

I

TEN “CHILD UNLIMITED”
TOOLS FOR UNLOCKING
YOUR CHILD’S FULL POTENTIAL

Use Empathy and Consequences

"You can accomplish by kindness what you cannot by force."

—Publilius Syrus (Latin writer)

*I*t was about ten minutes before the bell was going to ring for lunch. The students in my seventh grade science class were quietly copying down notes from the SMART Board™ into their notebook. I was explaining to them the differences between carbohydrates, lipids, and proteins. It was right before lunch time and I asked a few of the students what they were going to eat to see how much energy, in calories, they were about to consume.

One student's reply was, "I don't know. Whatever my Mom gave me today for lunch."

Another student said, "Whatever they serve up in the café."

And yet another student just shrugged his shoulders at me, without a clue.

Then I asked, "Does anyone know what they are eating today or is it all a big mystery?"

All of a sudden from nowhere I heard "POP!" It was the sound of a student blowing a gigantic-sized bubble from a piece of gum. The bell rang and the students were dismissed to have lunch. I asked the girl who had made the loud-sounding pop to see me before she left for lunch.

Chewing gum was against the school rules and this was not the first time that I had caught her doing this in class. I had told her to spit out the gum a number of times before and threatened to give her a detention, but never actually followed through on it. I quickly learned that my repeated warnings and lectures had no meaning to her whatsoever. Each time I made those empty threats, my power was being stripped away from me. At that point, I came to the realization that when I say "no," it should mean "no" if I were to

see a change in her behavior. It was time for the girl to learn a lesson from the poor choices that she was repeatedly making in class.

At that moment, I issued her an office detention that she was required to serve for an hour and a half after school later in the week. When I handed her the slip, she immediately shouted at me, "Are you kidding me? This rule is so stupid!" She continued by saying, "Why are you giving me a detention for something so dumb like this? My parents aren't going to sign this. I'm not serving it!"

The following morning I received an e-mail from her mother mentioning how she couldn't believe that I had given her daughter a detention for something "so stupid." The mother did not support my decision to give her daughter a detention. She believed that not letting her child chew gum in the classroom was a "stupid rule" that she hated when she was in school. She stated curtly that my decision was wrong and told me that she refused to sign the detention slip.

She fought the consequence tooth and nail with me for the next several days, demanding me to retract the detention. When I finally told her that the consequence was the natural result of her child choosing to break a school rule and the decision would stand, she went on to take matters to administration to get the detention revoked. Her incessant persistence got her what she wanted, or so she thought, at the moment. The detention was, in fact, rescinded.

What appeared to be a victory at that moment for the mother and her daughter was actually the start of much bigger problems to come. The mother's decision to abandon responsibility of her child's blatant disregard for school rules caused her to lose out on a golden opportunity to teach her child a valuable lesson for this infraction, albeit a minor one.

A few weeks after the gum incident, our team of teachers noticed some significant negative academic and behavior changes in the student and decided to request a meeting with her mother. At the meeting, Mom candidly expressed her frustrations in which she was losing control of her daughter and becoming increasingly upset with her behaviors. She expressed how she tried so many tactics, each one harsher than the other, and still was unable to get her daughter to listen to and follow the rules.

The mother's decision to take the side of her daughter for breaking the rules provoked a cascade of graver problems to come that I'm sure was not something she expected would happen. As time passed, the girl was getting herself into bigger trouble at school with other teachers, hanging out with the wrong group of peers, and letting her grades slip. Ultimately, Mom's actions gave her daughter the green light to keep making poor choices and preventing the girl from learning from her mistakes.

What had happened was the daughter resented her mother's "authority" and problems continued to arise between the two of them. A vicious circle had developed at this point when the parent became increasingly angry and delivered harsher consequences, out of desperation for control, which triggered further disobedient behavior by her child.

With all the teachers and the mother at that meeting, we called the girl in to sit down with all of us to hear what we had discussed. We provided her with an opportunity to reflect on her actions and come up with a personal solution on how she would improve her grades and make better choices.

The important point to that meeting wasn't so much to fix the problem at that moment, but rather for Mom to make sure that her child was *responsible for her own choices* and that consequences would be given and followed through for *choosing* to break the rules.

Mom's change in her own behavior, to support the teachers, was a major step toward obtaining the behavior she desired in her child. Instead of the mother being upset with a teacher for a bad grade or a detention that her daughter received, she became *empowered* by speaking highly of teachers, empathizing with her child, yet sticking to the consequences.

