CHILDREN CAN BE CHALLENGING

Unfortunately, children do not come with instruction manuals. We as parents often struggle to do the right thing for our children. We do the best we can with the knowledge we have at the time. I’ve been confronted with children’s issues for over 20 years; and fortunately, I learn something new every day. We will never have all the answers, so all we can do is continue to learn and grow. All parents make mistakes, and all children struggle. We as adults sometimes believe that we can protect our children from all negative experiences. But we can’t stop that any more than we can keep it from happening to ourselves. People die, accidents happen, marriages struggle, finances dwindle, and friends disappoint us. So what is a parent’s primary job? I believe it is this---to give our children the skills they need to survive and thrive in their lives.

This article will give you some guidelines, but only you are the expert on your child. This article will give you a framework and philosophy of parenting to help you make healthy decisions for yourself and your children.

So, let’s get started. There are three parenting styles:

**1) Permissive parenting**,in which there is too much freedom;

**2) Authoritarian parenting**, in which there are too many limits; and

**3) Authoritative parenting**, in which there is freedom within limits. When parents are using the first two, they are coddling or controlling. The third one is all about choice. The first two show a lack of faith in the child’s ability to make decisions and learn from his mistakes. The last one, Authoritative parenting, gives the child choices and allows him to experience the consequences of his decisions. **A parent’s lack of faith cause a child to get discouraged.**  This is a normal response from our personal experiences. I’ve unfortunately done both. We often give our children what we needed as children instead of what they need. My father left when I was young and my two step fathers were alcoholics. So when I had my first daughter, I coddled and protected her too much because I wanted to give her what I didn’t have. When my youngest daughter started to act out as a teen, I became more authoritarian, “My way or the highway,” because I felt I had lost all the influence I had over my family. I’ve made a lot of mistakes, so I’ve learned to do a few things right.

Children don’t need a perfect parent. They just need a good enough one. Here’s an example. My mother’s coddling saved my life. When I was 12, I had dizzy spells accompanied with a fever. My fever broke and I was going to return to school the next day. I woke up at 4 a.m. due to my mother covering my body with cold rags. I had a temperature of 105 degrees and soon discovered I had what they believed was a brain tumor. My mother didn’t let the hospital perform surgery until she got a second opinion. She took me to Columbus Riverside Hospital where they diagnosed me with a brain abscess, resulting from an abscess tooth. After 45 days of Corisone and antibiotics, I was back to being a kid again. “Thank you Mom.” My mother may not have done everything right but I always knew she cared; and it is that quality that makes us a good enough parent.

**Another reason children get discouraged is because they want validation.** Their hearts cry is, “Look at me. Look what I can do. Look what I made.” They want their parent’s attention. But we live in a society that has many pressures. Parents get busy getting their children off to school, going to work, helping with their homework, chauffeuring kids to extracurricular activities, making dinner, and getting them in bed at a decent hour. So time is an issue; but also, sometimes parents just don’t know how to do it. Often the parents I see didn’t have anyone to play with them when they were kids. The old school was tough. Parents worked hard to provide for their families. Some kids ended up working the gardens at an early age. So, it’s hard to give something if you never had it. Some parents say, “We do family activities all the time.” All that is good, but it is difficult to validate when all the children are together, as you will soon see. The sibling rivalry thing falls into this category also. Children try to outdo each other and have conflicts because they want to see who the parents love the most. They ask themselves, “Who are you going to side with?” Keep in mind. This is all normal. All families struggle with these issues to some degree. The goal is to understand our child’s needs and help him get those needs met in a healthy manner. Keep in mind the image of a pie. 95% of those slices represent what you are doing right. Think of all the sacrifices you have made even going back to night time feedings and dirty diapers. That’s why children never have the right to disrespect us. That 5% is the small bump in the road. As you will see, it is the small changes that will make a big difference and get your child back on track.

So when a child gets discouraged, he will do one or more of these four things: **1) Seek constant attention**; **2) Seek power**; **3) Seek revenge**; or **4) Act helpless**. These children have an inaccurate self-concept. They believe they only have value and can only get their parent’s attention if they are keeping the parents busy, are arguing with their parents, are making their parents angry, or are frustrating their parents by acting helpless. How you respond as a parent will determine whether or not you reinforce and solidify the inaccurate self-concept.

Solutions are simple but not easy: **1)** Ignore the constant attention; **2)** Drop the rope in a power struggle; **3)** Refuse to be offended and do not retaliate; and **4)** Help the child find his place in the family through usefulness and participation. The first rule with encouragement is to stop all discouraging messages. Look for opportunities to encourage. Suppose your child brings up her Science grade from an F to a D. You can say, “I see you were really working hard in Science. You brought your grade up.” You see, this child believes, “If I don’t try, then I can’t fail.” If you acknowledge the effort, then the child will say, “If this is good enough, maybe I can do better.” Discouragement takes away the child’s courage, encouragement increases it. We build on strengths, not weaknesses. But if the child is getting low grades due to, let’s say, electronic devices, then he is not allowed to use them until chores and homework are completed. Sometimes parents feel guilt for various reasons, which affects their ability to be consistent. If you give away your power, you may have a difficult time getting it back. Less talking and more action will help children to know their limits and feel safe.

