



# **P**arent **E**ffectiveness **T**raining

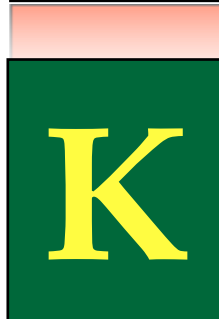
*The proven program for raising responsible children*



## art Two



## ow To Talk So



## ids Will Listen

Dr Susan Kriegler

## HOW TO TALK SO KIDS WILL LISTEN

When parents learn Active Listening, they get impatient and ask, “*When do we learn ow to get the kids to listen to us? That’s the problem in our home!*” Undoubtedly that’s the problem in many homes, for children inevitably annoy, disturb, and frustrate parents at times; they can be thoughtless and inconsiderate as they go about trying to meet their own needs. Like small puppies, *kids can be boisterous and destructive, noisy and demanding.* As every parent knows, children can cause extra work, delay you when you’re in a hurry, pester you when you’re tired, talk when you want quiet, make huge messes, neglect their chores, call you names, stay out too late, and so on ad infinitum.

Parents need *effective ways to deal with children’s behavior that interferes with the parents’ needs.* After all, parents *do* have needs. *They have their own lives to live, and the right to derive enjoyment and satisfaction from their existence.* Yet, many parents have allowed their children to be in a favored position in the family. These children demand that their needs are met but they are inconsiderate of the needs of their parents.

Much to their regret, many parents find that as their children get older, they *act as if they are oblivious to their parent’s needs.* When parents permit this to happen, their children move through life as if it is a one-way street for the continuous gratification of their own needs. Parents of such children usually become embittered, and feel strong resentment toward their “ungrateful,” “selfish” kids.

Parents who indulged a child since infancy may be puzzled and hurt because their adolescent child contributes very little to the family, yet expects her parents to do everything she requests. If she doesn’t get her way, she says abusive things about her parents, throws tantrums, or walks out of the house and doesn’t return for hours.



What can parents do when they cannot genuinely accept a child's behavior? How can they get the child to consider the parents' needs? Now we will focus on how parents can talk to kids so they will listen to *their feelings* and be considerate of their needs.

Entirely different communication skills are required when the child causes the parent a problem as opposed to those needed when the child causes herself a problem. *In the latter case, the child "owns" the problem; when the child causes the parent a problem, the parent "owns" it.*

## **WHEN THE PARENT OWNS THE PROBLEM**

Suppose:

A child is often late for dinner.

A child is interrupting your conversation with a friend.

A child calls you at work several times every day.

A child has left his toys on the living-room floor.

A child appears about ready to tip his milk over onto the rug.

A child is demanding that you read her one more story, then another, then another.

A child plays her music too loudly.

A child is not carrying his load of work around the house.

A child uses your tools and doesn't put them back.

A child drives your car too fast.

All these behaviors actually or potentially *threaten legitimate needs of parents*. The child's behavior in some *tangible or direct way affects the parent*: Mother does not want her dinner wasted, her rug soiled, her discussion interrupted, and so on.

Parents have several alternatives when they own the problem:

1. They can try to modify the child directly
2. They can try to modify the environment.
3. They can try to modify themselves.

Jimmy takes his father's tools out of the toolbox and usually leaves them scattered over the yard. This is unacceptable to Dad, so *he* owns the problem.

He can confront Jimmy, say something, hoping this might modify Jimmy's behavior.

He can modify Jimmy's environment by buying him his own set of junior tools, hoping this will modify Jimmy's behavior.

He can try to modify his own attitudes about Jimmy's behavior, saying to himself that "boys will be boys" or "he'll learn proper care of tools in time."

We are now going to deal with the first alternative, focusing on *how parents can talk or confront their kids in order to modify behavior* that is unacceptable to the parents. What you need here are *Confrontation Skills*.

## INEFFECTIVE WAYS OF CONFRONTING CHILDREN

Please take out a sheet of paper and write down how you would handle the following situations:

You are very tired from a full day's work. You need to sit down and rest for a while. You would like to take this time to watch the evening news. But, your five-year-old son keeps pestering you to play with him. He keeps pulling your arm, getting up on your lap, blocking the TV. Playing with him is the last thing you feel like doing.