The takeaway message from this scenario is that it is important to let your child experience natural consequences for poor decisions made, such as getting a detention, missing recess, or getting a bad grade. If you attempt to bail your children out of trouble and undermine authority, they receive the message that they don't have to listen to teachers, or for that matter any form of authority, which could result in worse behavior exhibited later on at home, at school, with peers, and in the community.

For that reason, a child misses out on an opportunity to learn from his or her mistakes and fails to make wise choices in the future when faced with more serious issues. A child, for that matter, may ultimately grow to become rebellious and defiant, and to resent a parent, which could result in even greater conflict.

In situations like this, it is important for parents to remain empathetic with their children, while still holding them accountable for their actions by saying something to the effect of "*I really disliked that rule, too. However, I had to follow the rules like everyone else.*" This functional response not only helps parents better relate with their child but also empowers them.

In *Parenting with Love and Logic*, Charles Fay, Jim Fay, and Foster Cline discuss the power that lies in *empathy* and *consequence*. *Empowerment* comes from empathy and consequence, which allow children to reflect on the decisions they have made. And as soon as a child is able to suffer the consequences, he or she can make better decisions in the future.¹

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. It strengthens the relationship you have with your child and restores *your power*. It stimulates thinking and in tandem with consequences, allows children *to own* the choices they make and learn to make better ones next time.

Showing empathy and letting your children experience the natural consequences for the choices they make allow them to grow as they learn from their mistakes. Empathetic parenting gains a child's respect, strengthens a close bond with a child, and helps build *emotional intelligence*. Learning how to support the development of this type of intelligence is not easy, but is one of the most important skills you can teach your child.

Communication problems between a parent and a child lie in a lack of "listening to understand" and being more in a mode of "listening to reprimand." The following exercises will help you be more present in a conversation with your child and actively listen to his or her feelings.

EXERCISE: REFLECTIVE LISTENING AND RESPONDING

Being empathetic with your child requires *active listening*. When one person speaks, another listens and reflects what was said to them. This form of communication demonstrates respect and lets the other person know that you were genuinely interested in, and truly listening to, what he or she had to say.

If your child gets upset over something that happened, he wants to know that he is being listened to and understood. It is important to accept and value whatever feelings of anger, frustration, and sadness are being expressed. You can let your child know that you understand how he feels by reflecting his feelings back to him by saying,

"What I hear you saying is . . ." (follow that by restating what the child just said without any interpretation or spin put on it)

"From what you said, I can imagine you feel pretty _____ (upset, disappointed, sad, etc.)."

"If I get what you're saying . . ." (follow that by repeating what the child just said to the best of your ability)

After you've repeated a child's words back to him, you want to ensure that you have accurately reflected what he expressed to you. To do this, ask, "Is that correct?" This solidifies a mutual understanding between you and your child and invites you to proceed further into the conversation.

EXERCISE: PUTTING YOURSELF IN YOUR CHILD'S SHOES

Once a child openly expresses his or her feelings and a parent actively listens by providing reflective responses, it is important to then validate the child's feelings. Validation is not about agreeing with the other person, but rather about understanding and accepting the other person and their situation. Here are some examples:

"If I were in your shoes, I can understand why you would feel that way."

"Looking at it from your point of view, I can see why you would feel that way."

"I can only imagine how that must have made you feel."

"Those kinds of things happen, and I understand how you must feel."

"I see what you're saying."

"This is a lesson that we all learn at some point in our life and next time I'm sure you will make the right decision."

When children express their feelings, they desire validation, appreciation, and acknowledgment, especially from a parent. This form of communicating will produce a safe, open means for your child to express thoughts freely, experience empathy, take responsibility for his or her own choices, and accept consequences for his or her actions.

When beginning to learn from mistakes, the younger the child, the smaller the price to pay. If you are looking to "REV" up the communication lines between you and your child, think:

R—Reflective listening and responding

E—Empathy

V—Validation

Don't be afraid to include *empathy* as part of discipline. By sharing what a child may be feeling or going through, and showing how every choice made has consequences associated with it, helps reinforce the development of a child's empathy toward others.

Children who are allowed to learn from small mistakes early in life are far less likely to make more serious mistakes later on. If you demonstrate love and empathy, instead of anger and frustration, and allow your children to learn from their mistakes by experiencing natural consequences, you are likely to raise respectful and responsible individuals.

Allow a child to make mistakes and let consequences do the teaching.

Be Cool and See the Child in You

“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.”

