

How To Influence (Parent) Your Children

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Introduction

This is not *Parenting for Dummies* or *An Idiots Guide to Influencing Your Children*. It is a collection of strategies for influencing your children. If it had a title along the lines of the “for Dummies” series, it would be *Influencing Children for Average and Above Average Parents*. While the strategies presented are relatively simple, implementing them effectively is complex, requiring the agility of a professional athlete.

To be successful you must use your intuition and intelligence. This is because human beings are complex and unique. What works for one child might not for another or even the same child at a later date. Children change and their job is to try to get what they want even if it means not doing what you want. The key is to be flexible and to avoid getting stuck with a strategy that does not work in the first place or stops working. If a particular strategy does not work go back to the drawing board and change what you are doing – try modifying the strategy or changing strategies. If you are able to follow this advice, you will be successful at influencing your children or knowing that you did all that is humanly possible.

Power and Influence as Expressed in Parenting Relationships:

No thinking person doubts the importance of the relationship between a parent and a child. A parent has tremendous influence on how a child feels about him/herself and how he/she is perceived by others. Indeed, the parent/child relationship likely does more than any other single factor to influence the path that a child takes in life.

Parents influence children in a multitude of ways. One way is by serving as a **model of how to behave and react to situations and feelings**. For example, how you treat others may be the single greatest influence of how your child learns how to treat others.

A second way is by **spontaneously guiding a child as he/she experiences the world**. For example, when a parent says, "You are going to be okay" after a child falls and skins his/her knee, the parent is helping the child deal with feelings associated with injury.

A third way is by **purposefully acting to influence a child's behavior**. These "purposeful parenting acts" are not more important than modeling desired behavior or guiding a child as he/she experiences the world. They are what most people think of as "parenting", however. They are also what many think about when they are wondering how they can improve their "parenting" and they are, like it or not, acts of power and influence in a special relationship (parent to child).

In the pages that follow, the focus is on "purposeful parenting acts" and how to constructively influence a child's behavior. The best parents will also think about how they serve as a model to their child and how they are spontaneously guiding their child through the challenges he/she faces in life, including the challenges provided by feelings that emerge as children grow older.

Purposeful Parenting Acts:

I think it is constructive to think of purposeful parenting acts as falling into one of three categories:

1. acts that unintentionally or intentionally strive to produce fear,
2. acts that unintentionally or intentionally strive to create feelings of shame, and
3. acts that intentionally appeal to a child's self-interest.

These “acts” are a parent's attempt to change a child's current behavior (combined with a hope of changing a child's future behavior).

Acts that unintentionally or intentionally strive to produce fear include threatening and intimidating behavior as well as acts that deprive a child of something he/she desires (where the child fears losing something). Examples are: a parent spanking a child or verbally threatening to spank a child, a parent threatening to leave a child behind, a parent threatening to take away a favorite toy, and a parent using body language or nonverbal cues to intimidate a child.

Acts that strive to create feelings of shame (unintentionally or intentionally) include verbal statements and behavior that lead to feelings of shame or guilt. Examples are: a parent saying, “You should feel ashamed of yourself for doing that, don't ever do that again”, a parent saying, “Your brother treats me so much better, why can't you be more like your brother”, and a parent sulking after not being thanked for a gift or other kindness.

Acts that intentionally appeal to a child's self-interest include primarily verbal statements that motivate that child out of their own interest in a particular outcome. Examples are: a parent saying, “You can have dessert after you finish your vegetables”, a parent saying, “You can visit your friend after you clean your room”, and a parent saying, “We will buy you an Xbox if you make the honor roll”.

Parenting Acts in Practice:

Acts that unintentionally or intentionally strive to produce fear are different from acts that strive to create feelings of shame or acts that appeal to a child's self-interest. Knowing how the acts are different, including their undesirable effects, allows for a more conscious choice about what act to use. In other words, knowing the effect of each type of purposeful parenting act, helps in the decision of how to purposefully parent.