You can influence and guide, but telling, lecturing, and preaching often lead to rebellion. Children won’t listen to how much you know until they know how much you care. You can show you care by entering their world. Relationships are reciprocal. Children not only want to partake in your activities, but they also want you to take an interest in theirs. Children feel valuable when someone follows and describes what they do. Validation is like holding up a mirror so the child can see her value and knows that someone understands her experience. Here is the formula for validating your child. It only takes 10 minutes a few days a week. Try to think of it as if your child were an infant again. It’s your turn to feed the baby. It won’t take long. I know, we get tired. But we all want to have experiences where we are enjoying the time with our children. Walk into her room and ask her what she wants to play. During play, you want to reflect and describe five things you will see her do. These are the Fantastic Five: An easy way to remember them is if you don’t use them the child will say, “I **Think** I **Feel** SAD, which is an acronym for **S**ay, **A**ccomplish and **D**o.

**1) THINK-“**You’re looking around the room figuring out what you want to play.” **2) SAY-**Repeat what she says, “You want to play baseball.” **3) DO-“**You got a hold of that one. That is a home run.” **4)** **FEEL-“**You look happy about beating your dear old dad.” **5) ACCOMPLISH-“**You did it. You won the game.” The child praises herself, “I am good at baseball.” Children will begin to use your language. This is good because the difference between low and high self-esteem is how a person talks to herself.

There are eight rules to follow when doing the Play Therapy. I came up with the acronym **U-PLEAS-UM**. We want to please our children, and this is how we do it. **U** is for **1) Use second person when the child is interacting with you or with someone else.** “You chopped off my arm with that sword. You got me.” Or, I may observe a parent- child interaction and say, “You’re overpowering your dad. You pinned him. You did it.” **P** is for **2) Don’t praise.**  Just like in the baseball example; all we have to do is describe, and she will praise herself. We want the child’s good feelings to come from herself-internal. If her good feelings are external, her self-esteem will be like a roller coaster depending upon what others say about her. **L** is for **3)** **Don’t** **lead.** She knows what she wants; so stay out of the way.Because the child’s play has meaning, we want everything we see in the play to come from the child. Then we can step back and say, “Oh, that is what my child needs or is communicating.” Most parents don’t see it until I teach them how to interpret the play. **E** is for **4) Show Enthusiasm.** Let the child see that you’re enjoying you’re time with him. **A** is for **5)** **Don’t ask questions.** The reason for this is that it distracts the child from the emotions that they are expressing in the play and conveys to the child that you are not listening. **S** is for **6) Stay within the metaphor.** Instead of saying, “You’re making Spiderman hit Batman.” Use third person when the child is using objects. Say, “Spiderman is hitting Batman. He looks angry. He knocked him on his back.” Children use objects to distance themselves from their feelings. The child may be Spiderman who is actually not angry at Batman but his younger brother for getting all the attention. **U** is for **7) Use the child’s Language.** If he has an army man that you are calling, “Sergeant,” and he is calling him, “Captain.” Call the army man, “Captain.” **M** is for **7) Mimic or imitate what the child is doing.** During sword play, if the child says, “We are not hitting each other now, we are practicing. Let’s swing the sword over each other’s heads like this. Then do exactly what he is doing.”

The reason it is difficult to do play therapy with more than one child is because they will all go in different directions, “I want to play action figures.” “No, I want to play barbies.” Parents can tag team by each taking a kid in separate rooms for 10 minutes and doing the Play Therapy.

Now that you are effectively validating and strengthening the relationship, you can discipline and will most likely get more cooperation from the child. Remember three things: **1) Either/Or**-“Either you and your sister stop making noise while I am on the phone or you can play in your bedroom.” The children continue to be loud. “I see you have chosen to play in your bedroom.” The oldest child says, “You can’t make me.” **2) Ignore** when the child is not cooperating with the needs of the situation or is disrespecting you. The parent responds calmly, “No, I cannot; but because I respect myself, I am not going to talk to you until you have done what I’ve asked.” The child continues to follow you. Don’t talk or make eye contact. Walk to your bedroom and lock the door. The child starts throwing objects. You state, “Just so you know if anything is broken, one of your toys will be sold in the newspaper or a yard sale to pay for what you broke.” Then go back into the bedroom. “I am not coming out until to go to your room and calm yourself.” After the child does it, you can use one of the Fantastic Five-Accomplish. “I see you got yourself under control. You did it.”

**3) When/Then**-“When you have finished cleaning your room, then you can play video games.” Turn off the game system if you have already asked your child once.

As a general rule, I tell parents not to get involved with sibling rivalry. “But Johnny is four years older than Seth. He may hurt him.” It’s up to you, but my philosophy is that children are often having collaborative conflicts to get your attention. If you mind your own business and have faith, Seth will figure out how to protect himself. When Seth sees that he’s not being rescued and Johnny sees that Seth isn’t loved more, the fighting will stop. But this is also contingent upon whether or not the play therapy is happening at home.

The Play Therapy changes the child’s inaccurate self-concept. After the child starts getting the positive attention, he will abandon the unhealthy methods for getting your attention. Our job as parents is to prepare our children for adulthood. When they go off to college, we want it to be one small step instead of a giant leap. Support but try not to rescue, for it is through the struggle that children learn to be self-sufficient. I hope this has been helpful. Remember, we only build on successes not failures, so encourage yourself by acknowledging your attempts at applying these skills.

If you have any questions, please contact Jim Wells at Counseling and Play Therapy Services. My phone number is (704) 840-7005. See my 90 second video at (www.counselingandplaytherapyservices.com)