

March 2008

Cooperation at Its Best!

Cooperation is such a wonderful word. It conjures up positive feelings like calmness, togetherness, unity, and harmony. As parents we'd love more of this stuff in our families! For some, it may seem like an impossible dream.

The opposite of cooperation is competition. People competing to get their way, which can foster a family environment that's very uncooperative. And that leads to stress, rivalry, and hurt feelings. Something many of us experience too often!

Having worked with parents seeking more cooperation and harmony in their families for over 19 years, I've noticed a common theme. Parents unknowingly contribute to the very problem they're trying to fix! Let's take a look. Here are typical words that I hear from many disgruntled parents:

"My child never does what he's told, he's so uncooperative!" "She never listens to me." "They know what is expected, why can't they just do it."

What might be the unspoken belief behind these words? How about "children should mind us" and "we know best"?

So we aren't really inviting cooperation at all – these words are inviting obedience. And according to my trusty dictionary, obedience means submission to another's rule or authority.

Now few parents have 'submission' as a long-term goal for their kids today (as tempting as it seems at times!).

You may fantasize of your child uttering statements like "right away mom", "anything you say dad" at times.

Today, instead of submission, we see the value of nurturing independence of thought and internal motivation in our children.

The definition for Cooperation paints a very different picture - Working together or working to the same end, 'in an agreeable manner'.

But when our children are driving us crazy, we can lose complete sight of these goals. Our emotions and hidden beliefs can hi-jack all of our good intentions.

So with this in mind, let me illustrate 2 very different ways of communicating with a child. The first parent is inviting submission with their words, and the second parent is inviting cooperation. Be their kids for the moment and see just how dramatically different it feels!

Parent #1

"What have you been doing up here? I told you we don't have time for play in the morning. The trouble with you is you never listen!"

"If you don't start getting dressed now, you are not getting breakfast."

"If you are not ready by the time I count to 3, I am leaving without you!"

"You still haven't packed your backpack. What are you waiting for? Move!"

"Put your mitts on, or your hands will get cold."

These statements use Blame, Threats, and Commands – all from the Autocratic Tool kit.

Now check out 9 ways you can communicate with a child that invite cooperation. Instead of character assassination, this parent is dealing with a potential conflict in an agreeable and respectful way.

Parent #2

1. Describe what you see, or describe the problem
"I see a child still in their pajamas."
2. Let the routine be the boss
"What is it we do next in our house?"
3. Give information
"It's 5 minutes to breakfast."
4. Give them a job
"Would you like to be in charge of putting out the bowls and choosing the cereal this morning?"
5. Ask questions
"Is there anything you have left to do before we go?"
6. Write a note. (posted by the bathroom mirror)
Please protect me.
Thanks, your teeth.
7. Say it with a word
"Backpack."
8. Give a choice
"Would you prefer to wear your gloves or put them in your pack for later?"
9. Provide encouragement
"We got out of the house on time today – and there was no yelling.
Give me five!"

These statements invite the child to:

1. Focus on the needs of the situation
2. Think of the logical next step for themselves (such as, "Oh, yeah I need to get my pack ready.")

Which house would you rather live in?

Potential pitfalls

Two things I need to caution you of:

Caution 1

You don't use all of these statements for a single situation. Hopefully one will suffice. For example, stop the nagging and **describe what you see**. "I see a child still in their pajamas." You would then be quiet and disengage giving your child room to deal with it. Have some faith that cooperation will come. Hovering, glaring, tapping of the foot is what I call "parental attitude". This likely will invite resistance and a power struggle from your child.

If nothing happens go to **let the routine be the boss** "What do we do in our house before breakfast?"

Caution 2

It's important to remind ourselves that "how" we communicate is as important as "what" we say. Your child will pick up on your attitude!

The attitude of love, respect and faith is what children thrive on. Here's a terrific quote from the book *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen...*

Unhelpful thoughts: “You’re basically irresponsible and thoughtless. You are always doing something wrong and this latest incident is one more proof of your difficultness!”

VS

Helpful thoughts: “You are a lovable and capable person. Right now there’s a problem that needs attention. Once you are aware of it, you’ll probably respond helpfully.”

So turn dreams of cooperation and family harmony into a reality. It can start with a simple change in thought!

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