

Stocking the parenting toolbox

BY LYNNE JOHNSTON



RALEIGH Over several decades of counseling parents of young children and teaching hundreds of parent-education workshops on positive discipline techniques, I have often heard the words "I have tried everything, and nothing has worked."

Parents have taken actions ranging from giving rewards to withholding favorite things: toys, desserts, TV, computer, electronic games or playtime with friends. Many see themselves in a cycle of giving "time-outs" all day long.

Too often parents say they have resorted to spanking "because nothing really works! Our child just doesn't listen! We are at our wits' end!"

This discouraging and frustrating dilemma is a common story for too many of today's young parents. Part of the problem is that parents use many tactics in a hit-or-miss fashion. Sometimes they are trying to duplicate the strategies their parents used; other times they are purposefully taking an opposite approach. Or they may be attempting to copy a tactic used or recommended by a teacher or another parent.

As a nation we do not have a consistent, well-thought-out model of discipline. Hundreds of parenting books offer many different and conflicting ideas about what strategies are best. Too often parents are left confused. In addition to their own inner conflicts about managing behavior, couples coming from different backgrounds often disagree on appropriate approaches. Sometimes there are conflicts with previous generations, with strong opinions expressed on both sides.

Too often parents find that neither behavioral systems relying on reward, punishment and "time-out" nor spanking offers effective discipline strategies. Although in the past, spanking was an acceptable form of discipline in schools, public places and homes, it is controversial today. While once forms of aggression were expected and even encouraged, today in many schools and other settings students can be suspended as a consequence of displaying physical force. Gone are the days of a simpler view that "If someone hits you, you hit them back" and "Boys will be boys."

Recently reported research shows that there are multiple negative effects of hitting children. My opinion is that spanking "models" to children that it is acceptable to use aggression to solve problems. Adults who spank children

while telling them they cannot hit peers and siblings are sending a confusing, inconsistent message with a double standard.

Adults need to be modeling and teaching children appropriate conflict resolution, communication and problem-solving skills. Doing so often requires learning some new techniques in order to coach their children.

So, what is a parent to do to fill his tool box with alternative tactics? First, the best-kept secret of discipline is not a discipline technique at all. It is to build a strong foundation in your relationship with your child.

Children will feel more connected to you and respond more cooperatively when they have a relationship built on respect, caring, talking and playing together. Private time, even for 10 minutes a day, using direct eye contact, gentle touches and focused attention works wonders in reversing misbehavior. Unfortunately, sometimes children need this one-on-one time most desperately when we least feel like giving it to them.

The other 50 percent of positive discipline is learning different skills in a step-by-step fashion. The first one is mastering how to be firm in a matter-of-fact, calm, consistent and kind manner, rather than using either a wishy-washy or harsh, stern tone. A second foundation skill is replacing a punishment model that emphasizes "what not to do" with a coaching, encouraging and teaching model that emphasizes "what to do" instead.

Being a parent is a 24/7 job with an ever-changing job description. Few of us have the knowledge and skills needed to do this job automatically and competently. Wake County is fortunate to have a public school system that recognizes that empowering parents of young children with developmental information, tools and strategies to get parenting off to a good start will promote long-term school success.

Through Project Enlightenment, schools offer many services to parents of young children before they begin school and during the kindergarten year. These include parent workshops, consultation, counseling and a Resource Center with a lending library of parent resources .

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