Your ten-year-old daughter plays on a softball team. You pick her up after games and for the last several days she has not been in the area where you agreed to meet.

Your teenager came home from school, fixed a sandwich for herself, and left the kitchen counter in a big mess after you had spent an hour cleaning it up so that it would be clean when you started to get dinner.

Perhaps you are one of those parents who would handle these typical situations ineffectively. If you are like most parents, *the things you would have said have a high probability of:*

1. Causing the child to resist her parent's influence efforts by refusing to change the behavior.
2. Making the child feel her parent does not think her very bright.
3. Making the child feel her parent has no consideration for her needs.
4. Making the child feel guilty.
5. Tearing down the child's self-esteem.
6. Causing the child to defend herself vigorously.
7. Provoking the child to attack the parent or get back at her in some way.



Here are the most common errors parents make when attempting to change a child's inconsiderate behaviors:

### **Sending a "Solution Message"**

Most parents don't wait for the child to initiate considerate behavior; they tell her what she *must* or *should* or *ought to* do. All of the following types of messages "send a solution:"

#### **1. ORDERING, DIRECTING, COMMANDING**

"You go find something to play with."

"Turn that music down!"

"Be home by 11:00."

"Go do your homework."

#### **2. WARNING, ADMONISHING, THREATENING**

"If you don't stop, I'll scream."

"Mother will get angry if you don't get out from under my feet."

"If you don't get out there and clean up that mess, you're going to be sorry."

#### **3. EXHORTING, PREACHING, MORALIZING**

"Don't ever interrupt a person when she's talking."

"You shouldn't act that way."

"You shouldn't play when we're in a hurry."

"Always clean up after yourself."

#### **4. ADVISING, GIVING SUGGESTIONS OR SOLUTIONS**

"Why don't you go outside and play?"

"If I were you, I'd just forget about it."

"Can't you put each thing away after you use it?"

In these kinds of responses *you call the shots; you are in control; you are taking over; you are cracking the whip. You are leaving her out of it.* Giving her the solution to your problem can have these effects:

1. Children - just like adults - resist being told what to do. They also may not like your solution.
2. Sending a solution also communicates another message, "I don't trust you to select your own solution" or "I don't think you're sensitive enough to find a way to help me with my problem."
3. Another implicit message the child receives is that your needs are more important than hers - "You're doing something unacceptable to me, so the only solution is what I say."

### **Sending a "Put-Down Message"**

“Put-down messages” may fall into any of these categories:

### 1. JUDGING, CRITICIZING, BLAMING

“You ought to know better.”

“You are being very thoughtless.”

“You are being bad.”

“You are the most inconsiderate child I know.”

“You’ll be the death of me yet.”

### 2. NAME-CALLING, RIDICULING, SHAMING

“You’re a spoilt brat.”

“All right, Mr Know-It-All.”

“Do you like being a selfish freeloader?”

“Shame on you.”

### 3. INTERPRETING, DIAGNOSING, PSYCHOANALYZING

“You just want to get some attention.”

“You’re trying to make me mad.”

“You just love to see how far you can go before I get mad.”

“You always want to play just where I’m working.”

### 4. TEACHING, INSTRUCTING

“Its not good manners to interrupt someone.”

“Nice children don’t do that.”

“How would you like it if I did that to you?”

“Why don’t you be good for a change?”

“Do unto others... etc.”

“We don’t leave our dishes dirty.”

All these are put-downs - they impugn *the child’s character, deprecate her as a person, shatter her self-esteem, underline her inadequacies, cast a judgment on her personality.* What effects are these messages likely to have?

1. Children often feel guilty or remorseful when they are evaluated or blamed.
2. They feel that parent is not being fair: “I didn’t do anything wrong” or “I didn’t mean to be bad.”
3. They feel unloved, rejected: “She doesn’t like me because I did something wrong.”
4. They dig in their heels. To give up the behavior would be an admission of the validity of the parent’s evaluation. They say, “I’m not bothering you” or “The dishes aren’t in anybody’s way.”
5. They come back at the parent with a boomerang: “You’re not always so neat yourself” or “You’re always tired” or “Why can’t the house be a place we live in?”
6. Put-downs make children feel inadequate. They reduce her self-esteem.



