

Shhh!: "Quiet" Parenting Zone Ahead

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"Nothing works! We've tried it all! He won't sit in time out. He won't stay in his room. He doesn't miss his Game Boy or anything else for that matter. He earns a reward but two days later he lies again. Right before he earns the reward, he blows the whole system. We've told him 1000 times to brush his teeth, get his backpack and turn in his homework. Every day we tell him the same things over and over. I tell him, again and again, you won't have friends until you stop being so bossy. Five minutes later he's back outside demanding that the other kids play what he wants to play."

These sentiments are expressed by adoptive family after adoptive family in adoption support groups, in online chat groups and in therapy. Parenting methods that worked well with typical children often have little to no impact on the new child with a traumatized past. This is because mental health issues—AD/HD, ODD, PTSD, Bi-Polar Disorder, Attachment Disorder—render traditional parenting strategies ineffective. In order for the adoptee with a history of neglect, abuse or abandonment to make changes, parents need new parenting tools.

We have provided some new parenting ideas in our previous blogs, *Affection is Wonderful: Will the Behaviors Ever Change?* and *Another Crazy Whopper: Understanding and Dealing with Lying - Part I and Part II*. In this blog we discuss a shift to more "quiet" parenting approach. That is, parents want to shift to a **less talk and more action approach**.



The reasons for this are described below. While reading, see if you recognize yourself:

- Remind, remind, remind! "Pick up your coat." "Brush your teeth." "Do your homework." "Clean your room." All day, the adoptee is reminded of his responsibilities. Actually, in many homes, this carries over to the typically-developing children as well. All of this reminding only accomplishes that the adults are doing the child's thinking. There is no need for the child to internalize the daily routine—his parent will always be available to tell him what to do next.
- Lecture, lecture, lecture! "If I've told him once, I've told him 1000 times...!" Likely, 1001 won't matter either. Children who have experienced trauma have difficulty paying attention. A couple of minutes into a lecture, you've lost him! He has tuned you out!
- Warnings—"The next time you forget your homework, I'm not driving to the school." What would be wrong with not doing it this twentieth time? Parents deliver warnings—chronically! Usually, little action is taken. The child perceives that his parents don't mean what they say. Why would he make changes?

- Threats—"If you don't get out of bed, I'm going to drag you out!" Threats are an attempt to manage negative behaviors with fear. Many traumatized children respond poorly to threats. Threats trigger their fear, activating memories of frightening incidents from the past. Once scared, the child dissociates—stares or seems as if in a fog—or enters hyperarousal. Heightened emotional states decrease the brain's capacity to access logical thought processes. The child is not capable of thinking clearly when in this state of emotional upheaval, which is often referred to as dysregulation. A co-worker of mine, Regina Kupecky, often says to parents, "During these times, it is as if you are trying to reason with a person who is intoxicated. It doesn't work." This is a good analogy and one with which many are familiar.

Fathers often utilize threats. Dads seem to want to be the authority figure in their homes. They want their children to listen and obey quickly. This level of obedience will not occur with children with moderate to severe mental health issues. Further, is this the way you really want to manage your children? Do you want them complying because of fear, or because they trust and respect your decisions?

Lastly, many threats are hollow. The threat can't be carried out or the parent has threatened something that wouldn't make sense to carry out. For example, frustrated parents often draw lines in the sand. "If you don't change, you are going back to the public agency." "If you lie one more time, you're out of here." The public agency won't simply take the child back. You adopted and agreed to raise the adoptee as if he were born to you. Unless the adoptee is presenting serious safety issues, he is staying in your home. Sometimes, parents threaten lengthy periods of deprivation—no snacks for a month or no television for a month. Is this reasonable? Can you carry this out? If you parent a child who has the capacity to leave a trail of wrappers around your house, likely he will find ways to have his cake and ice cream. If you are having a family movie night, what good does it do to leave out the family member having the hardest time learning to join the family?

