



What can parents say to make children learn?

By Dr Jolanda Dreyer

The views on childrearing and discipline have changed quite a lot over the past decade or two. The fact that corporal punishment was banned from our schools in 1998 and that children are just so aware of their rights, speaks for itself. With both parents working nowadays it becomes increasingly difficult to be an effective and good parent and the challenges are numerous. One of these challenges is: HOW DO I GET MY CHILD TO LEARN in other words how do I get my child to be motivated, enthusiastic and responsible about schoolwork.

According to research it was found that punitive interaction methods can disrupt a child's learning process and that it inhibits responsible behaviour. (Lewis 2001:315)

WHAT ARE THESE PUNITIVE METHODS OF INTERACTION WE ARE TALKING ABOUT?

Shouting

Corporal punishment

Threatening

Time out

Withdrawal of privileges

Ignoring

Punishment

Research has shown that aggression-, anxiety- and stress levels of both adult and child rise when these interaction methods are used. Another effect of these methods is that it prevents children from having intrinsic motivation (Noels 2001:112). Children feel less adequate to face new challenges, have a lower self esteem and in the end may even suffer from depression. Thus the child is not emotionally stable – and we all know that emotionally unstable children can not learn.

You are probably thinking by yourself now – what else is there that I *am* allowed to do? First of all be committed to a process of change which WILL BE HARD - but extremely rewarding – work.

It is important that you realize what kind of parent you have been up to now. Did you have an autocratic, democratic or permissive style? Not one of these styles can be singled out as the most effective. It will depend mostly on the child's personality which one will work best but actually the answer lies in secret option number four A BALANCE between the three styles may prove to be more effective. The danger comes in when a parent is leaning over too much to a certain style. When you are too autocratic the child lives in fear, may become extremely rebellious, and will probably not learn how to think for him/herself. If you are too permissive the child will do just what he/she wants and you will struggle severely with behaviour problems at home and at school. The danger with too much of a democratic style can be that the child thinks that everything can be negotiated about whereas we all know that certain things are just not negotiable.

WHERE DO I START WITH THIS WAY OF BALANCED PARENTING?

By accepting the child's emotion – quite a strange place to start don't you think – Here's why:

For children to be able to learn they must feel that they are being accepted unconditionally and that they have the freedom to express their emotions freely (Edwards 2000:320). There must be an everlasting atmosphere of mutual respect and positivity between adult and child (Harding 2000:10). The key is not to be *too*

controlling. Rather teach children responsibility than to try and control them through a lot of rules and regulations (Toso 2000:40).

Faber and Mazlish (1982:10) offer an alternative way of communication based on the principles of Ginott (1971). A lot of research was done in these interaction methods and it is described as *supportive, friendly and effective*. Sometimes we try so hard to be parents that we forget how to be friendly towards our children.

These methods boil down to the following

A better understanding of children's emotions

The application of logical consequences rather than punitive methods

The fostering of a positive attitude

Effective encouragement

Freeing children from the negative roles the sometimes take on

Why should applying these methods work? The answer is relatively simple: because the human being and especially children has the universal need to be accepted and the above mentioned methods say: I accept and understand you (thus what you feel) – although I sometimes do not accept the behaviour you display. Levine (2002:25) makes a very important statement: "I have come to view struggling children as modern day heroes and heroines repeatedly wounded by the fact that their thwarted struggles to succeed is so widely misunderstood by grown-ups." A frightening statement by Van Jaarsveld (2004) is that children are being exposed to 18 negative statements per day at home for every one positive statement made by parents – no wonder we live in such a negatively orientated society. This on its own must be a motivation to start the road to change.

NOW HOW DO I DO ALL THESE WEIRD AND WONDERFULL THINGS?

Practise practise practise practise practise practise practise practise practise

Some of the techniques are quite natural and somewhere along the way parents may have already used some of them – the trick is only to know exactly when to use which technique. It works well to use them in the sequence they are presented here - thus to start off with the first technique and if it doesn't work on the child go to the next technique but it can just as well be used at random when most applicable in a certain situation.

Techniques to handle emotions that make it hard for children to learn. (Adjusted from Faber and Mazlish 1982, Faber and Mazlish 1995).

