

Think, Think, Think!: Teaching Kids to Think for Themselves

By Arleta James, PCC

Daily, I observe parents reminding, warning, threatening and bribing their children—typical and adopted—through the grocery store, the morning routine, the evening routine, basketball practice, church, gymnastics class, piano lessons and so on and so on! While there are lots of words, there is little action! Parents seem exhausted and exasperated by all this verbal dancing! In reality, more talk leads to less listening (Keck, 2009.) It appears that the kids' hear the teacher in the Charlie Brown comic strip, "Wah! Wah! Wah!" So, minor or no change occurs. Children and teens don't rise to the level of responsibility desired by moms and dads, or needed to become competent.



Parents can consider a 2011 resolve to allow their kids more opportunities to think for themselves. Children, traumatized prior to entering the family, especially need to learn to improve their cognitive abilities. Abuse, neglect, institutionalization, etc., delay the development of cognitive skills—reasoning, problem-solving skills, perception, abstract thinking, etc. Without being provided chances to remember their backpack or their gym shorts, they won't mature into thinking beings!

There seem to be many reasons for this scenario of endless talk. Let's examine some of these motives and use our adult cognitive processes to determine the validity of the rationale for why, as parents, more action isn't taken.

"He Can't Think" or "I Don't Think He Will Get It"

Many traumatized children appear less intelligent than their actual capabilities. Children arriving from emotionally abusive environments have been given the impression that they are "dumb, stupid and worthless." These kids take these words to heart. They become helpless to believe that they can do things on their own, or do anything right. Their sense of self is shattered.

Over time, parents and other adults begin to accommodate the child's irrational thinking. For example, recently in discussing the issue of brushing teeth with an adoptive family, I suggested that the parents could stop reminding their now 10-year-old son to brush his teeth morning and evening. When it is time for dessert, he could have an apple or banana, rather than a piece of cake or a cookie. They could calmly state, "We need to help you take care of your teeth until you learn how." Immediately—and in unison—both parents stated, "He won't figure that out! He'll never be able to think that way!"

Certainly, the first time this strategy—a natural and logical consequence—is utilized, their son won't "get it." Yet, this child does not have the type of mental impairment that will inhibit him from learning to think in this manner. So, after **many** natural and logical consequences are allowed to happen, this youngster will begin to figure things out; "If I want dessert, I need to brush my teeth." We'll accomplish generating enhanced thought processes, and we'll give the child a

1

Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com,
www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

sense of accomplishment—a key ingredient for re-building self-concept! We're gaining in two areas with one intervention!

We Don't Want to Let the Team Down!

Billy, age 12, joined the basketball team. Not only wouldn't he bring home the practice and game schedule, he wouldn't gather his practice clothes or uniform. His mother had to call the coach in order to obtain the times for games and practice sessions. His mother had to make sure that his uniform and practice clothes were packed up correctly. One day, she simply decided to stop all of this. Billy didn't make it to practice. He didn't even realize it until the coach questioned him about it the next day. At dinner, Billy relayed the conversation with the coach. Later, after Billy was in bed, Billy's Dad was quite upset that Billy didn't make it to practice. He stated to his wife, "You let the team down!" He has an obligation to the team!"

Let's really think about this one! Is "the team" going to help Billy at his first job? Will "the team" be there when he is struggling in college? To whom is basketball important—Billy or Billy's Dad? Who let the team down—Billy or Billy's Mom?

Parents must decide when they are working harder on the child's life than the child. Then, they must decide what action to take. In this case, Billy's Mom was definitely working harder on basketball than Billy. If Billy is really interested in playing basketball, the ball is now in his court to demonstrate that desire.

Teaching the individual child responsibility will make him or her a better team player in the long run.

We Need to be Democratic

We seem to have a desire to make things "fair." We want to explain everything to kids—over and over. We want to give chance after chance.

Sally, a 7th grader, simply doesn't do her homework. This certainly isn't for lack of effort on her parents' part. After trying a number of approaches at home, they decided to let Sally go to school with incomplete assignments. In response, Sally's teacher started packing up all of her worksheets and assigned readings. About every three weeks, a large envelope arrived by regular mail. The packet included a note, "Please help Sally complete this work." Eventually, a meeting was arranged. After much debate, it was decided that the school would need to take action in accord with the school policy for Sally's disregard for her homework.

