

Shhhh!: “Quiet” Parenting Zone Ahead

“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.”

Why can't I get him to listen?

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*.

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.

If you do that one more time...

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."

I can think for myself!

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."*

Michael Jordan