Techniques that do not work effectively		Techniques that work effectively
Denial of emotions	Method:	Acknowledge emotions
Child: "I am tired."	Example:	Child: "I am tired."
Adult: "You can't be tired already."		Adult: "Yes, you look a bit tired."
Denial of emotions (philosophical)	Method:	Give the emotion a name
Child: "I do not like it to write essays."	Example:	Child: "I do not like it to write essays."
Adult: "Look that's life you will just have to do it, one can't always do what you like."		Adult: "It sounds as if you are a bit frustrated."
Denial of emotions (advice)	Method:	Make acknowledging sounds
Child: "I forgot my reader at school."	Example:	Child: "I forgot my reader at school."
Adult: "You always forget your reader at school, you must write it down so that you can remember. Next time, make a note in your dairy."		Adult: "O? / hum?"
Denial of emotions (defence of the other person)	Method:	Acknowledge and give wish in fantasy.
Child: "My teacher is mean she gave us loads of homework."	Example:	Child: "My teacher is mean she gave us loads of homework."
Adult: "Well she must let you work hard otherwise you won't get through the work."		Adult: "O my that's unlucky, imagine there was a homework fairy and she could do <i>all</i> the work and then let <i>all</i> the knowledge go into your head."
Denial of emotions (questions)	Method:	Any of the above techniques.
Child: "I am so angry (slams fist on table)."	Example:	Child: "I am so angry (slams fist on table)."
Adult: "What made you so angry – why do you shout and why do you slam your fist like that?"		Adult: "I can see something must have upset you, I would listen if you want to tell me what it was."
Remark	By using the more effective techniques the child gets the underlying message of "I'm being accepted" and learns to trust their own emotions.	

Techniques to handle mild misbehaviour and get cooperation (Adjusted from Faber and Mazlish 1982, Faber and Mazlish 1995)

Ineffective techniques to handle mild misbehaviour		Effective techniques to handle mild misbehaviour
Blaming and accusing	Method:	Give information
<p>CD on floor</p> <p>Adult: "You silly you are so irresponsible you broke the CD now."</p>	Example	<p>CD on floor</p> <p>Adult: "Billy, CD's get scratched if they lie on the floor."</p>
Name calling	Method:	Describe own feelings
<p>Child: (Interrupts) "Can I go and play now mom?"</p> <p>Adult: "You are so rude can't you see I'm busy."</p>	Example	<p>Child: (Interrupts) "Can I go and play now mom?"</p> <p>Adult: "It frustrates me tremendously when I'm busy and then being interrupted like that."</p>
Threatening.	Method:	Say it with one word only.
<p>Child leaves strips of paper on floor after working on a project.</p> <p>Adult: "If I catch you messing once more you will not watch TV for a week."</p>	Example	<p>Child leaves strips of paper on floor after working on a project.</p> <p>Adult: "Peter - Papers!"</p>
Giving orders.	Method:	Say it with a word and/or non-verbal action
<p>Child talks too much not getting started on homework.</p> <p>Adult: "Stop talking, do your homework, Open your book!"</p>	Example	<p>Child talks too much not getting started on homework.</p> <p>Adult: Shows stop with hand, smiles and say: "Homework dear."</p>
Moralising.	Method:	Copy another character/ use another accent.

<p>Child spells word wrongly.</p> <p>Adult: "How many times must I tell you how to spell little? You must really start listening to make progress in life – if you do not listen you can't expect to do well"</p>	<p>Example</p>	<p>Child spells word wrongly.</p> <p>Adult: (robot) "All---el---sounds ---are---spelled---L---E."</p>
<p>Warning.</p>	<p>Method:</p>	<p>Give information</p>
<p>Child is busy with cooking project.</p> <p>Adult: "Watch out the plate is hot. Look that is dripping?"</p>	<p>Example</p>	<p>Child is busy with cooking project.</p> <p>Adult: "Just remember plates take a while to cool off and keep in mind dripping spoons usually make a big mess.</p>
<p>Playing martyr</p>	<p>Method:</p>	<p>Describe own feelings and say what you expect.</p>
<p>Child does not know which homework to do.</p> <p>Adult: "I get a headache everyday because I must struggle so much with you – you never listen and now I must suffer."</p>	<p>Example</p>	<p>Child does not know which homework to do.</p> <p>Adult: "I get so annoyed when this happens I want <i>you</i> to come up with a solution within three minutes."</p>
<p>Shouting</p>	<p>Method:</p>	<p>Give a choice</p>
<p><i>Child sits in front of TV not doing homework AGAIN</i></p> <p><i>John GO TO YOUR ROOM NOW!!!! AND GET TO WORK IMMEDIATELY!!!</i></p>	<p>Example</p>	<p><i>Child sits in front of TV not doing homework AGAIN</i></p> <p>Adult: "John you can either sit here until the programme is finished and work an half an hour extra or you can go and study now and not have to work an half an hour extra."</p>
<p>Shouting</p>	<p>Method:</p>	<p>Leave a note</p>

<p><i>Child sits in front of TV not doing homework AGAIN</i></p> <p><i>John GO TO YOUR ROOM NOW!!!! AND GET TO WORK IMMEDIATELY!!!</i></p>	<p>Example</p>	<p>Leave the following note on the TV</p> <div style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p>John Before you switch on - <i>think</i> - is my homework gone.</p> <p>Remember half an hour TV in study time equals an extra hour study.</p> <p>Love MOM</p> </div>
<p>Remarks</p>	<p>The ineffective ways of handling these problems behaviour can cause too much fear, resistance, rebelliousness as well as challenging and apathetic behaviour whereas the effective methods can lead to much more positivity and cooperation because it's friendlier and not so threatening.</p>	

WHAT DO I DO IF THE PROBLEM PERSISTS?