Don't yell at your kids!



Lean in real close and whisper,  
it's much scarier

## EFFECTIVE WAYS OF CONFRONTING CHILDREN

Here are ways of confronting that *build instead of tearing down a child's self-esteem*:

### You-Messages and I-Messages

Ineffective messages almost always begin with the word "You" or contain that word:

- You stop that.
- You shouldn't do that.
- Don't *you* ever...
- If *you* don't stop that...
- Why don't *you* do this?
- You are naughty.
- You want attention.
- You should know better.

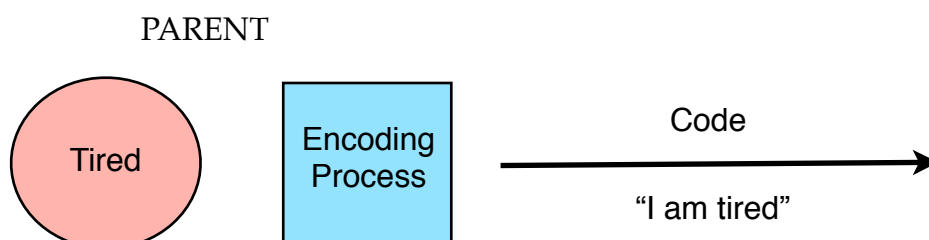
But when a parent simply tells a child how some unacceptable behavior is making *the parent feel*, the message generally turns out to be an I-Message.

"I don't feel like playing when I'm tired."

"I feel frustrated when I come to pick you up and you're not there."

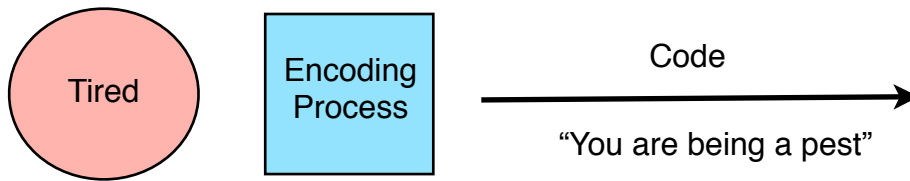
"I sure get discouraged when I see the mess in the kitchen after I just cleaned it up."

When a child's behavior interferes with the parent's enjoyment of life or her right to satisfy her own needs, *the parent "owns" the problem*. She is upset, disappointed, tired, worried, harassed, burdened, etc., and to let the child know what is inside her, she must select a suitable code.



But if this parent selects a code that is “you” -oriented, she would not be coding her “feeling tired” *accurately*:

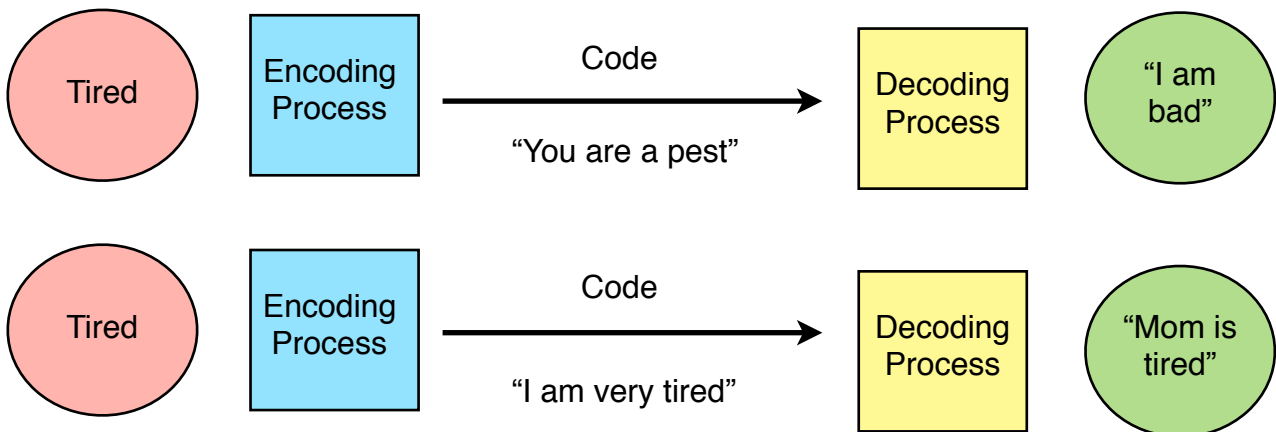
PARENT



“You are being a pest” is actually a very *poor code for the parent’s tired feeling*. A code that is *clear and accurate* would always be an *I-Message*: “I am tired,” “I don’t feel up to playing,” “I want to rest.” A *You-Message* code does *not send the feeling*. It refers much more to the *child* than to the *parent*. Consider these messages from the point of view of what the child hears:

PARENT

CHILD



The first message is decoded by the child as an *evaluation* of her. The second is decoded as a *statement of fact* about the parent.

## THE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF AN I-MESSAGE

Children will be much more likely to change their unacceptable behavior if parents send I-Messages containing three parts: 1) a description of the unacceptable behavior, 2) the parent’s feeling, and 3) the tangible and concrete effect the behavior has on the parent. (BEHAVIOR + FEELING + EFFECT)

### Describing the Unacceptable Behavior

The key here is to remember to *describe the behavior, not judge it*.

“When you didn’t come home from school on time and didn’t call to say you’d be late...” instead of “It was inconsiderate of you not to call.”



## **The Parent's Feelings About the Behavior**

You need to get *in touch with and being really honest about how you really feel*. Am I angry or afraid or worried or embarrassed or just what?

"When you didn't come home from school on time and didn't call to say you'd be late, I got worried..." instead of "You're driving me crazy."

## **How the Behavior Affects the Parent**

Kids need to *know how their behavior is a problem*. They need to hear a *very good reason to change* their behavior. Most often, a tangible and concrete effect is something that costs you money, time, extra work or inconvenience. It might prevent you from doing something you want to or need to do. It might physically hurt you, make you tired, or cause you pain or discomfort:

"When you didn't come home from school on time and didn't call to say you'd be late, I got worried and *that distracted me from my work*."

When you send a *complete three-part I-Message*, you tell the child the *whole story* - not only what she is doing that is giving you the problem, but also what feeling you have about it, and equally important, *why the behavior will cause or have caused you a problem*:

"When you don't want to try on these new jeans I'm afraid to buy them because if they don't fit I'll have to make another trip to the mall to exchange them."

"When you don't write down my phone messages I feel worried because I can't return my client's calls and I might lose a sale."

"When you left the gas almost empty I was upset because I had to stop to get it filled and that made me late for work."

In addition to giving children a specific reason for changing their behavior, the complete three-part I-Message has a *significant effect on parents*. When parents try to communicate the "tangible effect" portion of the message, they often realize there is no tangible effect at all. It helps parents realize *how arbitrary they can be with their kids, and how much of what they say to their kids is merely caused by the bad habit of being a control-freak*.

## **Why I-Messages Are More Effective**

I-Messages are less likely to provoke resistance and rebellion. To communicate to a child honestly the effect of her behavior on *you* is far less threatening than to suggest that there is something wrong with *her*.

I-Messages are also more effective because they *place responsibility within the child for modifying her behavior*. “Ouch! That really hurt me. I don’t like to be kicked” tells the child how you feel, yet leaves her to be responsible for doing something about it.

Consequently, I-Messages *help a child to grow, help her learn to assume responsibility for her own behavior*. An I-Message tells a child that you are leaving the responsibility with her, *trusting her to handle the situation constructively, trusting her to respect your needs*, giving her a chance to start behaving constructively.

