**Ready, Set, Change!**

*What we plant in the soil of contemplation, we shall reap in the harvest of action.*   
- Meister Eckhart

**Stages of Change**

Research shows that people who successfully create a new, healthy habit as a part of their New Year's resolution—or who kick a difficult habit like smoking—change happens in stages. James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente have been observing and describing the various stages of change for decades, and what they've learned is that if you start trying to impose change when you or your kids are in the wrong stage, the new habit won't stick.

Research suggests that breaking an old habit (like quitting whining) and successfully beginning a new one in its place (using your normal voice to ask for what you want) usually takes longer than we thought—about three to six months rather than the 21 days that seems to be in popular parlance. Although it felt like it would take forever, it was worth the effort.

In my case, I really had my work cut out for me: I was trying to break our impressively consistent pattern of begging (me), not-listening (the kids), threatening (me), finally doing it, but possibly in tears (kids). In the end, we established a great happiness habit: for routine household tasks (getting dressed, setting the table, brushing teeth, getting in the car), I pretend to be a talking clock (as in: "we need to be in the car in 5 minutes"). And the kids actually listen and (usually) comply. It would be the understatement of the century to say that this was not what went on in my house before we began this work.

1. ***Stage One: Pre-Contemplation***  
   This is the stage where no one is thinking about changing, and for my kids, it ended one bright morning in January. At breakfast I said, "Mommy is tired of having to beg you people to do anything before you actually do it." I then proceeded with the autonomy-supporting encouragement: voicing empathy for their sloth-like positioning, rationale for my requests (exhaustion), and the choices we all had before us.
2. ***Stage Two: Contemplation***  
   Then, we talked about why I want us all to change and asked them to contemplate why they might want to change, too. The discussion of how we would celebrate loomed large; a party at the local pool with all their friends was reason enough. Molly added that she was a "really good listener" now that she was five, and seemed eager to prove it to me.
3. ***Stage Three: Preparation***  
   This stage is actually a transition from thinking about changing to actually beginning the new habit.

I had to really plan—reorganize my whole morning routine, in fact—just to think about how to support their behavior change. It doesn't seem like offering empathy, rationale, and choice is that hard—and it isn't—but it was so different than what I was doing that I had to really think about what was triggering my use of very, uh, controlling, language. I knew that if I didn't leave enough time, I would start saying things like, "Molly, put on your shoes now," rather than: "I know you'd rather read that book—I would too! But I propose that you finish getting ready for school now. What else do you need to do? If you finish getting ready now, we won't be late, Mommy won't get upset, and you'll get to choose which shoes to wear!" I also knew that Molly would be very resistant to doing something without me close by if I hadn't spent any time with her yet. So I had to plan to be ready for work myself earlier so that I could hang out and eat breakfast with the kids before I expected them to get a move on.

Each little positive change would win the kids a dose of growth-mindset praise. Chapter 2 goes into what exactly growth-mindset praise is, and why it is so motivating for kids. But generally speaking, growth-mindset praise is specific and oriented towards their effort—the factor that was in their control: "Nice work getting ready for school without me even having to ask!! I can tell you were really focused this morning. I appreciate your effort." Positive behaviors also win them independence; if they get dressed the first time I ask, for example, they get to pick out their own clothes (rather than having to go with the adorable but scratchy jumpers I would pick).

Another key part of preparation is what I think of as a sort of placebo effect: if you think it will work, it will. To any optimistic reader of *The Secret*, this is a no-brainer. Just believing that you are capable of changing your bad habits into good ones predicts success, according to research on people who successfully maintain their New Year's resolutions. So do whatever you can do to help your kids believe they are capable of making the change. And you can also use an old sales trick: asking "intent questions."

Corporate researchers know that just answering a question about what you intend to do (or buy) makes you automatically more likely to do whatever you said in your answer. If you've been seeing a lot of green Toyota Priuses around, which you like, and someone asks you what car you are going to buy next, you're likely to say a green Toyota Prius. And then you'll be more likely to actually go out and buy a green Toyota Prius than you would be if no one had asked you in the first place.

How this translates for us: we need to ask our kids intent questions. *What are you going to do tomorrow after I ask you to get dressed? What are you going to get after you do it?*

1. ***Stage Four: Action***  
   Going cold-turkey on bad habits like whining and begging is unrealistic, so divide your grand end-goal into lots of smaller ones. The important thing is that at each step you and your kids succeed. This means breaking your big goal into an action-plan made up of tiny turtle steps that eventually get you there. In life, I am more of a hare than a turtle, so this one was really hard for me. However, I frequently find success by taking direction and encouragement from another sociology Ph.D. and science translator, Martha Beck.

The key, according to Beck, is at each step of the way to "play halvsies until your goal is ridiculously easy to attain." I started with one aspect of our morning routine, getting dressed, so the goal was to make one request for the kids to get dressed in the morning before they did it. This was not yet ridiculously easy, so to make it easier, the first goal was that the kids get dressed within 10 minutes of me asking them. I wanted them to do this without reminding on my part, but again, that didn't seem quite so simple either. So, playing halvsies again, my plan was to make the one request, and their first behavior change was for them to look up at me and say, "okay mom," and then head towards their room to get dressed.

I then helped them get dressed, doing whatever necessary to make it happen. I pledged NOT to go put my mascara on right after making the request, or to make the request and then maybe mention something about Santa Claus watching them before I got in the shower. My plan was to say "time to get dressed!" and then tail them until it was done. This required considerable effort on my part.

**The Plan, 3 or 4 days at a time**

As important as picking small, achievable goals is clearly keeping track of successes. There are handy worksheets for adults and children included at the end of the article that you can print out.

The science points to a few other things that lead to successful habit formation; I suggest you leave nothing to chance and try them all.

* **Stimulus Removal**  
  Another way to up the odds of success is to remove distractions and temptations. People trying to quit smoking cannot leave cigarettes lying around to taunt them. If I want Molly to get dressed without having to beg, at first I needed to make sure our cat wasn't in the room, or she'd pet the cat instead of getting dressed. The same thing went for me: when I decided that a first "turtle step" for me was to support my kids while they established a new habit, I couldn't also be texting dating advice to my brother, even though that was more fun and interesting than fetching socks for Molly.
* **Making it Public**  
  People who have social support for their new habits make more lasting changes—friends who help each other keep exercising, for example. Just making a goal public can increase social support—and pressure—to succeed, which is one reason why New Year's resolutions can be effective. Other people are important for making changes across settings, so be sure to involve your children's other caregivers if they have them.
* **Pick Only One Goal—And Make it Specific**  
  When I first got my kids on this plan, I was eager to eliminate every annoying thing that they do—the possibilities really seemed limitless. But we really can't change more than one bad habit at a time, and neither can our kids. Research shows that the more New Year's Resolutions we make, the less likely we are to keep them. So have them come up with one big goal, and make it really specific. Kids are more likely to reach a goal like forming a new habit when they know specifically what counts as really good performance. Vague goals like "do your best" don't tell them exactly what they need to do to succeed.

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