—Pablo Picasso (Spanish artist)

When the weather is warm outside, I enjoy going to the local park down the road shooting hoops with kids half my age. All the while, I notice some parents sitting on a bench watching their children play, as they climb up the jungle gym, pass through tunnels, and rock back and forth on the spring horses, while other parents actively push their kids on swings or cheer as they land at the bottom of a slide.

Play is where children exhibit their true feelings and emotions. It is the bridge for parents and children to make a deeper connection by sharing laughs, joy, encouragement, and enthusiasm. Studies show that play is critical to a child’s cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being.¹

The relationship that you have with your child will strengthen over time by doing the so-called little things that involve play on a consistent basis. Having a catch, shooting some hoops, or playing a board game together helps to develop your child’s imagination and dexterity, and contributes to healthy brain development.

The important thing to realize as a parent is that relating to your child doesn’t necessarily mean you must have a bunch of things in common with them. If you enjoy the outdoors, but your child prefers to watch a movie, learning to compromise and embrace your child’s hobbies will help to build a long-lasting bond. This shows your child that you are not only physically there, but also emotionally present and spending quality time together.

I will admit it. I tried to show off in front of my students a time or two. A few years back, I wanted to show them that Korean pop sensation Psy

had nothing on me, despite having over 2 billion views on YouTube at the time and worldwide fame. I was determined to do the “Gangnam Style” like nobody’s business. I was stepping to the left, then right, then left, and left again quickly. I was swinging my arms and bending my wrists up and down and then sliding to the right.

Could you picture this scene going on in the classroom for about thirty seconds or so? “Embarrassing?” you ask. An understatement to say the least! But, hey, I received some laughs, cheers, strange faces, and fist pumps. The point is that I got their attention and showed them that I knew “what was up.” I also wanted to seem cool by rattling off the names of the current R&B, rock, rap, and pop artists, while even throwing in some lyrics of popular songs.

Could you get away with that with your child? Trying to communicate and relate to your child by speaking their language, with trendy words and phrases like *swag*, *yolo*, *that’s the bomb*, *off the chain*, *totes*, *epic*, *lit*, *noob*, *fam*, *don’t be hatin’*, *you got owned*, *roasted*, *that’s boss*, and *that’s sick* can be a challenge. When you speak with your child, it can sometimes appear as though they are speaking another language, but this is their way to developing self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of belonging that helps carve their personal identity.

Your children may feel embarrassed by you “trying to be cool,” especially in front of their friends. Regardless, you may or may not feel comfortable showing off your dance moves in front of your children or throwing out slang terms that died out with MC Hammer pants. In any case, do you have to try and be cool to relate to your child or can it be accomplished another way?

As children grow, they will be discovering new ways to define their personality and seek out independence. This is a normal part of the growth and development phase of adolescence. However, this doesn’t mean you shouldn’t get regularly involved in what’s going on in your child’s life.

ASKING QUESTIONS

The question “How was school today?” may very well be the most frequently asked and least answered question by you and your child, respectively. As your children get older, the description of their day may become less and less detailed. What you are really trying to find out from them, especially as they get older, is not just how school was, but rather “How is your life going?” Oftentimes, the response shrinks down to “Fine,” which could allude to a bunch of things that your child may be thinking or feeling:

“I hate school! It is so freaking boring!”

“I have a crush on one of my classmates, but I’m not going to tell you!”

“This kid keeps picking on me, but there’s nothing you can do about it!”

“My life sucks and everyone hates me!”

I have spoken with and witnessed many parents out of touch with their children’s lives and far removed from their own educational experiences. They focus heavily on their child’s grades and place less emphasis on psychological health, which has such a profound influence on a child’s overall well-being. The feeling of being back in school may or may not be a distant memory for you, and recalling exact emotions that you once experienced may be a challenge.

However, there are plenty of questions that you can ask your child that will help prompt a meaningful conversation. Asking “How was your day today?” seems to be a bit of a loaded question for a child to answer. Instead, you can help spark conversation with your child and discover what is really going on in their life by asking pointed questions such as these:

“Did you do anything special today in school?”

“What was your favorite part of the day? Tell me all about it.”

“What was your least favorite part of the day? Why so?”

The importance of listening to your child to best understand him or her starts with reliving your own days as a student and evoking more than just selective, warm, fuzzy, and dreamy memories. It also includes recalling the day-to-day pressures that affected the decisions you made choosing your peer group, activities you took part in, and effort you put forth in school. These all contributed to your perceptions on life and how they have accumulated to impact you, positively and/or negatively.