Because I-Messages are honest, they tend to influence children to send similar honest messages *whenever they have a feeling*. In deteriorating relationships, conflict often deteriorates into mutual name-calling and reciprocal blaming:

PARENT: You’re getting awfully irresponsible about doing your dishes after breakfast. (YOU-MESSAGE)

CHILD: You don’t always do yours every morning. (YOU-MESSAGE)

PARENT: That’s different - I have lots of other things to do around the house, picking up after a bunch of messy children. (YOU-MESSAGE)

CHILD: I haven’t been messy. (DEFENSIVE MESSAGE)

PARENT: You’re just as bad as the others, and you know it. (YOU-MESSAGE)

CHILD: You expect everyone to be perfect. (YOU-MESSAGE)

PARENT: Well, you certainly have a long way to go to reach that point of perfection when it comes to picking up. (YOU-MESSAGE)

CHILD: You’re so picky about the house. (YOU-MESSAGE)

This is typical of many conversations between parents and children when parents start by confronting them with a You-Message. Invariably, they end up in a *struggle*, with both alternatively *defending* and *attacking*.

I-Messages are much less likely to produce such a struggle. This is not to say that I-Messages will produce only sweetness and light. Understandably, children do not like to hear that their behavior has caused a problem (just like adults, who are never exactly comfortable when someone confronts them with the fact that their behavior has caused pain or discomfort). Nevertheless, telling someone how you feel is far *less threatening* than *accusing* her of *causing* a bad feeling.

The greatest reward that comes to a parent from being honest and transparent is the relationship it promotes with a child. *Honesty and openness foster intimacy* - a truly interpersonal relationship, where the child is also encouraged to reveal to the parent who she is.

## **PUTTING I-MESSAGES TO WORK**

Here are some of the *mistakes* parents frequently make when they try to put I-Messages to work:

## The Disguised You-Message

Many parents send You-Messages under the *disguise of putting "I feel" in front of name-calling messages*:

MR G.: I feel very strongly that you have been neglectful of your chores.

PAUL: How's that?

MR G.: Well, take your job of mowing the lawn. I feel upset every time you goof off. Like last Saturday. I was angry at you because you sneaked off without mowing the backyard. I felt that was irresponsible and I was upset.

## Don't Accentuate the Negative

MRS K.: (as her daughter finally gets home at 1:30) I'm angry at you.

LINDA: I know I'm late.

MRS K.: I'm really upset at you for keeping me awake.

LINDA: Why couldn't you sleep? I wish you'd go to sleep and not worry.

MRS. K: How could I? I was mad at you and worried sick that you might have been in an accident. I'm really disappointed in you that you didn't think to stick to our agreement.

If Mrs K. had communicated what she *actually* felt when Linda walked in the front door, this conversation would have sounded more like this:

MRS K.: Oh, Linda, thank God you're home safe. I'm so glad to see you. What a relief. (Hugs Linda). I was so afraid you'd been in an accident.

LINDA: Wow, you *are* glad to see me, aren't you?

## "Undershooting"

You need to send an I-Message that *matches the intensity of your inner feelings*. This parent was guilty of undershooting her feelings:

MRS B.: Bryant, I don't like for you to hit Sammy.

If she had wanted to convey her real feelings, the message might have sounded more like this:

MRS B.: Bryant, I get scared to death when the baby is hit on the head! I would sure hate to see him hurt badly. And I really get upset when I see someone big hurting someone a lot smaller. Oooh, I was so afraid his little head was going to bleed.

## The Erupting Mount Vesuvius

Some parents end up spewing and venting their pent-up emotions like a volcano. The I-Message is *not a license to vent angry feelings*.



Unlike other feelings, *anger* is almost invariably directed at another person. It is a message that usually means “I am angry at *you*” or “*You* made me angry.” It is really a You-Message, not an I-Message.

Anger is a *secondary feeling* generated only *after* a person has experienced an earlier feeling. The person manufactures the anger as a consequence of the *primary feeling*. Mostly, the anger is used to teach somebody else a lesson, and it communicates judgment and blame. I am not suggesting that anger is not real. It is very real and makes people boil and shake inside. I am suggesting that people *make* themselves angry. It is actually putting on an act, *playing a role to affect the other person*, to show him what he has done, to convince him he shouldn't do it again. Examples:

Child acts up in a restaurant. Parents' primary feeling is *embarrassment*. Secondary feeling is anger: “Stop acting like a two-year old.”

Child forgets its her father's birthday and fails to say “Happy Birthday” or give him a present. Fathers' primary feeling is *hurt*. Secondary feeling is anger: “You're just like all the other thoughtless kids today.”

