

3rd Mile: Engagement and Understanding

This session will cover two of four behavioral essentials; engagement and understanding. Sessions to follow will cover the other two essentials; ability and motivation.

The Four Essentials

1. **Engagement:** Overcoming non-compliance or disappointing task performance must begin with engagement. Many parents grow frustrated when they think they have their child's attention, but don't; or when they know they don't have their child's attention, but can't get it. In either case, if the child and parent do not have each other's attention, compliance can hardly be expected. Similarly, if a child does not have his or her mind on a task, it should come as no surprise when the task is not performed well.
2. **Understanding:** Sometimes a child is paying attention but still does not get it. Understanding depends upon engagement but engagement does not guarantee understanding. Parents may not be aware of their ineffective communication or fuzzy directions. If a child does not understand exactly what is required and how to do it, then he will not be able to perform.
3. **Ability:** If the child is engaged and understands but does not have the ability to do what is required, frustration is inevitable. Sometimes, parents may not realize when they are asking their child to do something that is too hard.
4. **Motivation:** Finally, the child may be engaged, understanding and able; but there is "nothing in it" for him or her. There is no incentive for the child to comply or perform. He or she is simply unwilling. The demand represents somebody else's agenda. To overcome such inertia or resistance, something must drive the child forward.

How to Insure Engagement and Understanding

- **"Two-step it"/ Separate engagement from instruction:** Before you can expect your child to understand and comply, you must have his or her attention. If we give directions before we have engagement, we don't get very far. Sometimes, it may be as simple as saying your child's name before giving a command; other times, we need to be more creative, deliberate and patient.
- **Stop one thing before starting another:** If the child is preoccupied, he or she is less likely to register what you are saying. Before giving a command, try to wait for a break or the completion of the preferred activity. If you need to interrupt, try not to do this so suddenly that the child becomes irritated or angry. Sudden interruption will only make him less in the mood to listen. For example, "Tommy, in 5 minutes you are going to have to stop what you are doing. Then

I'm going to have something else for you to do." Or, "Jane, there's something I need to tell you. When can I have your attention?"

- **Pick the right timing:** Respect your child's needs, preferences, and behavioral rhythms. Make requests when your child will be in the most receptive mood. A child who is very distractible might be more responsive if instructions or reminders are given just before the task is to be done, at the point of performance. A child who is inflexible or slow to transition usually needs extra lead-time and preview.
- **Get close:** Parents often shout instructions from across the room, across the house, across the yard or across the playground. If you want to be sure that your child is ready to hear you, first get in your child's space, in your child's face, at your child's physical level.
- **Use all the senses:** For most parents, talking is the most natural mode of communication; but for some children, parents may need to modify their volume, pitch, rate and style of speech. For many children, talking can be a turn-off. Every parent should know which senses represent their child's most reliable communication channels. Does your child register information best through sound, sight, smell, taste, touch, or movement? How can input be modified to insure processing? What is the best way to communicate through each of the senses? Various modes of visual engagement and communication can be very effective: facial expression, gesture, body posture, demonstration, written directions, visual schedules, to-do lists, calendars, story books, pictures, computers, cartoons, or photographs. For each child, which type and style of visual aid will be most attention-grabbing? Teaching through touch and movement may include hands-on prompting, "walk-throughs", sand, and manipulatives.
- **Be creative. Make it fun:** A sense of humor helps. For example, Dad gets down eye-to-eye with his son Tommy. "Dad to Tommy, Dad to Tommy. Come in Tommy." Dad holds one palm open over his ear, the other hand fisted to his mouth, pretending to have a walkie-talkie: "Do you read me? Over." When Tommy looks at him, smiles and answers, "I read you Dad. Over", Dad knows he's ready to listen. Some parents hand their child a real walkie-talkie while talking into the other one.
- **Use empathy:** When a child is non-compliant, parents often fall into a trap. They try to explain. They try to teach. They try to motivate. But their child still fails to respond and might even "turn-off" more. This can feel like passive resistance or open defiance. However, it may be the parents have not put themselves in their child's shoes. They might be expecting things from their child before they have established the necessary emotional connection. The best way to connect with disengaged children is to pause and consider how they must feel, then let them know – verbally or non-verbally – that we understand. (See future session on Empathy.)
- **Anticipate, plan and communicate in advance:** Make a list of unmet behavioral expectations. How many problem situations really take you by surprise? Hardly any. In fact, most challenging child behaviors are painfully predictable. We can almost always anticipate difficult situations at least a day in advance; more often, weeks or months ahead. Think about the usual trouble

spots from waking until sleep: morning routine, mealtime, classroom, homework, unstructured/free/play time, TV/video/computer time, chores, evening routine, and bedtime. The regularity of these problems exasperates many parents. However, this predictability creates opportunities to anticipate, plan and strategize. Come up with a very specific and detailed schedule. Write down exactly what you expect your child to do and when, from waking up in the morning to going to sleep at night. Anticipate every problem situation. Formulate specific rules. A parent without clear schedules and rules is like a teacher without a lesson plan or a builder without a blueprint. If you are clear on your own expectations, you will be much better able to communicate them to your child.

- ***Have good reasons. Give good reasons:*** Some parents feel that their children should “just obey... (Why?)...because I said so!” True, children may be too young, inexperienced or immature to understand their parents’ thinking. Even so, children are much more likely to do what they are told if they understand why. If parents’ commands seem arbitrary or absurd, the child’s defiance should not be surprising. Lack of explanation should never be mistaken for lack of motivation. Good reasons lead to good behavior.
- ***Be specific. Break it down:*** Make sure that your child understands exactly what to do and how to do it. Parents may falsely assume that their child “gets it” when their job description has not been sufficiently clear. What exactly do we want done when we tell a child to, “Clean your room,” “Pick up your toys,” “Get ready for bed,” “Do your homework.” Break-down complex or multi-step tasks into their simplest chunks. Be specific. Provide details. How is the task to be done? When? Where? By Whom? Use job description cards, pictorial, photographic or cartoon-style visual schedules /sequential instructions, checklists, etc.
- ***Check understanding:*** Make sure that your child has registered and understood what is expected. Ask for repetition of instructions: “I just want to make sure that you understand. Could you please tell me what you have to do?”
- ***Repeat as needed:*** Once may not be enough. Some children really do forget. They need repetition to learn. Make sure to review instructions as necessary. If review leads to immediate compliance, then “forgetting” was “real” and not just an avoidance ploy. Detailed contracts, written and signed, posted or filed, can prevent honest misunderstandings about previous agreements.
- ***Prompt as needed:*** Often, the problem is not forgetting *how* to do the task but forgetting *when* it needs to be done. Many people have significant difficulties with time awareness and time management. Children and parents should learn habitual use of practical reminder strategies and devices: schedules, calendars, prompts, cues, timers, alarm clocks, alarm watches, post-it notes, posters, checklists, electronic planners, etc.
- ***Motivation:*** Good engagement and clear communication almost always lead to improved compliance. Children are often blamed for poor motivation when adults could do better planning and instruction. Rewards and punishments should never take the place of good teaching and supervision. Most children will be motivated to do well if they are engaged, if they understand, and if they are able. The overall strategy will always be to give whatever support is necessary to

ensure initial success, and then gradually fade supports to promote independence.