

learning for life



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Engaging co-operation with your children

"Wash your hands!" ... "Keep your voices down!" ... "Go to sleep!" ... "Are you sure you have brushed your teeth?" ... "Don't eat with your fingers!" ... "Don't jump on the sofa!" ... "Don't throw sand!" ... "Don't pull the dog's tail!"

One of the built-in frustrations of being a parent is trying to get our children to behave in ways that are acceptable to society and to us.

This is incredibly trying at times and may lead to tension and anger. Parents need routine, a sense of order, cleanliness, and courtesy. Meanwhile, I wonder if children really wish for the same thing? If we were not there, would they bother to wash, to pack away things, even eat their food? A lot of energy goes into helping children adjust to what we define as *our* needs. Yet, at times, the more we insist they do something, the more they seem to resist.

One of my favourite sayings is, "If you keep doing what you have always done, you will keep getting what you have always got." So if there are times when your children do not seem to be co-operating as much as you would like them to, then what can you do differently that may create a different result for you and your children?

By asking yourself this question you open up a world of possible skills that will help keep your relationships from getting into a 'stuck' routine.

So here is an invitation. Write down all the things you currently expect your children to do in a normal day (such as make their bed, eat their breakfast). Also write down all the things you expect them not to do (not to jump on the beds, not to leave their shoes in the passageway, etc).

Are there ways to engage our children's co-operation without damaging their self-esteem or leaving them with anger towards us? Below are some skills that may help you to engage your child's co-operation. Not all skills will work with every child. Nor will every skill suit your personality and there isn't any one that is effective all the time. However, these skills create an environment of respect in which the spirit of co-operation can begin to grow.

1. Describe what you see, or describe the problem. The power of using descriptive language is that it takes away the finger-pointing and accusation, and draws attention to the work that needs to be done.

"The food spilled. We need a cloth and another plate."
"This room is a mess. We need to pack all the

toys away carefully."

When we describe the event (instead of talking about what the child 'did'), we make it easier for the child to hear what the problem is and deal with it.

2. Give information. Giving information is like giving a child a gift that he can use for the rest of his life. The child experiences it as an act of confidence in him. He says to himself, "Grown-ups trust me to act responsibly once I have the facts."

"Milk that is left on the table may go sour. The milk belongs in the fridge."

"Puzzles that are left on the floor may get trodden on and then broken. Puzzles belong on the shelf."

"Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values." - Dalai Lama

3. Bring it down to one word. If you have already explained and given loads of information, then reminding them with a word is better than repeating the whole thing again. Children dislike hearing lectures, sermons and long explanations. The shorter the reminder the better.

You have asked them to pack their puzzles away and they still haven't done so. "Boys, puzzles!"

4. Describe what you feel. It is not necessary to be eternally patient and forgiving. Children are not that fragile and also need to hear that other people, including their own parents, have feelings which are varied and intense. You can model for them how to deal with these. They will most likely copy your methods of dealing with intense feelings and the verbal language you use. If you wish your children to share their feelings with you, then it needs to work both ways. Statements like these are good starters...

"I'm feeling really irritable at the moment. It would be a good idea to stay away."

"This isn't a good time for me to play with you. I'm tense and distracted. After supper I will be able to play some more games with you."

5. Leave a note. Attach the note to their shoes or the puzzles.

"Please put me back on the shelf. Thanks. Your puzzles."

6. Use humour, another accent or voice. The power of humour and being young-at-heart will win over any child. You can find a way to be serious and sincere while still being fun at heart.

"Rocket to Jason, rocket to Jason, come in please. I can't land with all these toys on the floor."

7. Give choices. The choices you give demonstrate to the child that they are still empowered to control certain aspects of their lives.

"We need to have a bath now. Would you like to have it with blue bubbles or red ones?"

"We need to go home in five minutes so would you like to have a last turn on the swing or on the slide?"

In using these skills it is important to be authentic and genuine. Sounding patient when you are not can only work against you. Not only do you fail to communicate honestly, but in being 'too nice' you end up letting it out on your child later on. Match your words and tone with your feelings.

Just because you may not get through the first time, it doesn't mean that you should revert to your old ways. There is more than just one skill and you can use them in combination, and if necessary, with increasing intensity.

And when you become too frustrated and irritated, ask yourself what you expect your child to do when they are also frustrated and irritated? Would you like them to shout, manipulate or threaten, or perhaps to keep trying to find a way that will create a result of positive co-operation for you both? Keep trying!

