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How to give kids feedback for improvement

POSITIVE PARENTING

by Michael Grose

It can be tempting to allow children to continue to behave badly or to perform chores, homework or sports practice poorly when they argue or resist feedback. Parents need to be part coach, teacher and counsellor so that kids learn how to behave well, develop healthy attitudes to learning and know how to get the best out of themselves. Feedback is one of the most effective tools we have to achieve this. Give it poorly and it will at best be ignored and at worst, rupture relationships and damage self-worth. If you provide feedback effectively, you'll see improvement in behaviour, attitudes and learning, even among feedback resistant teens.

Here's how to deliver feedback to make sure it sticks.

Make it specific

It's absolutely essential to give feedback about one behaviour, skill or attitude at a time, if you want improvement. "Jai, if you make eye contact with your brother when you talk to him, he's more likely to listen to you." The feedback needs to be specific rather generalised so that a child or teen knows exactly how to do better. It also needs to be delivered in a non-judgemental way.

Ensure it's descriptive

"That's not the way to behave inside" doesn't help much. "Use your quiet voice when you play inside the house" cues a child into how to behave. Use phrases and terms that have real meaning for kids rather than vague, non-descriptive language such as 'be a good girl', so kids not only know what's expected but they understand how to meet your expectations.

It's got to be timely

Providing feedback to a toddler half an hour after they've thrown a tantrum in public will ensure there's no impact. On the other hand, providing behavioural feedback when a teenager is angry will ensure one thing – you'll have an argument on your hands. Feedback needs to be fairly immediate for young children and if possible, provided before an event or activity. "When you set the table put the fork on this side and the knife on the other." Choose the time and place to provide feedback to older children, remembering that angry tweens and teens generally don't listen.

Give from a place of calm

Angry parents generally deliver feedback poorly to kids. Regardless of how well you choose your words and how accurate your feedback may be, feedback delivered angrily will prompt the flight/fight response from a child or young person. They will ignore you or start an argument, but they won't take your message on board when you're mad at them.

Give sparingly

When children require approval for every scribble, homework problem and picture they draw, it's probably because they have always been offered feedback on every scribble, homework problem and picture they draw. It's vital that children develop their own internal sense of validation and honest self-assessment, because as they grow up and face hardship, they need to be able to look to themselves for strength and approval. If they can't, they will be much more vulnerable to superficial external approval that comes their way in the form of peer pressure, bullying and the usual social jostling. As you wean them off of your feedback, turn their "Mummy, is this picture good?" or "Dad, did I do a good job?" back on them, and ask them how they feel about their work.

Feedback is a wonderful parenting tool that requires attention to detail, sensitivity and a willingness to respect the dignity of the child or young person who is receiving it. It's also most effective when given sparingly, rather than like a nervous tic, which keeps kids anchored to you for approval.