EXERCISE: REAWAKEN YOUR YOUTH

Take a few minutes to answer the following set of questions to help reawaken your adolescence. Make note of any associated feelings that come to mind for each question. Ask yourself,

- Are these memories fond or would you like to forget about the past? Why so?
- Were there moments of inspiration that you experienced that sparked a change in the course of your life? A friend standing up for you? A teacher believing in you?

- Did you look forward to going to school each morning?
- How did you feel when the bus arrived to pick you up each day?
- How did you feel riding the bus in the morning? in the afternoon?
- How did you feel at the bus waiting area near home? at school?
- Do you remember walking into class and seeing your worst enemy staring at you?
- Do you remember the difference a teacher you liked or hated had on you and how they made you feel?
- Do you remember the first day of elementary school? middle school? high school?
- Did you look forward to going to gym class? math class? science class? art class? social studies class? English class? foreign language class?
- How did it feel to sit in those hard chairs all day?
- Did you look forward to eating lunch with your peers?
- How did you feel when you had to change your clothes in front of others in gym class?
- Were you afraid of being picked last for games?
- Did you ever write notes to or text message friends in school? To whom and in what classes did you write/text them?
- How did you feel when your parents saw your report card?
- Were you proud of your efforts?
- Do you wish that your parents understood you better growing up?
- Do you wish that your parents imposed more limits on you or gave you more freedom?
- Do you wish that your parents pushed you harder in some areas of your life?
- Did you feel loved and cared for by others?
- Why did you choose the friends that you had growing up?
- Was there someone you were afraid to face in school and tried to avoid?
- Did you worry about dressing to impress others?
- How did you feel right before going to sports practice after school?
- How did you feel when you first asked that special someone out on a date or to the prom? had your first kiss? had your first serious relationship?
- How did you feel when you were being laughed at or made fun of by a select person or group of people?
- Were you anxious walking in the halls from class to class? Did you feel safe?
- Did your parents care about how your days were at school? How did it make you feel?

- Did you feel embarrassed to be around your parents in public places? with your friends?
- How did you feel when you were in a situation with someone or a group of people and you were asked to try or do something that you didn't want to?
- Do you have any regrets while growing up? How would you have changed events if you could go back in time?
- Do you wish that you had done something differently in previous relationships with friends—including boy/girlfriends, bullies, parents, siblings, teachers, coaches, or sports teammates?

Hopefully by asking yourself all of these questions you were able to rekindle specific feelings of your past school days. Despite this exercise falling somewhere between painful and pleasant, it serves as a necessary and useful launching pad for you to better understand your child's needs and what he or she experiences on a daily basis.

I wear many hats throughout the day teaching children from all different backgrounds, and it is my job to relate with each and every one of them to the best of my ability and influence their lives in a positive manner. I am able to do this, in large part, by conjuring up my own past experiences and putting myself back in school and reliving how I felt in different circumstances while growing up. Fortunately, I still remember the smells and textures of the classrooms, locker rooms, restrooms, libraries, and gymnasiums and recall my inner feelings, fears, joys, and dreams as if it were yesterday.

Even if you were unable to evoke the exact feelings from being back in school, asking yourself pointed questions from your adolescence is one of the first and crucial steps to help you *connect with your child, understand their point of view better, and build a trusting line of communication* with them for the rest of their lives.

As your children grow, they experience various highs and lows and are looking to you to understand what they are going through, whether they admit that to you or not. They are seeking guidance and answers through the changes they experience throughout their formative years. Being able to make a difference in your child's life requires you to relate to and best understand their experiences.

Apply these strategies to stay connected and build a strong, long-lasting bond with your child:

- Parents who are giving, kind, empathetic, listen, and make time for their children will stay better connected with them and have a strong influence on raising caring, positive, secure, and loving people.

- Playing pretend games like “doctor,” “house,” or “school” with your children is a great forum for them to learn role play, leadership, effective communication, and problem-solving skills.
- Taking your children to different places, such as parks, museums, libraries, movies, and stores, can spark curiosity and help inspire them to keep active, explore, ask questions, and learn.
- Finding ways to demonstrate that you are sincerely interested in your children’s lives reassures them that they are heard, understood, and important. Consequently, open and effective communication lines will begin to form naturally between you and your children.



Make it a point to relate to your children by listening to them, playing with them, and taking a genuine interest in their lives. Share stories of your own life to help enlighten what might be going on in theirs.

