

The 5 B's of Effective Parenting

Guy Harris

I hear the questions again and again: "How do I get my child to ...

...quit whining?"
...do their homework?"
...clean their room?"
...do the dishes?"

And I hear all kinds of answers for each situation. Here is my proposal, rather than handle each situation as an isolated event, let's look at them in light of what we know about human behavior.

Events that appear to be random, isolated behaviors actually fit into predictable patterns for most children. If you understand the patterns, you'll know what to do in most situations. I've developed the five B's to reduce these patterns to five easy to remember and apply principles.

So, let's get started...

1. Be Positive

People -- including children -- do things for one of two reasons: to avoid pain or to pursue pleasure. As a parent, you constantly work between these two options. If you use lots of negatives -- like punishments -- to drive behavior, your child will do just enough to avoid the pain. Rewarding good behaviors rather than punishing bad ones, improves the chance that you'll get cooperation and not conflict from your child.

Noticing unacceptable behaviors and stopping them with a punishment is easy. It takes effort to recognize good behaviors and praise them. You'll need to do both; but the more you recognize the good, the less likely you are to see the bad.

2. Be Specific

Make sure you speak to your child about specific behaviors. Whether you administer discipline or offer praise, the more specific you make your words the better.

Let's say your child interrupts you. Many people get angry and tell their children to "stop being rude and inconsiderate." Well, "rude" and "inconsiderate" are interpretations of behavior, not behaviors. A better statement would be, "I don't appreciate it when you interrupt and challenge me. I see those behaviors as rude and inconsiderate. The next time you speak to me, I expect you to wait your turn to speak." Depending on the situation, you might even take a further disciplinary action based on the rules of your household. Whether you take further action or not, focus on specific behaviors and not interpretations.

Here are some examples:

- Good girl (or boy), bad girl (or boy), rude, inconsiderate, disrespectful, arrogant, obnoxious, flighty, unfocused, smart aleck, and pushy are interpretations.
- Interrupting, rolling eyes, speaking loudly (or softly), shrugging shoulders, looking away, walking away, tone of voice, and slamming the door are specific behaviors.

3. Be Certain

People act based on what they expect to happen to them in the future. Whether it's avoiding pain or pursuing pleasure, it's still about expectations. Your child needs to know -- without a doubt -- what to expect from you based on their actions.

We use pre-defined family rules and behavioral expectations as a tool to improve certainty. Children need to know the rules. They need to know what to expect when they follow the rules -- and when they don't.

We put a list of five family rules and a list of both acceptable and unacceptable behaviors on our refrigerator. We never have to discuss what is or is not appropriate in our household. We defined it together and wrote it down. As parents, we then enforce the pre-agreed upon rules.

4. Be Consistent

Consistency works in close partnership with Certainty. It is Certainty's twin in the daily struggle to raise happy, healthy, respectful, well-behaved kids. Your children will never develop a sense of certainty if you don't consistently apply your household rules.

For example, if whining and complaining are inappropriate today, they had better be inappropriate tomorrow. If you give in to the behavior to get them to stop whining, you just taught them that whining is okay. Unacceptable behaviors should never give your child their desired result. If it is unacceptable, it is always unacceptable. Even the glimmer of hope that it might work for them is enough for them to give it a try. They have to know what to expect from you each and every day.

For me, consistency is tougher than certainty. I'm great at setting the rules and communicating them to my kids. I'm not always so great at fair and consistent application. But, I realize, easy or difficult is not the issue -- appropriate or not appropriate is. So, my wife and I constantly strive for consistency when we enforce the rules in our house.

5. Be Immediate

Act now. When your children do something worthy of praise -- do it now. When your children do something that needs correction -- do it now. Delayed consequences have very little impact on behavior.

Let's look at our adult behaviors to illustrate the point. I like cheesecake. Eating cheesecake offers me both immediate and future consequences. The future consequence is negative -- I could develop a weight or blood pressure problem. The immediate consequence is positive -- it tastes good and gives me pleasure. When I

have the opportunity to get cheesecake, I find it difficult to resist. Why? The immediate, certain positive tends to overshadow the future, possible negative.

The definition of immediate can change depending on your child's age. For example, your ten-year old might respond to a disciplinary action that happens 15 minutes after the event. With a four-year old, you had better correct the behavior on the spot -- even if other people are around. To a four-year old, 15 minutes is a virtual eternity.

Acting immediately has an added benefit for you when the behavior is inappropriate. If it continues without correction, you are likely to get angrier every time you see it. As you get angrier, you will probably have more difficulty keeping your response proportional to the behavior (i.e. -- not blowing your stack). Act now and you'll probably maintain control.

There you have it -- five simple principles to guide a wide range of parenting situations.

As I sit writing this article, I can think of times when I haven't done it right. Nonetheless, I offer the 5 B's in an effort to help all of us become better parents. Collecting my thoughts on this topic reminds me of the right way to work with my children. Writing them down helps me to stay on track.

Some or all of these ideas may be completely new to you -- but maybe not. It's more likely that you've heard some of this information before. Maybe not in exactly the same way, but you've heard it. If this is new to you, I hope it helps you as a parent. If it's old-hat, I hope it serves as a reminder to help you stay on track as well.

About the Author:

Guy Harris is an author, speaker, trainer, and consultant on human behavior at home and in the workplace. He has helped thousands of people across the country learn to practically apply the principles of human behavior. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Sandra, and two daughters.

Guy co-authored "The Behavior Bucks System™" to help parents apply behavioral principles in the home to reduce stress and conflict with their children. Learn more about this book at <http://www.behaviorbucks.com>

Learn more about Guy at <http://www.principledriven.com>

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