

## **5th Mile: Self-motivation and Learning from Experience**

Children do not have to learn everything from their parents. In fact, children often learn better from their own experience. Although parents make a crucial difference, children need a chance to develop self-motivation. The strategies discussed below might require parents to set the stage a bit - but then back off. Parental restraint can give children the opportunity to appreciate the consequences of their own actions and learn for themselves.

Some basic principles of learning are worth reviewing. Children are more likely to repeat demands if they get what they want. They are less likely to repeat demands if their expectations are not met. Children are more likely to comply if something good follows. They are less likely to comply if there is nothing in it for them. These principles underlie some very simple and effective strategies.

### **Natural consequences**

Children often make demands which are inappropriate or unreasonable. Even if parents do not give-in to these demands, they need to be wary of giving too much attention to the demanding child. If the parent usually responds to demands, the child will learn to demand more. Children need opportunities to learn that they can not always get what they want; that they sometimes need to help themselves; and that certain types of demands may not be dignified with a response. If parents exercise restraint and ignore unreasonable demands, children will learn to “do-without” or “do-for-themselves”. (Effective ignoring technique is covered in another session.) Such ignorable demands may involve:

- Providing pacifiers and bottles
- Unhealthy eating and drinking
- Impulsive eating and drinking
- Rocking or lying with to sleep
- Fetching
- Transporting
- Buying

Children often resist parents’ appropriate and reasonable suggestions on matters of comfort, health and success. If parents insistently repeat their requests, the child may intensify his or her resistance. Once a power struggle begins, it can only end with the parent over-powering or giving-in. Instead, parents could calmly make a suggestion - once and only once - then back off and allow the child the opportunity to experience the natural consequences of their decisions. For example:

- What happens if I don’t eat?
- What happens if I don’t sleep?

- What happens if I don't put on a warm coat?
- What happens if I don't try to work out problems with siblings and friends?
- What happens if I don't do my homework?
- What happens if I don't clean up my room?
- What happens if I don't put my laundry in the basket?

Children can learn from natural consequences such as hunger, fatigue, cold, loneliness, teacher reaction, lost toys, and smelly socks. This is not a case for “tough love” or “the school of hard knocks”. Parents should continue to assume a major role in paving their child's path to success. *They should never stand idly by and allow their children significant harm or suffering.* On the other hand, children should have the chance to learn for themselves from *minor* disappointment and distress. Parents can not prepare children for all of life's contingences. Even if they could, parents should not help their children over every little bump along the road.

### Logical sequences

Non-compliant behavior is often the result of illogical sequencing; that is, children do not easily shift off something they *do* like onto something they do *not* like. Parents should analyze a typical day, from wake-up until sleep. Are regular problem situations and resistant behaviors the result of illogical sequencing? For example, does TV come *before* homework? Which comes first, niceties or necessities? For a mule to move forward, the carrot has to be in front, not behind.

Rules and routines should be adjusted to set the order right. Parents can withhold something that the child prefers until *after* the child does what is necessary. The child learns: “To get that, I must first do this.” For example, in asking a child to come downstairs or get in the car, parents should not repeat requests or push from behind. They should position themselves downstairs or in the car and simply wait for the child to come. They should delay giving attention until after the child complies. Sequencing strategies work best if there is a logical connection between what the parent requires and what the child wants. Examples:

- Get out of bed, go to the bathroom, and get completely dressed (including shoes). Then you can have your breakfast.
- Brush your teeth and get your back-pack ready. I'll be waiting for you in the car.
- Do your chores. Then you can have a friend over.
- Clean up all your toys. Then you can have a snack.
- Finish all your homework. Then you can watch TV or use the computer.
- Eat at least three pieces of each food on your dinner plate. Then you can have dessert.
- Put your dish in the sink and come upstairs. Then we can play a game of cards.
- Brush your teeth, get your pajamas on, and pull out your clothes for tomorrow morning. Then we can have story time.