Did you recognize yourself above? Worse yet, did you recognize your typically-developing children? Older appropriately-developing children often fall into these roadblocks as well. Recently, a family with five children was leaving our office. The oldest sister grabbed her younger brother's coat, another grabbed his back pack and a third said, "Bob, don't forget your water." Bob isn't making changes because he doesn't have to—he has six family members handling all of his responsibilities!

Consider working to rid your home of these "parenting roadblocks." Move into a "quiet zone" of parenting. Yes, at first, the children will make mistakes. However, keep the following in mind:

"All children, especially those with disorganized thought processes due to trauma, need to learn to think for themselves. Step back and let consequences occur. Success results from these stumbles. They will learn to try again. Eventually they will succeed. From such experiences, your children will learn to navigate relationships and their way in the world."

Lastly, from Michael Jordan, *"I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."*

Getting Started with "Quiet" Parenting

Recently posted was Shhhh!: "Quiet" Parenting Zone Ahead. In response, a Mom said to me, "I agree with the information in the blog, but how do I get started with more quiet parenting?" This is such a good question that I felt I would reply with this blog. Thus, this post will focus on two main ways to begin to move from a parenting style riddled with noisy "roadblocks" to one that allows for a more quiet ride to enhanced relationships between all adoptive family members.

The “roadblocks” that are being addressed are reminders, warnings, threats and lecture. These common parenting tools all have in common that the child’s capacity to think for himself is undermined. If children can’t think on their own, no change is possible. Short-term, a threat or reminder may gain greater compliance. Long-term, the behavior continues—over and over. Truly ceasing negative behaviors requires a less talk, more action approach. Or as my boss, Greg Keck says, “Less talk leads to more listening.”

Changing a parenting style is comparable to dieting. For many, deciding to diet includes a drastic plan of simultaneously ridding the house of snacks, joining a gym, drinking more water and so on! Anyone who has attempted all these changes, at one time, knows that such a large scale effort can fail fairly quickly. Actually, success in dieting can occur by making small gradual changes—over a long period of time. For example, increasing intake of fruit leads to a reduction in calories. Then, reduce trips to fast-food restaurants, etc. Modifying a parenting style is similar. Altering one or two things at a time is more effective than attempting sudden sweeping changes.

So, a first step in moving to “quiet” parenting is taking stock of the type of tools you utilize. Are you making multiple threats each day? Are you reminding from morning to night? Are you delivering warnings with no follow-through? Do the threats and warnings even make sense—can you carry them out? If so, make a commitment to rid your parenting toolbox of one or two of these. This includes monitoring the number of times each day you use the tools and identifying the situations in which you most use the technique (i.e., car, stores, etc.) Then, begin to catch yourself. Then, STOP yourself! Tell yourself, repeatedly, “I am learning to allow my children to think for themselves.” This is positive self-talk. At first, it will require effort. Eventually, it will become habitual and then you won’t have to work so hard at this. Won’t that be nice! Write a note to yourself as well with this message and place it where you will see it throughout the day. Give yourself time—change doesn’t happen overnight. This process may take several weeks to a few months.

Another dynamic of this process is to ask yourself why you continue to use these parenting methods when they are clearly not working. This may require some depth of thought about yourself. For example,

Katie is 9-years-old. She was adopted from the foster care system at age 4. Every morning she refuses to get up for school. Katie’s Mom, Gloria, calls her and calls her. Katie’s Dad, Paul, grows weary of this matter and so, he enters Katie’s room and states, “Get out of bed now or I’m dragging you out!” Sometimes, he actually has to pick Katie up out of bed to get her moving. This is a lot of work and as Katie gets older and bigger, this is going to be impractical and impossible to implement!

Underlying this issue is that Paul feels he must rescue his wife. He hates the way he sees Katie treating Gloria and as such, he feels he must intervene and solve the problem. He feels a loss of control within his home. His threats and actions give him a sense of mastery. While this is so nice that he wants to support Gloria, this morning routine is just that—a morning routine. Nothing is changing! Threatening is a short-term solution. This family needs a long-term way to solve this problem. Facilitating a discussion between Paul and Gloria gave the couple insight into what having control in the home really means. Gloria was satisfied with Paul’s acknowledgement of the difficulties Katie presented. She really didn’t expect Paul to be able to solve all of the behaviors. Paul could relax more knowing that Gloria felt supported by him without having to drag Katie out of bed each day. Resolving underlying issues leads to the ability of the couple to parent differently—quietly. This example brings us to our second point—pick your battles.

