But they will work some of the time and should make things easier.

For those of you who are thinking "Life is not a game, they have to learn how to listen" or "I am not interested in being a friend to my child, I want them to respect me like I respected my parents" let me suggest the following.

A boss can be friendly, cooperative, give independence and will to decisions and maybe even go to lunch with you. However, we never mistake our boss for our friend, he remains the one in charge, and is to be respected.