Child brings home her report card with C's and D's. Mother's primary feeling is *disappointment*. Secondary feeling is anger: “You know you were goofing off all semester. I hope you feel very proud of yourself.”

### **Problems with I-Messages**

Children frequently respond to I-Messages by *ignoring* them, especially when parents first start using them. *Nobody likes to hear learn that their behavior is interfering with the needs of others*. The same is true of children - they sometimes prefer “not hearing.”

Send another I-Message when the first does not get a response. Perhaps the second I-Message will come out stronger, more intense, louder, or with more feeling. The second message tells the child, "Look, I really mean it." It may sound something like this:

"Hey, I'm telling you how I feel. This is important to me. And I don't like to be ignored. I hate it when you just walk away from me and don't even listen to my feelings. That doesn't sit well with me. I don't feel its very fair to me when I really have a problem."

Children frequently respond to an I-Message by sending back an I-Message of their own. Rather than immediately modify their behavior, they *want you to hear what their feelings are*. Example:

MOTHER: I hate to see the clean living room all dirtied up as soon as you come home from school. I feel very discouraged about that after I've worked so hard to clean it up.

SON: I think you're too picky about keeping the house clean.

Instead of getting defensive, irritated, or rebutting, in this case you need to *go back to the first basic principle - when the child has a feeling or a problem, use Active Listening*. This is called "*Shifting Gears*" - temporarily changing from a confronting posture to a listening posture. For example:

MOTHER: You feel my standards are too high and that I'm too fussy.

SON: Yeah.

MOTHER: Well, that may be true. I'll think about that. But until I change, I sure feel darned discouraged about seeing all my work go down the drain. I'm very upset right now about this room.

Often, after the child can tell you have understood his feelings, he will modify his behavior. Usually, all the child wants is understanding of *his* feelings - then he will feel like doing something constructive about *your* feelings.

## **I-MESSAGES RATHER THAN PRAISE**

No idea is more entrenched in parent-child relations than the notion that *kids should be praised for "good" behavior*. First, to be effective, praise must be felt by the child. *Praise is often rejected by the child*:

PARENT: You're getting to be such a good little swimmer.

CHILD: I'm not half as good as Laurie.

PARENT: Honey, you played such a good game.

CHILD: I did not. I feel horrible. I should've won.

If the I-Message is a more constructive way of motivating a child to change unacceptable behavior, it actually stands to reason that its also a *more constructive way of communicating positive feelings* - appreciation, pleasure, gratitude, relief, thankfulness, happiness.

When parents praise children, it usually comes out as a You-Message:

“You’re being such a good boy!”

“You did a great job!”

“You’re doing so much better in school!”

Note that all these messages contain a *judgment, an evaluation of the child*. Contrast these messages with *Positive I-Messages*:

“I really appreciate your taking out the trash even though its my job - thanks a lot!”

“Thanks for picking up your brother - that saved me the trip. I sure appreciate it.”

“When you let me know when you’ll be home, I feel relieved because I don’t have to worry about you.”



### **How to Prevent Some Problems**

You may want to send a message to prevent an unacceptable behavior in the future. The purpose of Preventive I-Messages is to *inform kids ahead of time* about your plans or needs:

“I need to finish a course I’m taking online, so I’d like us to discuss how we can share the computer this weekend.”

“I’d like us to figure out what needs to be done before we leave for our trip, so we make sure we have time to get it all done.”

“I’d like to know when we’re having dinner because there’s a long phone call I want to make.”

### **CHANGING UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOR BY CHANGING THE ENVIRONMENT**

Environmental modification is often extremely effective with children of all ages.

### **ENRICHING THE ENVIRONMENT**

Be sure to provide children with *many interesting thing to do* - play materials, reading materials, games, clay, dolls, puzzles, etc. Set up a *special area* in the house, in the garage, or in the garden designated as a place where a child is free to dig, pound, build, paint, mess, and create. Car trips can be fun if children have play materials, games, and puzzles that will keep them from becoming bored and restless.

### **IMPOVERISHING THE ENVIRONMENT**

Parents, especially fathers, sometimes *overstimulate* their children before mealtime or bedtime and then expect them suddenly to become quiet and controlled. These are times when the child's environment should be impoverished, not enriched.

