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PRINCIPLES FOR PARENTING YOUR ELEMENTARY AGED CHILD

Parenting is both easier and more difficult once your child reaches elementary school. It is easier because your child is engaged with the world and is not 100% focused on you. It is more difficult because your child is engaged with the world and is not 100% focused on you!

What distinguishes your elementary schooler from their younger pre-school siblings?

Elementary aged children begin to pivot their energies from mom and dad to friends and activities and skill development. They want to have more and more playdates and sleepovers. They want to be on social media all of the time. They want to play soccer or manhunt or be with friends. They want to play virtual computer games. They want to read by themselves rather than be read to. They want to dress more like their peers than like mom and dad. The bottom line is that their developmental needs change in a major way, their incentive structures change in a major way, and their need to craft a separate world from mom and dad becomes compelling.

Therefore, although parents must continue all that I have written about for the pre-school child, like affirming and validating your child, parents must now enlarge their skill capacities and vision.

Validation of the child is no longer limited to mom or dad's verbal recognition of the child's growing capacities and virtues. Validation of the child requires parents to do whatever they are able to in the service of

supporting the child's interests and passions, even when those passions and interests take the child away from the family a bit. Additionally, the growing scope of the child's world may inevitably cause the child to be in conflict with parents. The growing maturity of the child makes them more likely to try to find ways to "get around" parents' restrictions, not in the unregulated, immature ways of the two-year-old child throwing a tantrum, but in the willful and sometimes sneaky ways of the 10-year-old child.

Additionally, the child has more conflicts that arise outside of the close nuclear family. These conflicts, for example with friends at school, on the playground, ball field or ballet class, spill over at home and may leave the child moody and explosive. Also, bad examples from friends may cause the child to try out bad behaviors, like defiance, cursing and so on.

Although this age group is generally calmer and is more often able to go about their life independently than the younger child, don't expect a rest from parent/child struggles.

All of this means that in addition to validation of the child's growing interests and capacities, parents must also "manage" the child when the child violates their norms, rules, limits and values. However, parents cannot always manage with simple parent-to-child "praise and positivity" anymore. And it is unwise to manage the child with spanking, which always creates more resentment and long-term acting out, or with verbal criticism, which results in defeated or angry, or acting-out kids.

Parents must always create the foundation for their child's cooperativeness through a loving and empathic relationship with their child. Parents should affirm what they love and appreciate most about their child. Parents must always emphasize the positive aspects of the child and of the child's relationship with the parent. Period. But we need an "add on"

which we will call incentives and disincentives to manage some of their behaviors that are harder to manage with relationship energies alone. We need incentives and disincentives to enforce the norms, rules, limits and standards we create for our 6-12 years old children.

Thus, incentives and disincentives apart from the parent's smile and approval come more into play to achieve many of the same goals which had been achieved primarily through parental validation in the 2-6-year-old grouping of kids.

There are formal ways to dispense incentives, like behavior charts. The key with behavior charts is to stay positive, as usual. Identify the negative behavior, create its opposite or competing positive behavior, and then give the child an incentive for performing that positive behavior. A point system works fine. I have guided many parents to successfully create, implement, and enforce point systems. They work.

When I counsel the use of incentives, I recommend that parents review the entire range of incentives – “things, privileges and experiences.” A “thing” would be an item that will give the child pleasure and, preferably, something that will absorb their time, like an advanced Lego set or a computer game. A privilege might be the addition of an extra hour of screen time on the weekend. An experience might be a trip to the zoo or the botanical garden or a hockey game. **It is important that the child learn that his or her parent loves to be generous with them, but that generosity is tied to the child's responsible choices. This promotes both bonding, which is the key to all positive behavior, and responsible choice-making.**

Many parents, however, do not use a formal incentive program like a chart or point system.