(Works better in conjunction with counselling sessions)

HOW TO HANDLE MORE SERIOUS MISBEHAVIOUR (Adjusted from Faber Mazlish 1982, Faber and Mazlish 1995)	
Method	Example
<p>Point out a way to be helpful and/or an alternative.</p>	<p>Adult: "It would be great if you could help with gluing the things together instead of just playing with the glue."</p>
<p>Show your own disapproval and say exactly what you expect.</p>	<p>Adult: "It makes me feel really frustrated and angry to tell you to be in at seven and study all the time."</p> <p>Adult: "I expect you to be at your desk in 2 minutes with your books open pen in your hand working on your maths."</p>

Let them experience the logical consequence of their misbehaviour (REMEMBER A LOGICAL CONSEQUENCE MUST HAVE SOMETHING IN COMMON- OR MUST BE THE LOGICAL OUTCOME FOR WHAT WAS DONE WRONG).	<p>Adult: “Only play or any other activity after work is done: work and then friends visiting, or no work no friends visiting – you can choose.”</p> <p>Adult: “If the work is done half-heartedly it must be done again.”</p> <p>Adult: “If a pencil is lost again - A deposit R5 before you get a new one.”</p>
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If the above mentioned did not work proceed to problem solving

SEVEN STEPS OF PROBLEMSOLVING (Adjusted from Faber and Mazlish 1982, Faber and Mazlish 1995)	
Method	Example
1. Describe the problem and give a name to the possible emotion the child may experience.	Adult: “I see that you often play computer games instead of doing schoolwork, it must be hard to do schoolwork when you are so interested in the computer game.”
2.Listen what the child says and reflect the emotion expressed without any judgement or criticism.	Adult: “Yes I can understand that schoolwork are sometimes boring.”
3.Say how you feel about the problem.	Adult: “It makes me worried and nervous when I know the time is passing by and you did not spend any of it on your schoolwork.”
4.Invite the child to brainstorm with you about possible solutions – write each suggestion down without allowing any comments from either party.	Adult: “Let’s think of a solution that will work for both of us.”
5.Decide together which solutions may work best (do not criticize child’s solutions, merely point out a problem it might cause).	Adult: “Playing computer first may be a problem because it can drain a lot of your energy that you will need for your homework, what about ...
6.Decide what must be done to put plan into action.	Adult: “So you will work for an hour and then play one stage on the computer. I may come in and switch the computer off after half an hour has passed and you didn’t switch it off already.”
7.Stick to the decisions made.	ALWAYS

Sometimes we use the word no far too much creating far too much negativity.

ALTERNATIVES TO THE WORD NO (Adjusted from Faber and Mazlish 1982, Faber and Mazlish 1995)	
Method	Example
Give only the information itself.	Child: "Can I go and swim Mom?" Adult: "You must really finish your project first."
Accept emotion but combine it with a non-verbal action.	Child: "I don't want to do spelling - it's dumb." Adult: "Place pen in child's hand nod your head and say the sooner you start the sooner it will be over."
Describe the problem.	Child: "Can I paint?" Adult: "Paint makes a big mess and our time for cleaning up is limited today."
Say yes.	Child: "Can I rest mom?" Adult: "Yes as soon as your sentences are written."
Give yourself time to think.	Child: "Can I call Jane, Dad?" Adult: "Let me first just think if I don't have to make any more important calls."
Remarks	The word no is shorter but taking some time to avoid it may save a lot of time and conflict in the end.

This will help to create a more positive atmosphere as well as enthusiasm and perseverance.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE (Adjusted from Faber and Mazlish 1982, Faber and Mazlish 1995)	
Method	Example
Show what has been done and what must still be done.	Adult: "Wow you did five sums – now you only need to do two more."

Show what is right and what must still be done to make the rest correct.	Adult: "Good! these paragraphs are really interesting, you just need to look at the spelling and some of your sentence construction here and there."
Show respect for the child's struggle.	Adult: "I can see how hard you struggle with that problem – It looks as if you are really trying your best."
Don't take away the child's hope.	Adult: "Solving maths problems can be a difficult task."
Remind child of past successes.	Adult: "But remember that other difficult problems you solved on your own a few weeks ago – maybe you can do it this time again."
Let the child overhear when you say something good about them to somebody else.	Adult: "Wow! you must see the difficult maths problems John solved on his own the other day."

It is important to realize that this article mentioned the very basic principles of these interaction methods and that it is best to attend a full course on it to fully understand each method and implement the process correctly. If none of this worked something else may be the problem. More intensive counselling or other professional help may then be needed.

Good luck – have fun

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