Select the two or three behaviors your troubled adoptee most needs to change. Selecting which of those behaviors to end and which to let go (for now) can be a challenge. That’s right, I said pick a few things to work on and let the rest go. It will appear that the adoptee is “getting away with things.”

This will be true temporarily. Actually, working on one or two behaviors will lead to more overall change. This is a difficult concept to grapple with. Try it! It will work! Keep in mind when selecting behaviors to extinguish:

- Behaviors that jeopardize the safety of the adoptee, brothers and sisters, and parents are always selected first to extinguish—violence is a good example of a behavior in this category.
- Behaviors that lend to long-term impaired functioning of the adoptee are second – stealing, for example, may lead to incarceration. So, stealing should be a priority.
- After the above two categories are covered, any behavior can be selected keeping in mind that there are some battles you cannot win. You can most likely ask a child to go to his bedroom. You can't make him sleep. You can make a child do his homework. You cannot make him turn it in. So, in deciding which behaviors to change, have realistic expectations of what you as a parent can and cannot change.

Once you identify your problem areas, replace noisy parenting methods with natural and logical consequences. If the child doesn't brush his teeth, the natural and logical consequence is that his snack becomes fruit instead of a cookie. The parent can empathically state, "I would like for you to have a cookie. However, I need to take care of your teeth until you learn how to."

Regarding Katie, Paul and Gloria, arrangements were made to have Gloria's mother, Linda, come over one morning. Katie was still sleeping when Paul and Gloria left for work. About 10:00am, Linda woke Katie up and handed her the phone. She said, "Katie, its the school wondering where you are." Katie, half-asleep, found herself explaining to the assistant principal why she wasn't in math class. Please note, this had been pre-arranged with this school professional. Since, there has been a lot less morning difficulty in this family! Of course, Katie was at first angry. Gloria, Paul and Linda remained calm and kept stating, "It's okay. They'll have third grade every year honey. School is totally up to you."

If you don't have school staff that are empathic or understanding, you may wind up driving Katie to school. However, the natural and logical consequence is that the child needs to pay for the gas and parental time. Payment can be in many forms—chores or cash. Payment may also be that while out shopping you can be sad for the child as you say, "Well, I'd like to buy you that shirt. However, I'm putting that money toward the gas it's taking to drive you to school." Then, be done—move on! Don't say, "See, how do you like it?" "How does that feel?" This is anger talking. Anger renders the natural and logical consequence ineffective.

Natural and logical consequences connect actions to outcome. Eventually, the child's brain will form new pathways and he will begin to make better decisions. Thus, natural and logical consequences enhance problem-solving skills too. The child sees or feels the result of his actions. Natural and logical consequences are free of lecture, warnings and reminders—an action simply occurs. Roadblocks are avoided as is conflict. The family atmosphere becomes more calm and relaxed. This produces an environment in which relationships can form. Natural and logical consequences allow the child to experience the outcome of his actions and this, over time, contributes to the development of logical functioning. Delivered with empathy, natural and logical consequences make for a powerful parenting tool.

Natural and logical consequences may mean waiting for the opportunity to deliver a consequence. This is fine. Everything doesn't have to be immediate. Natural and logical consequences may also mean giving up parental desires. We all want our kids to be clean, dressed well, making good grades, having friends, etc. However, we can't control all of these things. We can't make these things happen for our sons and daughters. We can only provide the opportunities and the learning experiences to help kids make the best choices possible.

[Parenting with Love and Logic – www.loveandlogic.com](http://www.loveandlogic.com) (and other books, CDs and tapes in the Love and Logic series) by Foster Cline and Jim Fay covers natural and logical consequences in great detail. Check out their website (see Resources) to review the entire line of Love and Logic products. It makes sense and it is fun parenting once you understand it. Having more fun is the best gift you can give any of your children and yourself!