For those parents, I teach them to rely primarily on asking the child for cooperation and, if the child balks, finding out what the issue is. Once that is clear, parents seek a reasonable compromise between what they most want and what their child most wants. Kids respond better to parents who are flexible without losing their values and standards than to parents who try to intimidate, punish or “bribe” the child until the parent gets his or her way. However, kids also do not respond well to “marshmallow parents,” who give up their values and standards the moment the child makes a fuss.

When a parent makes reasonable efforts and the child is just stuck being oppositional or stubborn, or when the parent is not able to be flexible about the issue at hand, **the “when-then” method is very effective.** The parent simply says, for example, “when you have finished your homework, then you may use your cell phone.” The parent keeps both parts of that “agreement.” The parent sets a limit on the cell phone, even if the parent dreads the child's howling. They remove it. And they faithfully give it back when homework is done. Always keep agreements. **Just don't make agreements you will end up resenting or failing to keep.**

With kids of this age, time outs are best not understood as removals from the parent which the younger, pre-schoolchild will want to rectify quickly. They are “time outs from being plugged In.” So, for example, the parent will say “You violated the rule disallowing use of your cell phone late last night. As a consequence, your cell phone is unavailable to you after 6 pm tonight.” Or the parent says, “Your computer games are getting in the way of our family time, so computer games are not available to you until after dinner and only until 8 pm.” And the parent takes the time to block the computer games. The most common error is not failure to set a sensible rule. **The most common error is failure to follow through and enforce their rule.** Parents get busy. Parents get intimidated and want to avoid the outbursts which enforcement often stimulates.

Parents are annoyed that it takes time when the kid "should" remember, "should" obey and "should not" need monitoring or enforcements. Yet it is important to learn to tolerate outbursts and stay the course. **If you abandon your rules by failing to enforce them, children stop taking you seriously. They then ignore your limits, rules and orders, or give them lip service only. They then learn nothing from you. And you are constantly frustrated.**

For those parents interested in a few technical considerations related to incentivizing and disincentivizing their school aged child, the following may be useful:

The positive incentives 6-12 years old kids will work for the most have to do with things and activities which foster their interests, and with access to friends and activities. So that is what the parent should make available as a reward. Parents give relevant positive incentives to help the child learn new, good habits which the child does not take to naturally and easily.

Conversely, negative disincentives take the form of a "time out" from those incentivized, preferred activities and privileges. The major exception is this: do **NOT** take away something that is developmentally useful and valuable. If a kid needs soccer to make friends, do not punish them by refusing to drive them to soccer. Instead, drive them to soccer but cancel the usual "pizza" after the game.

Finally, **let's address the problems which can occur if and when you use timeouts.** As stated above, I generally use the term timeouts for school aged children as "timeouts from their incentivized activities and things." However, there is one situation where a parent probably should use a more traditional timeout with a school-aged child. **Use a traditional timeout if and when your child is out of control and/or aggressing upon you or their siblings.** At that point you

should **firmly invite and gently guide your out-of-control child to a timeout space**, usually their room. They stay there until they are “well-regulated” emotionally. (*“Please come back when you feel calm and don’t need to hit and shout.”*). When you handle them calmly, without insult, anger or embarrassment, they will typically go to their room, even if begrudgingly.

However, **if they refuse to go to or stay in time out, use the same “timing” method** I advised for their younger, pre-school siblings. (*“I see you don’t want to cooperate with my time out. Therefore, I have to **set my timer**. Your punishment will be dependent upon however many minutes you rack up on my timer. And I will translate the duration of your refusal to observe your timeout into your privileges and devices being suspended for an amount of time that relates to the amount of time on my timer. I hope you don’t make a bad choice here.”*). **The parent is always neutral, calm, and emotionally regulated both to provide a model of emotional regulation to the out-of-control child, and to keep the emotional temperature of the relationship steady.** It is just another teaching moment for the parent. Nothing special or dramatic or worth getting distressed about. **It is just part of the parent's teaching job.**

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