

Parenting for Success Class #2

Observing and Describing Behavior



Introduction

Creating messages our children understand

Children are concrete thinkers—they don't understand the full meaning of words that are abstract or vague. Consequently, they may not understand common parental criticisms.



Consider this Example

“Johnny, you have a bad attitude today.”

In this context, what does the word “bad” mean? It is a vague term used to describe a variety of possible behaviors. While Johnny may be able to infer your meaning, this statement does not address the specific behaviors you would like him to address.



An Alternative Approach

“Johnny, when I asked you to take out the trash, you rolled your eyes and sighed.”

In this example, we have described a specific behavior and indicated to Johnny that it was an inappropriate response. This gives Johnny a very clear message about our expectations for him.

Remember that our goal as parents is to create messages for our children that **THEY** understand.



What is Behavior?

As we all know, behavior is what people do or say. But it's important to remember that behavior can be seen, heard, or measured (how often or how long). This is what allows us as parents to describe behavior in specific terms.



Consider this Example

You are listening to a basketball game on the radio. Hopefully, the sportscaster is giving very specific details descriptions of the game. You should be able to “see” every play in your mind as the announcer gives a verbal replay of the action.

Would it be as satisfying if the announcer simply stated that the team was playing poorly or that a certain player was doing well? Would we be able to “see” the game in our minds? No—we would quickly become confused and frustrated, and our connection to the game would disappear.

We need to be just as clear when we are describing behavior to our children.



Examples of Descriptive Behaviors

- My daughter talks on the phone for one hour at a time.
- When I ask my son to do something, he rolls his eyes and walks away.
- When I tell my daughter her jeans are too tight, she whines and screams, “why are you such a pain?”



Examples of Descriptive Behaviors

It's equally important to recognize and be able to describe positive behaviors.

- When my kids come home from school, they put away their books and ask if there's anything that needs to be done around the house.
- My son helped me put away the dishes. Then he rinsed the sink and swept the kitchen floor.

These descriptive examples are much easier to understand than simply hearing vague statements like, "my daughter did an excellent job," or "his son has a terrible attitude."



The Parts of Behavior

It can be tempting to focus only on the behavior itself, but then we may miss the rest of the picture. What led to the behavior in the first place? And what will be the result?

Remember the ABC's of behavior—

- Antecedent,
- Behavior
- Consequence



Here's an Example

Antecedent (Situation)

- A bully picks on Tommy on the bus ride home

Behavior

- Tommy is angry when he gets home and tells his mother to shut up

Consequence (Result)

- Tommy loses his privileges for the rest of the day



Steps to Describing Behavior

There are three main steps to describing your child's behavior—expressing praise or empathy, describing the observable behavior (what you saw or heard), and if the behavior is inappropriate, describing what to do instead.



Examples

Express praise or empathy

- “I understand that you don’t like doing chores.”
- “I am so proud of you!”
- “I know you would rather be playing with your friends.”



Examples

Describe the observable behavior (be specific)

- “When I asked you to start washing dishes, you looked at the floor and stomped into your bedroom.”
- “When Stacey came over to play, you shared your toys and didn’t argue.”
- “Right now, you are watching television instead of doing your homework.”



Examples

If the behavior is inappropriate, describe the appropriate behavior

- “What you should have done instead was stay calm, said okay, and completed the chore right away.”
- “What you need to do is finish your homework and then ask to go out with your friends.”



Putting the Steps Together

Example #1:

In this example, let's look at a situation where a parent is talking to an uncooperative child:

- “I understand that you don't like doing chores.”
- “When I asked you to take out the trash, you groaned and turned up the television.”
- “What you should have done instead was look at me, say okay, and take out the trash immediately.”



Putting the Steps Together

Example #2:

In this example, let's see how a parent can describe a positive behavior, when the child cooperates right away:

- “I am so proud of you.”
- “When I asked you to take out the trash, you looked at me, said okay, and took out the trash immediately.”

You probably noticed that one step is missing. In this case, we didn't need to describe an alternative behavior because our child is already behaving appropriately.



Remember to...

- Have your child look at you. It's more likely that he or she will hear what you say and follow through on requests. Eye contact is a key to giving and receiving clear messages.
- Look at your child. This shows that you're paying attention and allows you to see your child's reaction to what you say.
- Use a tone of voice that fits the situation. Be firm when giving correction and friendly when giving compliments.
- Be aware of your facial expressions and body language. Make sure your body language also fits the situation—you might choose to smile when you are happy with something your child has done or frown when you're displeased.
- Eliminate as many distractions as possible. Try to find a quiet area where you can talk to your child.
- Try to position yourself so you are at eye level with your child. Try not to intimidate your child. Communicate on his or her level.



Conclusion

This class has helped us learn how to observe and describe our children's behaviors in a manner that they will understand. Making sure we can communicate clearly with our kids is a very important first step toward being able to effectively teach our children how to behave appropriately.

And most importantly...

It's extremely important to remind your child that while you may dislike their behavior, you still LOVE them. After all, that's why you're taking the time to teach them another way to behave.



Next Class

In class #3, we will look at how positive and negative consequences can help reinforce our children's positive behaviors or change their negative behaviors.



Thank you!

We hope this class was useful to you.

For more free parenting resources, including additional classes in this series, please visit:

www.youthvillage.org

