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King Street
Cooperative
Preschool

What Do I Do About Challenging Behavior?

By Teacher Aaron

It's the mystery of not just childhood, but all human behavior. As we get older, we learn how to communicate our needs and regulate our emotions. But how, then, do we teach our children these skills? Why does challenging behavior happen? Where does it happen? How do we look for it? And most importantly, what do we do about it?

We want to understand (1) how we make meaning of our experiences, (2) how challenging behavior is a solution to a different problem, (3) what are the practical tools for young children to self-regulate, (4) understand the recovery tools in developing minds, and (5) how to use several tools for improving relationships with young children.

As irrational as it sometimes appears, we know that behavior is always purposeful. The purpose of behavior is to find belonging (a sense of connection) and meaning (significance). People make decisions based on how they perceive the world. A perception leads to an interpretation which leads to a belief, and then a decision based on that belief which leads back to a new perception. Children do this all the time. They use their senses to make interpretations. "How heavy is this block?" "What does tomato soup smell like?" "I can see steam; that must mean it's hot." "When I see a black bird, I notice it makes a certain sound." Children make these interpretations in an effort to organize the world around them.

So when there is a "problem," it really is a solution to another problem that we just are not aware of yet. A child who is "misbehaving" is, rather, discouraged. Children want to feel a sense of community. Being in one and contributing to it. We need to teach children ways to accomplish their goals that are appropriate and safe. By encouraging a child instead of discouraging them, we give them the power to solve problems autonomously.

Human beings live in the realm of meanings. We do not experience things in abstract; we always experience them in human terms.

-Adler, What Life Can Mean to You



This happens when we:

- Teach life skills to children
- Pay attention to the power of perception
- Focus on encouragement (connection and presence with children)
- Be kind and firm at the same time
- Look to mutual respect. Respect for yourself. Respect for the situation. Respect for the needs of the child.
- Celebrate mistakes as opportunities to learn
- Look to solutions rather than punishment

These are the building blocks for effective discipline. Parents struggle with this word all the time. "What is discipline and how can I be sure it's appropriate?" Taken from Adler, a prominent child developmentalist, effective discipline helps children feel a sense of community by being mutually respectful and encouraging. What is the child thinking, feeling, learning, and deciding about herself in her world? What does he do in the future to survive and thrive? So it is effective long term. It teaches important social and life skills such as respect for others, problem solving, cooperation, and contributing to the world around him. It also helps a child to discover how capable she truly is.

Here are some tips for when that mid-brain takes over and the challenging behavior comes out. There are tips for when your child "flips her lid" and for when YOU flip your lid. These tips work for both children and adults. We all encounter these situations. Think about how these tactics work best for you and your family. Share them with your partner and keep the discussion going!

Tips for when YOU have flipped your lid:

- Recognize what it feels like physically: fast heart beats, redness of the face and neck, sense of urgency. Learn your body's warning signs.
- Recognize what it feels like mentally: An inability to think calmly and clearly. Thoughts that repeat or go in circles. A sense of urgency
- Take a time out from the situation and calm down: Recognize that continued engagement won't help. Take a moment to calm down and breathe. Remove yourself.
- Focus on your breathing: Do it slowly. In and out.
- Use large muscles: walk, run, bike, do push-ups, or yoga. Anything to keep yourself moving.



- Try engaging your cortex: Do mental math, count backwards, list facts. Anything to slow the pace.
- Notice why you're in "survival mode." This situation makes me feel vulnerable because I'm not being heard, I'm not being respected, etc. Don't take it personally. Your brain thinks it's about survival, when it really isn't.

Tips for when THEY have flipped their lid (child or adult):

- Watch for signs in the other person: Intense emotions, disjointed sentences, irrational action, flushed/red face.
- Notice your body: Use those mirror neurons. Get down on the child's level. Be calm and speak slowly. Use simple words. This makes it easier for them to calm down too. Don't let their "flipped lid" catch you off guard.
- Remember safety: People unable to use their cortex act irrationally and can be physically dangerous. Be calm, stay aware, and move slowly.
- Acknowledge feelings: Use few words and speak slowly. "I can tell you're frustrated" or "I see tears running down your face, you must be sad."
- Talk TO them not AT them: Don't make fast movements. They may want to be touched or they may not want to be touched, be aware of what their body language is telling you. If they want to leave (and it is safe), let them.
- Give them space, don't crowd: Don't give complicated

directions (they cannot process them), keep it simple. Don't demand from them.

- Invite them to take a CDT (Cool Down Time): This is similar to a time-out, but instead is non-punitive. This works best as an option, not a command.
- Simple tasks engage his/her cortex: Ask him how his name is spelled. Ask her to count to ten. Math and literacy are both great ways to do this.
- Ask for their help: Finally, when they begin to de-escalate, change their focus by asking for their help. "I can tell you aren't ready to play yet, but can you help me get these things from the cupboard?" or "I know you can't go back to work yet, but could you help me by...?"

