

The Parent's Corner

☆We're In your Corner☆

This month we dive into *behavior as communication*.

All children engage in undesirable behaviors at some point, and when this happens we may wonder: Is this normal? How can I make it stop? Dole out a consequence? Yell? Ignore them? Take something away? Will they grow out of this? And finally – is there something wrong with my child? Usually – **NO**. More often than not, problem behavior is your child's attempt to communicate. In fact, **everyone** communicates through behavior no matter what age they are. So what can we do?

First – it's helpful to reframe our thinking around behavior. If we consider problem behavior as an attempt at communication, rather than something wrong with a child, we can begin to address the root of the behaviors. Behind every single behavior there is a cause. In this frame of mind, we recognize that the only thing wrong is the child's inability to tell us their need in that moment. The next step is to take a deep breath, remove our own emotion from the situation, and ask ourselves – what is my child trying to tell me?

Let's be honest, some days we still find ourselves in survival mode. Some days we still engage in...The Power Struggle! We engage with our children in battles that have no winners. Consequences, discipline, bribes, promises, taking things away – we've all been there – no judgment here! Disengage. The most helpful thing can be to not enter the power struggle in the first place. *I want you to imagine with me for a second. You feel angry. Now someone yells, scolds or punishes you. Or maybe someone says "calm down," or "you look ridiculous." How does this feel? Are you calm yet? Yelling at a child for a behavior does not provide them the support they need to learn how to act in difficult situations. When adults react with anger, we send the message that anger solves problems. When adults help children find positive ways to communicate their needs to others, children learn important problem-solving skills that will help them throughout life.*

On the surface we may see a clingy, attention-seeking, shutting-down, scared-to-make mistakes, hyper-active child. But remember that reframing we did? Every behavior has a root cause. If we look deeper, we see a lack of emotional vocabulary to verbalize needs and feelings, and in turn the inability to self-regulate. When words fail them, children turn to actions. Their emotional brain is activated. They can't access the rational, problem-solving part of their brain. It is our job as caregivers to help them return to that rational place, and to work with them to determine the cause.

Behavior Struggles? Follow these tips:

- 1) Kids want control.** So give them as much control as you can handle, and offer choices that you are ok with (e.g.: Do you want to do your homework at the kitchen table or in the dining room?).
- 2) Talk Less!** By skipping the threatening or nagging, you show your child you are not going to be pulled into an argument. Instead of jumping in with a bribe or a punishment or yelling, give yourself some space to gather your thoughts and calm down so that you can respond to their behavior rather than react.
- 3) Kids love to be part of the discussion – ask them what they think!** Solicit their opinions – whether it be family decisions, consequences for their actions, how they want their day to go (including all of the necessary things you expect).
- 4) Avoid consequence that you can't follow through with.** If you are in the heat of the moment, walk away and think it through before letting them know what the consequence will be. Every misbehavior doesn't need an immediate consequence, but not following through teaches children to ignore your requests; respond with "I'm going to do something about this. We'll talk later."

If you continue to have concerns, contact your school counselor to make a plan for a success — they're full of ideas, and are always in your corner!~

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Love & Logic classes are available at Saint Louis Counseling—feel the support of other parents and learn valuable tools to use at home with your children.