

So You Have A Challenging Child In Your Home?

By Dave Ziegler, PhD

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If you have a challenging child in your home, you are not alone. With the numbers of children in foster care, the increased number of domestic and foreign-born adopted children, and children in biological homes that have experienced divorce and other domestic problems, parents today are searching for answers to the increasing challenges presented by troubled children. Some of these children can make parents crazy, because parenting approaches that work for other children don't help at all; and even worse, what worked with the child yesterday, doesn't work today. Sound familiar?

I know what you are thinking, "another one of those articles about being a good parent—with an expert saying: be consistent, stay calm and make sure the child gets plenty of tender loving care." Not so fast, in some cases this advice is a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution. And if you haven't already asked this, I will do it for you, "So what makes this guy an expert anyway?" Good question. There is only one thing that makes someone an expert in parenting difficult children and that is to have actually done it, and done it successfully. Starting as a foster parent with one child at a time, my home has evolved into one of the top treatment centers in the United States. The type of children we go out of our way to help are those that refuse to ask for, or even accept, our attempts to help or to parent them. Perhaps I have a screw loose, but I see these children as my best teachers. So if your child is happy to see you when she comes home from school, if he volunteers to help out around the house for free and can be found on weekends cleaning his room while singing "Don't Worry, Be Happy," then this article is not for you. I hear stories about such children, but I have never parented one. My foster home turned into a group home, and then into a treatment center over the years. But my family is still here 23 years later getting children who are grumpy (and worse) off to school each morning, and seeing if we can introduce each of them to a world they don't believe exists—one where they can come out a winner. Do they eventually get it? Yes, in nearly every case. But before they learn to touch the stars, they have to learn to firmly plant their feet on the ground. If you are with me so far, then let's get to work on parenting difficult children.

What I have found that works with troubled and difficult children is a combination of staying focused on the goal for each child, and knowing what I need to be doing more of, and what I need to be doing less of. My goal is a progression of having each child experience the following and to do so in the correct order—experience safety, security, acceptance, belonging, trust,

relationship, self-understanding and personal worth. These critical components of being a successful human being must come one at a time as in stair steps, and rely on the foundation of the step that came before. Without safety you can't have security, without acceptance you cannot feel like you belong, and without trust you cannot have a successful relationship. I ask myself what step I am on with each child I am working with and keep focused on the goal to get to the next step—one child and one situation at a time.

What I need to be doing more of can be broken down to the following: 1. Translate the child's behavior and energy to understand what is going on inside of him (don't get sucked into his words, words are seldom helpful), 2. Give attention to things I want to see more of (don't spend your day giving most of your energy to misbehavior, because what you give attention to, you get more of), and 3. Lead with thinking and not with emotions (don't let the child decide how you are going to act or feel, remember that feelings are easy targets for children who want to wound others).

So what about being consistent, staying calm and tender loving care? I find consistency overrated. This is not the case with responsive children, because they need your consistency. With troubled, angry and/or manipulative children, they will use your consistency against you. To disrupt a child who gets stuck in the same negative behavior habits, I suggest creative inconsistency. What this means is you must first disrupt the cycle between you and the child. He is used to doing his thing (misbehavior) and waiting for you to do your thing (correcting the behavior). You don't like this cycle, but your child does like it because he feels in control of you and the environment. If you are tired of this dance, then change it. First short circuit the behavior pattern, and then intervene more effectively. For example, if your bundle of joy has a habit of not liking dinner each night and colorfully sharing her culinary review, then start the dinner by saying, "Jessica, you only get dessert tonight when you have found something wrong with every aspect of tonight's dinner." After the child looks up at you wondering, "Has she finally lost it?" she then has a dilemma (that I love to put children in)--do I follow directions and criticize, or do I refuse to criticize and break my pattern. You win either way. We call this prescribing the symptom, and it can also be called putting the child into a therapeutic bind. The goal is not to frustrate the child, but the goal is to frustrate the behavior.

Most parenting classes will tell you to stay calm. That is fine most of the time. However, when I get ignored by children (this is frequent in the early stages), or if the child wants me to repeat essentially everything I say, I might try yelling my thoughts and directions. I don't do this in an angry way, just a loud way. Troubled children do not like yelling in the house if the yelling isn't coming from them, so they always ask me, "Why are you yelling?" I tell the child that I am saving us both the time of either repeating or having them miss what I have to say. When they ask me to stop it, I offer them a deal that I don't need to yell if they listen and don't need things repeated. Welcome to the world of reciprocity.

As for tender loving care, the quickest way for a child to put a parent in the funny farm is to reject every overture of caring and love. Love may have been all the Beatles needed, but they were not raising troubled children. Difficult children need love all right, but it needs to come in the form of teaching the child the lesson that life and relationships are two-way streets, what we put out to others has a lot to say about what we get back. So save your tender loving care until

the child has moved beyond manipulation, self-hate and perpetual rudeness (yes, with the right steps they can move beyond these). In the meantime give them a different type of TLC—Translating what is going on with them, Learning from every situation to be a better parent to this child, and staying in Control of your behavior, your emotions and the energy in your household.

With those basics as a foundation, let's look at a number of strategies for successful parenting:

Take care of yourself—if you don't do it, who will? We all have rechargeable batteries, but like a flashlight, if we don't take the time to recharge, our light becomes dim in a hurry.

See below the surface of behavior—what you can see is only a small part of the problem. Behaviors are the result of what a child thinks and how he or she feels. We must go deeper than managing behavior.

Be firm in a loving way—if we are too firm the child links us with past abuse, if we are too loving they may not respect us. Strike a firm and friendly balance.

Never stop working on yourself—we all make mistakes parenting. I use my mistakes as a model for children. I admit the mistake and take personal responsibility, and then I take the necessary steps to repair any damage done. How can we ask a child to do this if adults have not taught the child how by example?

Make sure the child feels your support—don't wait until things go badly before showing your support. When things do go badly, with every correction give the child the message you believe that he or she can do better. “We don't grab things from others just because we want it in this house. I want you to think about this and I know you can come up with a better way to handle it. When you do, let me know and you can have your turn.”

Always give more praise than criticism—criticism fits the child's negative self-image, praise does not. If you want the child to be more positive, he must hear more positive messages from you.

Practice the “New Day”—just because the child has been doing poorly in the past, start over each day and give them a chance to improve. If the child is ready to move beyond misbehavior, make sure you are ready to let them. This is one reason why extended consequences, such as grounding the child until age 21, are not recommended.

Don't let the child lower your expectations—you generally get somewhat less than you expect from a difficult child. If you expect a lot or a little, you will get somewhat less. High or low expectations, it's your call (by the way, the child prefers lower expectations).

Practice “No-Lose Parenting”—do your home work, use your superior mental skills, do your best, don't give up, don't expect an immediate return on your investment in the child, and remember, your responsibility is what you have become more so than who the child chooses to become. If you do all this, how can you lose?

OK, so I haven't told you everything you need to know to be successful with your difficult child. Fair enough, so the little challenge in your home is going to take some extra study and work? That is why this parenting approach has two textbooks with very appropriate titles: Raising Children Who Refuse To Be Raised and Achieving Success With Impossible Children. The ideas in these books can change the whole game with your child. Working with tantrums, sexual behavior, lying and stealing, and teaching responsibility, positive discipline, are all covered in the style of this article. Obviously I believe the ideas will help you. I believe this because the ideas were all taught to me not in graduate school but by the children I have parented. Did I forget to say, parenting a difficult child can even be fun? You will have to read more to find out about that (I warned you about my loose screws). Happy parenting!