Solving Disciplinary Problems

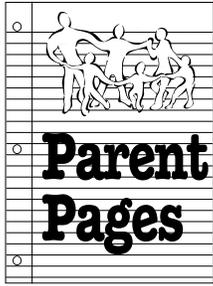**Parent Pages**

When misbehavior becomes a real problem, parents and caregivers are encouraged to take a rational, step-by-step problem-solving approach, instead of screaming and punishing. Here are some questions you can ask yourself as you solve disciplinary problems:

What's the problem?

Parents and caregivers must determine whether or not there is a problem. Adults are often bothered by children's behaviors that are quite common and normal at certain ages. For example, thumb sucking or using a pacifier is normal for infants, toddlers and even preschoolers. Other "problem" behaviors, such as refusing to use the toilet, may simply indicate a lack of skill or developmental readiness rather than misbehavior or disobedience. Still other behaviors may reflect temperamental differences. Is it really a problem if Jimmy doesn't like broccoli or Joanie doesn't like to wear turtlenecks? Personal tastes and preferences offer a more rational explanation of children's behavior than defiance.

When assessing whether or not a problem exists, ask yourself:

1. Is this really a problem?
2. Is it important?
3. Is it relevant?
4. To what degree is it a problem?

Whose problem is it?

After you decide that a real problem exists, you should determine who "owns" the problem. If you own the problem, there are effective steps you can take to solve it. If the child owns the problem, there are effective ways you can guide him to solve it. If the problem seems to be a mutual concern, talk about it and work it out together. How do you decide who owns the problem? Ask yourself:

1. Who is raising the problem?
2. Who is most directly affected by this behavior?
3. Whose goals are being thwarted or rights being interfered with?
4. Who has the negative feelings?

The answers to these questions will dictate the most effective course of action. For example, your son complains to you that his teacher is unfair and he can't stand school. This is clearly his problem, since he raised it, is most directly affected by it and owns the negative feelings. Our problem-solving strategy is to help him analyze and solve his problem -- not dismiss his frustration, reinforce his negative feelings or solve his problem for him.

What exactly is the problem?

The first step in problem solving is to analyze the problem. The person who owns the problem should find out what's really going on. To analyze a behavioral problem, take the following steps:

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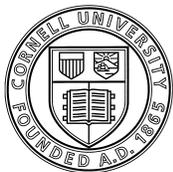
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1. Describe the problem and list all observable facts.

2. List possible causes of and contributors to the problem.

3. Describe the feelings involved.

4. Specify what should change

The last step will be your goal for changing the situation, so be clear about your expectations. Do you want to change feelings, attitudes, behaviors or all three?

What options do you have?

The next step in problem solving is to brainstorm as many courses of action as possible. You may generate solutions alone, with a partner or with the child. Don't hesitate to ask your children for ideas, even if you own the problem. Aim for quantity - don't worry if an idea sounds farfetched at this time.

When you have listed as many ideas as you can, determine what has and hasn't work in the past. Don't repeat past mistakes. What you want to do is come up with a creative solution to a persistent problem.

Evaluate your list of possible solutions and begin with the one that offers the best chance of success. Success will be determined by "Yes" answers to the following questions:

1. Will this end the problem behavior?

2. Will it teach the correct behavior?

3. Will it improve my relationship with the child?

Your aim is to find a win-win solution, one that encourages cooperation and makes all parties feel optimistic about the results.

So what do I do next?

It's not enough to brainstorm a lot of ideas and pick one that may work. Effective problem solving always includes an action plan. A good action plan for changing problem behavior includes the following elements:

A realistic timetable. When do you want this behavior to change? What can you realistically expect? When adults and children fall into unproductive habits, they often have to unlearn the old ways before they can learn new, more productive behaviors. This takes time and adults should be prepared to allow sufficient time for change.

Clear choices and consequences. Your action plan should make it clear what choices are available and the consequences of each choice. Include desirable consequences for successful solutions.

Checkpoints. Your plan should build in ways to check on the child's progress. Expect both success and setbacks and be prepared to help the child chart and evaluate how well he is doing. Remember, your goal is to have the plan work and the child succeed, so allow for mistakes and help your child learn what to do by showing and teaching him.

Evaluation. The last step in action planning and problem-solving is evaluation. Ask yourself the following:

1. Did it work?

2. How do I feel now?

3. How does the child feel?

4. Would I do something differently next time?

Yelling, screaming and resorting to punishments are rarely effective in changing problem behaviors. While a problem solving approach may not lead to the quickest or even the best solutions, it does reduce parent-child frustration

HD 84