Unintentionally or intentionally striving to produce fear in a child **works** at influencing behavior but it has several undesirable side effects. It can be physically damaging and scarring. It can be emotionally damaging and scarring, including by diminishing a child's sense of being safe and secure. It can start and feed feelings of resentment in a child. And, it can lead to a child being intimidating and threatening toward others.

Unintentionally or intentionally striving to create feelings of shame **also works** at influencing behavior but it also has several undesirable side effects. It can be emotionally damaging and scarring, including by reducing a child's sense of feeling competent and worthy. It can start and feed feelings of resentment. And, it can lead to a child striving to create feelings of shame in others.

Appealing to a child's self-interest **works** at influencing behavior with fewer undesirable side effects, particularly when done with forethought.

Forethought comes into the picture when a parent states an expectation and ties a consequence or reward to the child doing what he/she is asked to do. For example, a parent can say, "I expect you to finish your vegetables. If you do, I will give you dessert. If you do not, you will not get dessert". Or a parent might say, "I expect you to get yourself ready for school on time. If you are able to do this, you can have a play date with your friend this afternoon (or ride your bike, or watch a favorite movie, etc.). If you do not get yourself ready on time for school, then you will not have a play date this afternoon". This method of appealing to a child's self-interest can build a child's sense of competence (if he/she is able to meet the expectation) and is less likely to start and feed feelings of resentment.

It is possible to appeal to a child's sense of self-interest without forethought and unstated expectations but typically the expectation is assumed. For example, without forethought a parent might find him/herself saying, "Of course you cannot have dessert, you did not finish your vegetables" if he/she had not set the expectation when sitting down for the meal but had done so at many prior meals.

Otherwise, the purposeful parenting act that has the same superficial structure of an appeal to self-interest, becomes an act of unintentionally or intentionally striving to produce fear. In this case, fear of losing something. For example,

with or without forethought, a parent might find him/herself saying, "You cannot have dessert (even though you finished your vegetables), you were disrespectful of your sister during the meal".

By now it should be obvious that my opinion is that of the three purposeful parenting acts, appealing to a child's self-interest is the superior strategy, particularly when a parent uses forethought to state an expectation and a consequence or reward for meeting the expectation.

This is not to say that intentionally striving to produce fear or intentionally striving to produce shame do not have their place in the "toolbox" of competent parents. They do and they should be utilized in certain situations. For example, a parent might intentionally strive to produce fear or shame in a child who is defying appeals to his/her self-interest. Or, a parent might intentionally strive to produce fear or shame in a child who has hurt another child. In each case, a parent is judging that the "benefit" of changing a child's behavior by striving to produce fear or guilt outweighs the "cost" of any undesirable side effects. These are conscious choices rather than unintentional acts, however. They should be respected as such. In my opinion, occasions that pass this type of cost/benefit analysis are exceptions to the rule that appealing to a child's self-interest is a superior strategy.

Case Examples:

These case examples are simplified for the sake of clarity. They are meant to illustrate the differences between the three purposeful parenting acts outlined above. They are not meant to anticipate all potential extenuating circumstances such as raised by symptoms of ADHD, Depression, etc..

Case One:

Sarah (8 years old) frequently hits her younger sister, Ruby (4 years old), when Ruby takes something from her or “bugs” her. Sarah has not witnessed domestic violence or other forms of physically aggressive interaction between adults. She is merely resorting to a primitive strategy for influencing her those around her, in this case, her younger sister.

Sarah's mother has a strong emotional reaction to seeing Sarah hit Ruby. She abhors physical violence and is stung by one of her daughters actually striking someone else, especially her younger and smaller sister. Whenever she sees Sarah hit Ruby, she threatens Sarah with a spanking. If Sarah continues to hit Ruby, she acts on her threat and spanks Sarah. When she is done, she sends Sarah to her room while yelling at her not to hit anyone and while asking her how she might feel if someone bigger than her hit her. She does not appreciate the irony of her behavior and comments toward Sarah.

Sarah's father also has a strong emotional reaction to seeing Sarah hit Ruby. He also abhors physical violence. He speaks sternly with Sarah about hitting Ruby and threatens her with a time-out if she continues. If Sarah continues to hit, he sends her to the room while angrily yelling, “it is not okay to hit”.

