

# **Good Behavior is not “Magic” – It’s a Skill: The Three Skills Every Child Needs for Good Behavior**

by James Lehman, MSW

<http://athealth.com/topics/good-behavior-is-not-magic-its-a-skill-the-three-skills-every-child-needs-for-good-behavior-2/>

When you have a child who acts out and is disrespectful or disruptive, it's easy to compare him to the so-called "good kids" who never seem to get into trouble or give their parents grief. Many people feel hopeless about the possibility of ever teaching their child to "magically" become the kind of well-behaved member of the family they envisioned before they had him.

It's actually the learning process associated with consequences that changes the behavior.

The truth is that good behavior isn't magic - you can't just wave a wand and turn your child into who you want him to be. Rather, good behavior is a skill that can be learned, just like carpentry, teaching or nursing. I believe three of the most important skills for children to learn as a foundation for good behavior are: how to read social situations, how to manage emotions, and how to solve problems appropriately. If your child can learn to master these three tasks with your help, he will be well on his way to functioning successfully as an adult.

## **Skill #1: Reading Social Situations**

The ability to read social situations is important because it helps your child avoid trouble and teaches him how to get along with others. If he can walk into a classroom, lunchroom, playground or a dance, read what's going on there, and then decide how he's going to interact in that environment in an appropriate way, he's already halfway there. So if your child sees a bunch of kids who usually tease and bully others, the skill of reading social situations will help him stay away from that group, rather than gravitate toward it.

Parents can help their kids develop these skills by getting them to read the looks on people's faces at the mall or a restaurant, for example. If your child can learn to see who looks angry, frustrated or bored, two things will happen: the first is that he will be able to identify how people might be feeling. Secondly, he'll learn that he should try to identify other people's emotions. Both are integral in learning how to read social situations.

## **Skill #2: Managing Emotions**

It's critical for your child to learn how to manage his emotions appropriately as he matures. Managing your emotions means that it's not OK to punch a hole in the wall because you're angry; it's not OK to curse at your dad because he took your iPod away. Children need to learn that just because they feel bad or angry, it does not give them the right to hurt others.

## **Ask the Right Questions**

If your child calls his little sister a nasty name, it's your job to first sit down and ask, "What did you see going on that you thought you needed to do that?" Not, "How did you feel?" but "What was going on?" You'll find that usually this type of behavior is generally self-centered. Perhaps your child's little sister is getting more attention, or she's watching a show, and he wants the TV, or she's playing with the video games, and he wants to play them. When your child does not know how to deal with that situation, and he becomes nasty or abusive, it's time for you to step in and put a stop to it. And I think you should very clearly state, "Just because

you're angry, it doesn't give you the right to call your sister a nasty name." That's an important, direct way of teaching the skill of managing emotions.

## **What Giving Consequences Does (and Doesn't) Accomplish**

I believe that consequences are part of accountability. In other words, your child should know that if the inappropriate behavior happens again, he will be held accountable. Saying that, I don't think people change simply because they're punished or are given consequences. Although parents often focus on them, consequences alone are not enough. Rather, it's the learning process associated with the consequences that changes a child's behavior. So it's the part of your child's thinking process that says, "Next time I'm upset, if I call Sarah a name, I'm going to be punished. Instead, I can just go to my room and cool down."

Here's the truth: you can punish kids until the cows come home, but it's not going to change their behavior. That's because the problem is actually not the behavior - the problem lies in the way kids think. This faulty thinking then gets externalized into how they behave. If you punish them for the behavior and neglect to challenge the way they think about the problem - or discuss what their options are for dealing with that problem effectively in the future - then really, what are you doing? You're punishing your child, but he hasn't learned anything and he's not going to do anything differently. In fact, he's probably just going to do it again when you're not looking.

## **"What Will You Do Differently Next Time?"**

I think it's very important that you talk to your child about what he can do differently the next time he feels angry or frustrated. This tool is something I developed as part of The Total Transformation Program, and it's an important way to focus on changing your child's behavior. When you use this technique, it encourages your child to come up with other things he or she might do instead of using ineffective behavior. By the way, when you have this talk with your child, it should be a pretty businesslike conversation - it's not all smiley and touchy feely; it shouldn't be abusive or negative, either. Stick to the facts and ask, "What can you do differently next time?"

## **Skill #3: Teach Problem Solving Skills**

There's No Such Thing as "Good Kids" and "Bad Kids"

I believe that the kids who are labeled "good" are children who know how to solve their problems and manage their behavior and social life, and the kids who are labeled "bad" are kids who don't know how to solve those problems. A child is often labeled "the bad kid" when he's developed ineffective actions to solve the problems that other kids solve appropriately. So this child may turn to responses that are disrespectful, destructive, abusive, and physically violent. In my opinion, there's no such thing as good kids or bad kids; there are simply kids who have learned effective ways of solving life's problems, and kids who have not.

As they develop, children have to continually adjust their problem-solving skills and learn new ones. For instance, for a three year old, being told "no" is the biggest problem in her life. She stomps her feet, she throws a tantrum. Eventually, she has to learn to deal with that problem and manage the feelings associated with it. And so those tasks continue for five-year-olds who have to deal with the first day of school and for nine-year-olds who have to change in gym. They continue for 12- and 13-year-olds when they're at middle school, which is a much more chaotic environment than they have ever faced before.

I've devoted much of my career to dealing with kids who behaved inappropriately, all the way from kids who were withdrawn and depressed to kids who were aggressive and acted out physically. I believe a key element in helping children change their behavior is for parents to learn techniques where they help their child identify the problem he/she is facing. Together, you look at how to solve problems and come up with other solutions. So talk to your child about the problem at hand and how to solve it - not just about the emotion your child is feeling.

***Children with ADHD and other behavioral disorders are particularly vulnerable to low self-esteem. They frequently experience school problems, have difficulty making friends, and lag behind their peers in psychosocial development. They are more likely than other children to bully and to be bullied. It is important that parents make themselves aware of their children's concerns and respond to them in positive, consistent, and supportive ways.***

In the end, there is no magic solution to good behavior. The secret is really in teaching kids how to solve problems; good behavior is simply one of the fruits on that problem-solving tree. Your goal as a parent is to give your child the tools to learn good behavior. It's never too late to get these tools, but know this: if your child can't read a situation in the ninth grade and doesn't know how to respond, reacts by getting aggressive, and then gets into trouble, how do you think they are going to handle it when they're an adult and their boss tells them something they don't want to hear? That's why it's important for you as a parent not to "wish away" the bad behavior but to start teaching your child the skills he/she needs to change the behavior for good.

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Page last modified or reviewed on January 24, 2014