



January Counsellor's Corner

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January's Topic: The Q-Tip Principle

Have you ever raised your voice at your kids? Ever had steam coming out of your ears and silently counted to ten, only to invoke a punishment that you later regretted doling out? Did the two-week winter break at home with your kids almost break your belief in your parenting abilities? You are not alone! Sometimes we feel as though we have repeated ourselves a thousand times and our children are still not getting the message, no matter how loud, frustrated or angry we get.

Allow me to introduce the Q-tip principle.

Quit
Taking
It
Personally

When it comes to our own kids, it's hard to step back and look at their behaviour objectively. "You should know better!" is a phrase echoed by parents everywhere. Sometimes it is hard to fathom where their thinking comes from and how they can be so impulsive. Most parents, despite their best intentions, end up frustrated with their children for poor behaviour from time to time. Why do we go to *frustration* mode instead of *teaching* mode? It's hard to say – sometimes it is because it feels like our children's behaviour is a reflection of our parenting, sometimes it is because we feel we have taught the same lesson over and over and our child is still engaging in the same behaviour, and sometimes it is because we have so much else going on that misbehaviour is the last thing we have energy or patience for.

Gordon Neufeld, a Vancouver-based psychologist, uses the phrase,

"Personalize the relationship; depersonalize the discipline"

Personalize the relationship:

Basically, we need to take the opportunity to connect with our children through play and conversation so that our relationship is strong. Without a strong relationship as a foundation, it is difficult to make behavioural change with our children. A strong relationship takes time (preferably screen-free) – it is an investment in our child's well-being. Inviting your child to help you in the kitchen, playing game of cards while supper is cooking, sitting with her to help with her math...these are all ways we can show our child we are invested.

Depersonalize the discipline:

When our children "mess up," we need to rely on the "Q-tip principle" and try to be objective in our parenting.

That looks like:

- Stepping back and treating the situation like a business arrangement, pointing out the child's choice in the matter and outlining the consequence in a matter-of-fact way (<<calmly>> "I

see you chose to skip classes again today. That is going to have to mean that I hang onto your phone until we meet with your teachers and sort out whatever is going on for you. I will be happy to help you talk to your teachers if you like. Once we have a plan in place and turn this around, I will definitely give you your phone back.")

- Using a calm voice to demonstrate that your role is to help them get out of whatever mess they are in and sometimes that involves consequences to turn things around

That does not look like:

- Bringing our personal feelings into it ("How could you embarrass me like that?")
- Using our relationship as leverage ("I spent all that time up the mountain with you and this is how you thank me?")
- Solving the problem for your child ("You want to bite your brother? Well then *nobody* will play with the toy until you can figure out how to get along.")
- Getting emotional/angry or showing weakness/defeat ("I am at the end of my rope with you kids! I swear I don't know why you keep doing this to me every time your mom is out of town! You are driving me crazy!")

Once discipline/consequences are dealt with calmly (on the parents' part at least), then it is time to jump right back into personalizing the relationship. If the problem has been solved, let it be solved and don't use guilt or reminders of the misbehaviour to shape future behaviour, ("Well, you know what happened last time you skipped school, so let this be a warning to you!")

So, what do you do with misbehaviour besides just calmly handing out consequences?

If we shift our thinking from frustration to attempting to understand the message behind misbehaviour, we can better understand how to respond to it.

Essentially:

Kids who misbehave are ***lacking the skills*** they require to problem-solve.

It's easy to assume that behaviour is wilful, vindictive, purposefully targeted toward you, but the truth is that children resort to what they know, often opting for fight, freeze (hide) or flight.

Some examples:

- Your three-year-old attempts to pull a toy out of your six-year-old's hands. Your six-year-old tugs harder and holds the toy up out of reach so that the toddler can't get it back. The two-year-old bites the six-year-old on the leg. (Fight)
- You get an email from your child's high school that he missed classes again today, despite you dropping him off in front of the school in the morning. (Flight)
- You arrive home from work on a pro-d day to see that the kitchen is a mess and your teen has not completed even one item on the "to do" list that you left that morning. In frustration, you raise your voice, only to be met with your teen stomping off to her room and slamming her door, not to be seen again that day. (Freeze [hide])

The common reaction to each of these scenarios is punishment of some sort, often coming out of a frustrated reaction by the parents. Perhaps the toddler gets a time out (administered through clenched teeth and a firm escort to the time-out chair), the teen skipping school gets his phone taken away ("forever!!!!) and the teen locked in her room gets her door removed from her bedroom. These responses are logical, fair punishments that will increase the chances of the behaviour diminishing; however, they do not teach new behaviour. Essentially, without the teaching of problem-solving, we end up with children who behave out of a fear of consequences rather than behaving because they know how to effectively navigate problems they encounter.

Punishment can stop behaviour, but until we teach new behaviours (problem-solving), children will find other ways to act out whatever it is they are trying to communicate. In the examples above, the two-year-old doesn't know how to communicate that she wants the toy from her brother. The teen skipping school is scared to face the potential failing grade in English class and is avoiding dealing with the issue, while the teen locked in her room is struggling to know how to calm down and communicate effectively.

Our focus needs to shift from:

Stopping the behaviour (punishment)

To:

Teaching skills to manage the situation (discipline)

When we take our child's behaviour personally and parent out of frustration, we are missing the opportunity to teach problem-solving skills. That doesn't mean we can't have consequences, but those consequences need to be administered in a way that isn't directly linked with our frustration and they should be coupled with a teaching component.

We can best do that from a calm state where we can "Q-tip". It takes practice, but once we get it, it allows us to parent from confidence instead of frustration. Put your shoulders down, take a deep breath and try a calm, steady voice the next time you are dealing with misbehaviour. Remember, you are modelling how you want your child to handle difficult situations and they learn from watching us.

For more tips on parenting, contact your school or community counsellor.

Some sites to visit:

<https://brightandquirky.com/your-child-would-do-well-if-he-could-do-well/>

<https://www.kidsinthehouse.com/expert/parenting-advice-from-gordon-neufeld-phd>

<https://www.livesinthebalance.org>