### **SIMPLIFYING THE ENVIRONMENT**

Children often engage in unacceptable behavior because their environment is *too difficult or complex* for them. Simplify their environment by for example:

- Buying clothes that are easy for her to put on herself.
- Providing a stool or box she can stand on to reach her clothes.
- Purchasing child-sized eating implements.
- Buying unbreakable cups and glasses, etc.

### **LIMITING THE CHILD'S LIFE SPACE**

Putting an unacceptably behaving child in a playpen, is an attempt to limit the child's "life space" so that her subsequent behaviors will be acceptable to the parent. Fenced-in backyards are effective in preventing such behavior as running out into the street, walking through the neighbors' flower garden, getting lost, and so on.



### **CHILD-PROOFING THE ENVIRONMENT**

Although most parents remove medicines, sharp knives, and dangerous chemicals from the reach of children, a more thorough job of child-proofing might include such things as:

- Turning pot handles to the back of the stove when cooking.



- Putting matches out of reach.
- Removing expensive or breakable objects.
- Locking up sharp tools.
- Putting a rubber mat in the bathtub.
- Storing slippery throw rugs.



"It took a little time, but we finally made the house baby-proof."

## **SUBSTITUTING ONE ACTIVITY FOR ANOTHER**

If a child is playing with a sharp knife, offer her a dull one. If she is bent on examining the contents of your cosmetic drawer, give her some empty bottles or cartons to play with on the floor. If she is about to rip out the pages in a magazine you wish to keep, give her one you don't want.

## **PREPARING THE CHILD FOR CHANGES IN THE ENVIRONMENT**

If her usual babysitter is unable to come on Friday, start talking with the child on Wednesday about the new babysitter who is going to come. If you are going to spend your vacation at the beach, prepare the child weeks ahead for some of the changes she is going to encounter - sleeping in a strange bed, meeting new friends, not having her bicycle with her, the big waves, proper behavior on a boat, and so on.

## **PLANNING AHEAD WITH OLDER CHILDREN**

Conflicts can be prevented by thoughtfully arranging the environment of teenagers, too. They also need adequate space for their personal belongings, privacy, opportunity for independent activity. Here are some suggestions for *enlarging your area of acceptance* for older children:

- Provide the child with her own alarm clock.
- Provide adequate closet space with numerous hooks.
- Establish a message centre in the home.
- Provide a child with her own personal calendar for recording commitments.
- Give a child advance notice whenever special work needs to be done to prepare for company.

Always knock before entering a child's room.

Include children in discussions involving family plans that will affect them.



" Some days it's hard to keep one step ahead of them. "

## HOW PARENTS CAN PREVENT CONFLICT BY MODIFYING THEMSELVES

It is far easier for most parents to accept new methods to change their *children* than to accept the idea of making changes within *themselves*. Parenthood in our society is considered more a way to influence the growth and development of *children* than the growth and development of *parents*. Too often parenthood means "raising" kids; they are the ones to adjust to parents. There are problem *kids*, but not problem *parents*.

Yet every parent knows that in his relationships with a spouse, a friend, a relative, a boss, or a coworker *there are times when he must change* in order to prevent serious conflicts or maintain the health of the relationship.

## CAN YOU BECOME MORE ACCEPTING OF YOURSELF?

There is a direct relationship between how accepting people are of others and *how accepting they are of themselves*. A person who accepts himself as a person is likely to feel a lot of acceptance for others. People who cannot tolerate a lot of things about themselves usually find it difficult to tolerate a lot in others.

A parent needs to ask himself a penetrating question: "*How much do I like who I am?*"

If the honest answer indicates a lack of acceptance of himself as a person, that parent needs to reexamine his own life to find ways to become more fulfilled from his own achievements. Persons with high self-acceptance and self-regard are generally productive achievers who are using their own talents, who are actualizing their own potential, who accomplish things, who are doers.

Parents who satisfy their own needs through independent productive effort not only accept themselves but also *needn't seek gratification of their needs from the way their children behave*. They don't need their children to turn out in a particular way. People with high self-esteem, resting on a firm foundation of their own independent achievement, are more accepting of their children and the way they behave.

