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ADHD: CREATING RULES AND LIMITS

USING POSITIVE INCENTIVES AND PUNISHMENTS

“My son has ADHD. He gets me so angry. He never follows my orders, doesn’t obey, doesn’t cooperate.”

“My teenage daughter has ADHD. She has an answer for everything I say. She acts as if she doesn’t have to answer to anybody in the home. All parental discipline and authority have broken down.”

Parents often tell me that all discipline has broken down in their home. Here is what I advise:

SKILLS RELATED TO SETTING AND ENFORCING RULES AND LIMITS USING BOTH POSITIVE INCENTIVES AND PUNISHMENTS

- 1. Create standards, norms, rules and limits as a needed complement to acceptance, effective communication, and positivity.**

Parents should always create a home base characterized by acceptance, effective communication and positivity. But you must also create the needed structure of rules and limits.

I urge parents of children and teens with ADHD to work on SETTING STANDARDS, NORMS, RULES and LIMITS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THEIR PARENTAL VALUES. PARENTS ALSO NEED TO ENFORCE THESE STANDARDS CONSISTENTLY.

Parents must enforce these standards with both rewards and punishments.

2. Create structure and routines for your child with ADHD:

The first step in introducing the above is to create lots of structure and routines so you do not need to constantly remind, nag and order your child around. Structure and predictable routines are very necessary for these disorganized kids with ADHD who do not easily create self-directed habits and who need the predictability of routines.

3. Address your child's compromised working memory:

A strong motivation for creating structure is to remember that your ADHD child has a compromised working memory and is not going to remember the practical elements of their daily life, like where they put their homework. Nor is your child going to have a clue about how much time is 15 minutes. ADHD children will lose their homework and lose track of time. Your job is to sidestep your own frustration and desire to blame and instead to help your child create physical reminders and time cues so their daily life works more smoothly. This reduces the rushing, pressure and screaming that typically go with working memory problems;

4. Convert orders into rules, norms or requests:

I advise parents to stop issuing orders and instead create and articulate simple Rules and Norms. Anything that is important for your child to do should be converted into a predictable rule, if possible. Anything that you want the entire family to observe should be discussed as a family norm. If something is desirable but is not seriously important or is not recurrent, it should be treated as an occasion for making a request, based on good will.

5. Use lots and lots of positive incentives whenever your child complies with a norm, rule or limit.

Positive incentives are needed by children with ADHD to raise their motivational level. Research has demonstrated that children with ADHD respond much, much better to positive incentives than to punishments because of the particular way their motivational system is affected by the biology of their brains.

6. Apply consequences in an “educative” manner, rather than in a punitive way or as a way to vent your frustration and anger:

Deliver your consequences for misbehavior in a very matter of fact way for the purpose of helping your child learn, rather than for the purpose of causing your child to suffer. Use “logical consequences.” The logical consequence should be, if at all possible, logically and organically related to the infraction. Above all, always, always use punishments EDUCATIVELY and DISPASSIONATELY. Not to create suffering or to “*show the child who is boss,*” or to “*make sure he never does that again.*” The point of a punishment is to help your child learn something from direct experience. When a child experiences you as coercive, punitive, angry, offended, or moralistic they learn either to feel fear and shame or to avoid you by lying or complying. They don’t learn much about the logical consequences of their actions, as your child’s focus is all about your parental anger.

7. Act and speak like a Swiss Policeman:

When delivering a negative consequence for a poor or oppositional choice, I urge parents to act more like a Swiss Policeman than as an offended, disobeyed parent. In a very matter of fact tone, inform your child that they chose A (the undesirable option) rather than B, the preferred option, so they get consequence B (the unpleasant one)

rather than Y (the rewarding consequence). No muss, no fuss on your part. It is the child who needs to be affected, not you.

8. Use “I-messages” as a form of negative feedback rather than always resorting to criticism, yelling or removal of privileges:

Once the relationship between you and your child improves, your child will often be eager to please you. As you express more positive feedback for good behavior, your child often feels motivated to elicit your good feeling and to make you proud of them. Once the parent-child relationship becomes more positive, a short, gentle “I-message” about how something does not work for you can work wonders with many of the everyday infractions a child with ADHD engages in.

For example: *“I know you are irritated that I just reminded you to do your homework before playing your computer game, but when you yell at me like that it just feels lousy. Please use another, kinder tone.”*

9. Avoid inadvertently stimulating or reinforcing oppositional patterns in your ADHD child:

Both research findings and my own clinical experience leads to the conclusion that many, perhaps most, kids with ADHD have developed oppositional patterns. After repeated failures at academics and at pleasing the teacher by maintaining good class behavior, and after repeated experiences of disapproval from frustrated parents, ADHD kids almost invariably develop a negative attitude towards authority. This very often leads to the development of Oppositional Patterns. Overemphasis on the negative behavior of your child and overemphasis on the use of negative consequences for bad behavior tends to stimulate oppositional patterns. Therefore, always look for ways to use positive feedback and positive incentives. When you need

to bring negative consequences into play, do so “educatively,” without blame, anger and insulting words.

10. Address challenges created by the ADHD child’s oppositional responses:

Despite the use of positive feedback and positive incentives, oppositional patterns and oppositional/defiant disorder occur very, very frequently in children with ADHD. Consequently, I encourage parents to use a “Forced Choice” option when they are asking their reluctant or oppositional child to engage in a positive behavior. Parents often scream at their child who has resisted doing homework, yelling something like: *“I can’t stand this anymore. Go do your homework or I will ground you.”* Instead of this response, I encourage parents to provide a Forced Choice within the parameters the parent decides are appropriate.

For example, *“We reached a family agreement for all children to observe the rule of getting homework done as a condition for using computer for games. You are breaking that norm. Here is your choice: You can go and complete your homework before supper. If you do, you can use your computer after supper. Or you can decide to ignore your homework now. If you do so, your computer will be forfeited for the rest of the night. The choice is yours.”*

All of this must be said and delivered in a matter-of-fact way, much like our proverbial “Swiss Policeman.”

11. Adopt a child-developmental view of setting and enforcing standards and rules:

One of the guidelines we use in helping parents establish standards, rules and norms is this: as children move from pre-K to college age, the parent moves from **power methods**, (where the parents of the

pre-school child choose the rule and the consequence), **to influence methods**, (where the parents of the elementary aged child try to influence the child with requests, appeals, incentives and disincentives), **to negotiation methods**, (where the teen or young adult is a full participant in collaboratively negotiating an approach which is acceptable, or at least tolerable, to all parties.) By doing this you honor your child's stage of development as you prepare your child, teen or young adult to for leave your home and launch their own life.

12. Stay mindfully focused on the ultimate goal: healthy character:

Healthy character is learned. Children need to be taught how to work well. They need to be taught how to do their share in the family. They need to be taught how to conduct family relationships in a healthy way. It does not all come naturally. The goal of parenting which will serve you and your children best is not to create children who are always happy and never angry with you. **The goal I recommend is to help your child develop health character in the form of a healthy set of psychological capacities and virtues which will serve your child well when they eventually take their place in the world of work and marriage.** I often ask parents: "*If your child eventually speaks to his wife that way, will you be happy?*" If the answer is NO, you absolutely must seek to alter your child's actions through heartfelt communication and the establishment of relational norms, rules, limits and consequences.

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