Overall, again, we need to ask, "Who was working harder on Sally's homework? We also need to ask, "How will Sally learn to be accountable if she is given chance after chance?" Sally is really learning that deadlines have no meaning. This is simply setting Sally up for a difficult future in the world of higher education and the workplace.

Once children know the rules, there is no need to make statements like, "If you don't take the trash out, the car won't move." The car just doesn't need to move! Or, "If you nag me one more time, we won't be going to Burger King." The trip to Burger King was off as soon as the nagging commenced. In these instances, you are doing the thinking for your son or daughter. Instead, they need to figure out why you didn't go for Whoppers or why you didn't drive them to soccer. This is definitely true if these are recurring scenarios in your home. Frequently, the adoptive home can be equated to the movie, *Groundhog Day!* The same behaviors occur over, over and over!



If *Groundhog Day* is a valid description for the situation between you and your kids, the prescription is action!

What Will the Teacher Think? My Neighbor? My Friends? My Extended Family?

It is unfortunate that so many adoptive parents have fears and concerns about what others will think about their parenting style. I often hear, "What will the teacher think if she doesn't have her backpack?" "What will my extended family think if I don't let him have a cell phone?"

Just in my lifetime, society has undergone many changes pertaining to the "best ways" to raise children. When I was in grade school, any trouble caused by a child was quickly made known to her parents who, in turn, relayed it to every other parent on the block! Upon the child's arrival home from school, multiple parents made it clear to the child that the trouble needed to cease! This "shared parenting/it takes a village" concept has given way to the following opinions:

"Parents should be able to manage their children's behaviors. When they can't, they must be bad parents."

"Children should do well in school and be involved in sports, music, dance, church groups and so on. When they don't and aren't, they must have parents who don't care."

"Children should attend college, get good jobs, buy a home and have a family of their own—on a particular time table. When they don't, they weren't raised well. Their parents have failed them."

There is no easy answer to this shift. My best advice is to network with adoptive parents who "get it." Online and in-person, veteran adoptive families can applaud your efforts to raise a respectful, responsible son or daughter! You may also feel free to circulate our previous post, *This Holiday Season (and everyday!) I Wish My Friends and Family Would...Notes From Adoptive Parents- Part One and Part Two*. This article offers friends and family members much food for thought about the need to parent a traumatized child differently than a non-traumatized son or daughter.

In conclusion, I think there are also other common reasons for the need to talk at kids so much about their behavior. For example, when angry, we want them to know we have power—the power to turn off the TV, remove the computer privileges and so on. Again, typical children, respond to a raised voice or "the look." The traumatized child, on the other hand, frequently continues to push the limit. Thus, angry threats have no meaning. The previously traumatized adoptee wants the reaction, rather than the privilege. This phenomenon is described in more detail in our previous blogs,

- ***Consequences vs. Reactions: Parent "Deerly"***
- ***Why Love Isn't Enough: Part Four – Physical Abuse/Domestic Violence***
- ***The Parallel Healing Process: Preventing "Button Pushing", Promoting Peace***

I have also worked with parents who are sympathetic, "I feel sorry for her because of her trauma." Certainly, I too am sorry about the abuse, neglect and rejection adoptees experience pre-adoption. It isn't how childhood is supposed to

3

Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

be! Yet, we must resolve these feelings in order that we prepare children for the "real world." Peers, co-workers, college roommates, spouses, etc. won't operate from a sympathetic perspective. They will expect the child to perform in accord with the rules and standards of the given environment.

Of course, as all of you are good parents, you want to protect your children! It is so very difficult to stand back and watch children make mistakes. Yet, when the circumstances are safe and allow for growth, this is the best protection for the child to flourish into a productive adult.

If you feel you are caught in a cycle of too much talk without solid footing on which to be doing so, shift gears to a more action-oriented style of parenting today! Think about some areas you can turn over to your child to manage. We offered some guidelines for picking your battles in, *Seeing the Forest through the Trees: What to Pick?* Stand back, and be quiet. Comfort them as they falter, before figuring it out. Think about the words of Michael Jordan as you proceed. Let this quote from Michael be your mantra as your kids learn to "think, think, think for themselves." In essence, through his **actions**, he became a basketball legend,

"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."

If you need additional help taking action, I've explained the concept of "quiet parenting" more fully in my articles,

Shhh!: "Quiet" Parenting Zone Ahead

Getting Started with Quiet Parenting