On the other hand, if a parent has no or few sources of satisfaction and self-esteem from his own life and depend heavily on getting satisfaction from *the way others evaluate his children*, he is likely to be unaccepting of his children - especially those behaviors that he fears may make him *look like a bad parent*.



\* Fortunately, I'm not driven by a deep need for validation. \*

“Good children” - high achievers in school, socially successful, competent in athletics, and so on - has become a *status symbol* for many parents. They “need” to *be proud* of their children; they need their children to behave in a way that will make them look like good parents to others. In a sense, many parents are *using* their children to bring them a feeling of self-worth and self-esteem. In this case, the stage is set for a dependency on children that makes the parent overanxious and severely needful that the children behave in particular ways.

## **WHOSE CHILDREN ARE THEY?**

Many parents justify strong attempts to mold their children into a preconceived pattern by saying, “After all, they are *my* children, aren't they?” or “Don't parents have the right to influence their *own* children in whatever way they think best?”

A parent who feels *possessive* of a child, and therefore feels a right to mold the child in a certain way, will be much more inclined to feel unaccepting of the child's behavior when that behavior deviates from the preconceived mold. A parent who sees a child as someone quite separate and even quite different - not at all “owned” by the parent - is bound to feel accepting toward more of the child's behavior because *there is no mold*. Such a parent can more readily *accept the uniqueness of a child*, is more capable of permitting the child to become what he is genetically capable of becoming.

Many parents see their children as “*extensions of themselves.*” This often causes a parent to try very hard to influence a child to be what the parent defines as a good child or to become what the parent regretfully failed to become himself. Evidence is accumulating that in healthy human relationships each person can permit the other to be “*separate*” from him. The more this attitude of separateness exists, the less need to change the other, to be intolerant of his uniqueness and unaccepting of differences in his behavior.

Kahlil Gibran has phrased this principle beautifully in *The Prophet*:

Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They came through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.  
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.  
For life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday.

## **DO YOU REALLY LIKE CHILDREN OR JUST A CERTAIN TYPE OF CHILD?**

Fathers who value athletes often tragically reject a son whose interests and talents are nonathletic. Mothers who value physical beauty can reject a daughter who does not fit the cultural stereotype of female beauty. Parents whose lives are enriched by music often show a nonmusical child how deeply disappointed in him they are. Parents who value academic competence can cause irreparable emotional damage in a child who does not have this special type of intelligence.

There is an *infinite variety of children brought into this world* and an infinite variety of ways in life for them to go. The beauty of nature, and the miracle of life, is this vast variety of living forms. Don't want your child to *become something in particular*, just want him to *become*.

## **ARE YOUR VALUES AND BELIEFS THE ONLY TRUE ONES?**

Many parents who are in deep trouble in their relationships with their children are persons with very strong and very *rigid concepts of what is right and wrong*. The more certain parents are that their own values and beliefs are right, the more they tend to impose them on their children (and usually on others, too).

Parents whose system of values and beliefs is more *flexible*, more permeable, more amenable to change, less black-or-white, are more accepting of their children's behaviors that would appear to deviate from their values and beliefs. These are the parents who somehow seem to accept that *change is inevitable*, “that life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday,” that the beliefs and values of one generation are not necessarily those of the next, that our society does need improvements.



"You had it easy when you were a teenager. Other than your ears, you didn't have to worry about which body parts to pierce."

## IS YOUR PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR SPOUSE?

Many parents look to their *children* for their primary relationship, rather than to their *spouse*. Mothers, particularly, rely heavily on their children to give them the satisfactions and pleasures that more appropriately should come from the marriage relationship. Frequently this leads to "putting the children first," "sacrificing for the children," or counting heavily on the the children "turning out well." Their children's behavior *means far too much* to them.

It is very difficult for such parents to *allow their children to make mistakes* and stumble in their lives. They may feel their children must be protected against failure experiences, shielded against all possible danger. You investment should not be solely in your children. You should be *concerned* about them but not *anxious*. You should be *interested*, but not *smothering*. An effective parent is amused at her children's immaturity and foibles, rather than devastated.



