



Feelings, Behaviors, and Relationships

*(This article is based off the book “Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control.”
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Children need unconditional love and unconditional acceptance from their parents; we all know this and believe this. However, do we ever stop to consider how so many of the traditional parenting techniques accepted in our culture work contrary to this primal goal? Traditional parenting techniques that involve consequences, controlling directives, and punishment are fear-based and fear-driven. They have the ability to undermine the parent-child relationship and because they are tied into behavior, children easily interpret these actions to mean, “If I’m not good, I am not lovable.” Thus, children often build a subconscious foundation that says that love and approval is based off of performance.

Parenting from a love-based paradigm means going beyond our children’s behavior and beyond consequences to first see that negative behavior is a form of communication and that negative behavior is a response to stress. If we see the kicking and screaming child as one who is having difficulty regulating due to an overflow of feelings, we can learn to stay present with the child in order to help him modulate these feelings and thus, help him to build his emotional regulatory system. A child kicking and screaming or in a rage is a child who

has been "emotionally hijacked". Emotions are not logical or rational ; this hitting and kicking is the body's natural fear reaction gone awry.

Allowing a child emotional space to safely dissipate this energy will then allow him to calm down. As we provide reassurance, unconditional love, and emotional presence for our children, the need to kick and scream will disappear. Many times our children kick and scream simply because they do not feel that they are being listened to nor do they feel as if they have been heard. Staying present and reassuring a child that you really are listening to him, can be enough to help them begin to regulate. The life lesson that kicking and screaming is inappropriate does indeed need to be reinforced. But, this life lesson can only happen once the child is fully regulated (when the child is calm) and his cognitive thinking is intact. This is also the time to present alternatives to kicking and screaming. This is a way of teaching our children instead of punishing them. The definition of discipline is to teach. The more we can stay focused on the relationship with our child and strengthening this relationship instead of controlling it through consequences, the more we will be helping our child learn to work through their stress appropriately. Below are four pointers to help you stay in a loving and emotionally open place for your children:

Just Be Happy!—*But I'm not!* Did anyone ever tell you, “Just think happy thoughts and it will be okay.”? Did it really work? Probably not. Emotions do not simply disappear. If feelings are not released and acknowledged, they are stored and become part of our physical make-up. Research has convincingly shown that being able to express feelings like anger and grief can improve survival rates in cancer patients. With our children, feelings that become stored and “stuffed” become activators for negative behaviors.

ALL Feelings are Good Feelings - As parents, it is important for us to understand the necessity of emotional expression, both in teaching it to our children and in modeling it to our children. Blocked feelings can inhibit growth, learning, and the building of a trusting relationship between the parent and child. The first step to take is to recognize that *ALL* emotions are healthy. In our culture, feelings such as joy, peace, and courage are seen as good feelings, yet feelings such as sad, mad, and scared are seen as bad feelings. Let's rethink this to understand that it is not the feeling itself that creates negativity; it is the lack of expression of the feeling that creates negativity. And in children, this negativity is often expressed through poor behaviors.

Getting to the Core of the Behavior – When children are acting out and being defiant, we need to begin to understand that their behaviors are simply a communication of an emotional state that is driving these behaviors. If we simply address the behavior, we miss the opportunity to help children express and understand themselves from a deeper level. Start by modeling basic feeling words to your child. Keep it simple and teach the five basic feeling words: sad, mad, bad, scared, and happy. Even the youngest of children can learn to say, “I’m mad!” When the toddler is throwing his toys or the teenager is throwing his backpack across the room, encourage him at that moment to get to the core of the behavior through emotional expression. Remember...it really isn't about the toys or the backpack; and they really do know better than to do the negative behaviors.

Responding vs. Reacting – So the next time your child becomes defiant, talks back, or is simply “ugly” to you, work to be in a place not to react to the behavior, but respond to your child. Respond to your child in an open way—open to meeting him in his heart and helping him understand the overload of feelings that are driving the behaviors. He doesn’t need a consequence or another parental directive at that moment; he just needs you to be present with him. As your children learn to respond back to you through the parent-child relationship, they won’t have the need to communicate through negative behaviors anymore. You’ll both have more energy for each other, building a relationship that will last a lifetime.

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Heather Forbes, LCSW, is the co-founder of the Beyond Consequences Institute, LLC. Ms. Forbes has been training in the field of trauma and attachment with nationally recognized, first-generation attachment therapists since 1999. She has been active in the field of adoption with experience ranging from pre-adoption to post-adoption clinical work. Ms. Forbes is an internationally published author, with her most recent book titled, *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control: A Love-based Approach for Helping Attachment-Challenged Children With Severe Behaviors*, endorsed by Sir Richard Bowlby, son of John Bowlby. As a speaker, her passion for families is known throughout the nation. Ms. Forbes consults and coaches both nationally and internationally with families struggling with children with severe behaviors. Much of her experience and insight on understanding trauma, disruptive behaviors, and attachment related issues has come from her direct mothering experience of her two adopted children.