Frustrated with the frequency of Sarah's hitting, they consider how else they might handle her “misbehavior”. They decide to sit down with Sarah and express their concern about how she is treating Ruby. They state that they expect Sarah to treat Ruby with greater respect and to not hit her when she is frustrated or annoyed at her. They encourage her to get help from either of them if Ruby does not listen to her requests to stop taking her things or to leave her alone. They tell her that if she hits Ruby she automatically will have a time-out for hitting and lose the privilege of staying up later to read to herself. They tell her that no matter what Ruby does, if she hits Ruby she will serve a time-out and lose the privilege of reading to herself. Sarah reports that she understands what will happen if she hits Ruby and that the proper thing for her to do is to get help.

Sarah's parents have shifted from using parenting acts that produce fear and shame to an act that appeals to Sarah's self-interest (staying out of time-out and reading to herself at night). While she is likely to test her parents implementation, Sarah will soon learn that hitting Ruby has consequences that

she does not like and she will change her behavior.

In this example, Sarah's interest in reading to herself and staying out of time-out gave her parents some level of "leverage" with her. Other children are likely to have different "interests" or "leverage". Common examples include: time spent watching television, working on the computer, or playing electronic games, time avoided doing extra chores around the house, and time with friends. One of my favorite consequences is time-out combined with writing out statements like "I will treat my sister with respect and avoid hitting her" 25 times. In each case, however, the consequence is announced along with an expectation of certain behavior. This fosters a sense of achievement and competence for the child who meets the expectation and does little to generate resentment (as can be the case when no expectations are stated).

Case Two:

Sam (10 years old) has started to lie to avoid getting into trouble. He is otherwise a typical kid – he does well in school, is liked by his peers, and responds to parental requests most of the time. His parents are frustrated by his lying and wonder everything from whether they are raising a sociopath to what else they don't know about their "little angel". When they catch him in a lie, they tell him that they know he is lying, that it is wrong to lie, and that he will have a bigger punishment than if he had told the truth in the first place. They tell him all this with considerable emotion on their own parts because of their concern and frustration over raising a "liar".

Sam's parents are using a combination of shaming and fear (of a bigger punishment) to influence his behavior. It is not working. Perhaps Sam does not yet feel the pain of guilt or shame (not unusual for someone his age). Perhaps Sam does not really believe that his punishment will be less if he tells the truth. And, perhaps Sam thinks that getting away with lying (as he inevitably does) is worth the price of getting caught the other times.

At the end of their respective ropes, Sam's parents sit down and decide they must do something else about Sam's lying. They decide to focus on it as a "problem" that they all need to work on. They approach Sam and state that they are concerned about how much he is lying and about how easy lying seems to be for him. They explain that lying erodes their trust in him and will erode the trust of his friends, teachers, and others if he keeps it up. They tell Sam that they expect him to tell the truth – all of the time. They state that if they ask Sam a question and he tells the truth (as far as they can tell), they will reward him with a token that he can later exchange for time on the computer or playing video games. It is the only way he can earn time for doing these activities. They state if they learn that he has lied, they will take away whatever tokens he has saved and start again. They place the emphasis on rewarding his positive behavior. They try to remain calm and detached when they are forced to take away the

tokens and say things like, "Well, we'll try again tomorrow".

Sam's parents have moved toward appealing to Sam's self-interest. They are anticipating that he will feel good about telling the truth. They are also rewarding his telling the truth with access to an activity that he wants to do (and otherwise cannot do). They have moved away from shaming and fear which were not working, made them and Sam feel bad, and focused on what he was doing wrong rather than on his doing something right.

Conclusion

Parenting is challenging. The parent-child relationship has many dimensions. To be a good parent requires being caring and loving along with being a good role model, being a good guide through the situations presented by life, and being judicious in the use of power and influence. Knowing what choices you have when you attempt to influence your child or children is critical. Consciously choosing to emphasize appealing to a child's self-interest will help manage a child's behavior while maintaining as positive relationship as possible.