The foundation of the tools to helping young children self-regulate is the relationships we build with them. Discipline means not just what we do during moments of challenging behavior, but how we encourage children to be better people. This is a concept adopted from Positive Discipline by Jane Nelson. Positive discipline doesn't mean praising children but rather, encouraging them. Praise: meaning "to express a favorable judgment of" or "an expression of approval." Encouragement is instead defined as "to inspire with courage."

We do this by helping children self-evaluate themselves ("tell me about it" or "what do you think?"). Instead of conformity ("you did it right", "I'm so proud of you"), build empathy ("I can see you enjoyed that", "what do you think and feel?"). Appreciate them by being specific ("I appreciate your help with..." or "who can show me the proper way to sit?").

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Am I inspiring self-evaluation or dependence on the evaluation of others?
- Am I being respectful or patronizing?
- Am I helping them discover how to act or trying to manipulate their behavior?
- Am I seeing the child's point of view or my own?
- Would I make this comment to a friend or neighbor?

It is important to provide a connection before correction:

1. State clear expectations... "As soon as you finish, you may..."
2. Respond with a question... "Would you like to do this by yourself, or do you want/need help?"
3. State a given (i.e. rule or condition)... "I can't let you do that, those words are hurtful." "The balls stay outside." "It's not time for that now. It's ok to be disappointed."
4. Check his/her understanding... "Tell me how we're solving this problem." "What's the next step before we can..."
5. Invite cooperation... "I need your help with this."
6. Limit choices... "Would you like to put this away now or after dinner?"

7. Say what you want and mean... "I want you to use your body in a different way. That feels unsafe. Try this..."
8. Negotiate an agreement... "I can't let you do that, it hurts her body. But you can climb up this way."
9. Use non-verbal language such as a hand on the shoulder or a secret nod.
10. Follow through... "Time to... now". Be sure to follow through yourself. Don't use the word "now" if you'll get busy and forget to follow through.

Most of all, anticipate and be ok with mistakes. They are opportunities to learn. We all make them. Remember to recover from a mistake.

- **Re-gather:** Everyone has had ample time to calm down
- **Recognize:** "Whoops, I made a mistake."
- **Reconcile:** "I'm sorry."
- **Re-solve:** "How can we work together to make it better?"

Resources:

Children the Challenge by Rudolf Dreikurs

Parenting from the Inside Out by Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzel

Positive Discipline by Jane Nelson

Drive by Daniel Pink

The Brain in the Palm of your Hand

From *Parenting from the Inside Out*
by Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzel

Your Wrist and Palm:

Brain Stem. Responsible for survival instincts: flight, freeze, or flight; Autonomic ("automatic") functions.

Your Thumb:

Mid-brain. Freeze, flight or flight response, emotions, where we store an integrate memories and hold fears.

Your Fingers over your Thumb:

Cortex. Perception, motor action, speech, higher processing and what we normally call "thinking."

Your Fingernails:

Orbitofrontal cortex/pre-frontal cortex. A primary integration center for the brain, almost like a "switchboard" that makes sure messages get where they need to go. Functions of the pre-frontal cortex: regulation of body through autonomic nervous system, emotional regulation, regulation of interpersonal relationships, response flexibility, intuition, mindsight, self-awareness, letting go of fears, morality. The pre-frontal cortex doesn't fully develop until a person is in his or her mid-20s.

What happens when you are stressed, overwhelmed, or trying to deal with traumatic or painful memories? The pre-frontal cortex shuts down; it no longer functions. (This is temporary, thank goodness!) You have flipped your lid. You can't use most of those 9 functions above (and can't learn). To engage, to learn, you need to calm down and bring the orbito-frontal cortex back into functioning. Brain in hand video by Daniel Siegel:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD-lfP1FBfk>

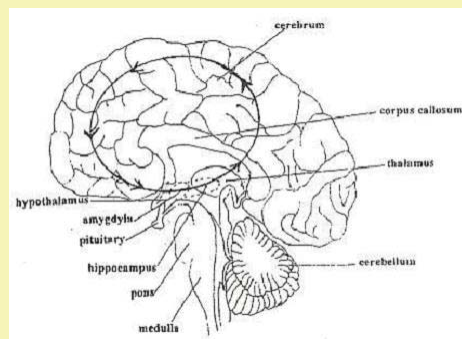
Mirror Neurons: The "monkey see, monkey do" neurons that play a key role in social interaction, connection, and learning. Go to:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/mirror-neurons.html>
for an excellent 14 minute Nova episode on mirror neurons.

Implications for being "present" with kids:

Integrative functioning (the high road)

A form of processing information that involves the higher, rational, reflective thought process of the mind. High-road processing allows for mindfulness, flexibility in our responses, and an integrating sense of self-awareness. The high road involves the pre-frontal cortex in its processes.



Non-integrated functioning (flipping your lid, the low road)

Low-road functioning involves the shutting down of the higher processes of the mind and leaves the individual in a state of intense emotions, impulsive reactions, rigid and repetitive responses, and lacking in self-reflection and the consideration of another's point of view. Involvement of the pre-frontal cortex is shut off when one is on the low road.

