

Mother Nurture

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Teaching Kids Psychological Skills for Taking In the Good

In our last column, we discussed how to create a nurturing and structured environment for spirited or cautious/rigid children. In this column, we're broadening our focus to explore how to teach basic, essential psychological skills that all children need, like being able to let go of upsetting experiences or take in positive ones.

Relaxation

Especially in early childhood, a child's reactions to things are more a matter of the body than the mind. When the body is more settled, the reactions usually becomes less extreme, and it is easier for him to think clearly and control himself - and remember what his momma said! That's why knowing how to settle his body down is vitally useful to a child.

One of the best ways to teach this skill is at night, when a child is already more relaxed and open, and more willing to try (or put up with) some new things just to keep his mom or dad in the room. We suggest leading your child through some of these techniques and finding the ones that work for him:

- Draw letters or shapes on his back and see if he can figure them out
- Tense his muscles for about five seconds and then relax completely
- Systematically put his attention on each major part of his body, starting with his feet and working up to his head
- Take big breaths; one trick is to get a child to exhale fully and then hold the exhalation for a couple of seconds - when he inhales, he'll naturally take a big breath
- Imagine that he is very heavy, sinking more and more deeply into his bed
- Imagine that his hands are very warm
- Recall or imagine a very relaxing scene, like snuggling in bed with you

You would normally spend five to fifteen minutes a night on these methods. As he gains more experience, you can ask your child to relax his body increasingly on his own. And during the day, you can gently encourage him to recall those feelings of relaxation or to use the techniques he has learned.

Letting Go of Upsetting Feelings

Over time, upsetting experiences form a kind of residue in a child's emotional memory banks. The next time a similar situation occurs, that residue gets activated and intensifies her reactions, like a pre-amp blasting music out of the loudspeakers. Besides being more uncomfortable for the child and stressful for you, her BIG reactions trigger more intense responses from other kids or adults - making her feel more picked on than ever, more unfairly dealt with, more besieged and anxious and angry, and worse about herself.

So teaching her how to filter out painful feelings at the end of the day, or as the day goes along, can be very helpful. Again at night, when you've got a captive audience, you can follow the relaxation by asking your child to recall anything that was bothersome or upsetting during the day, and then imagine that those feelings are being released through one or more of these methods:

- Let her vent for a few minutes. During that time, try not to dampen her feelings (e.g., It's not as bad as all that).
- Exhale the feelings with each breath; perhaps imagine that the breath is like a broom that sweeps dusty, schmuggy feelings away: Good riddance!
- Let them drain out of the body, perhaps as if there were tiny valves at the tips of each finger and toe
- Imagine the feelings being swept away by standing in a cool and refreshing stream on a beautiful, sunny day
- Imagine putting the feelings into a jar and tossing it into a river to be carried off to the sea, or placing them on a rocket ship blasting off to be burned up in the sun
- Imagine that a cord of some kind connects her to the things that are bothering her, and then she takes a pair of golden, super-powerful scissors and cuts the cord
- Say to herself phrases such as, Let it go, it's alright, I can feel better now.

As with relaxation, you would ask your child to use these methods increasingly on her own, both at night and during the day.

Taking In Good Experiences

A child will have lots of positive experiences in a day, but many of them may flow through his awareness without really sticking. On the other hand, if the good moments sink in, they become a crucial resource inside, a source of soothing and encouragement he can draw on the next time things get rough. They contradict the negative, self-fulfilling beliefs he might have, such as I'll never do it right, or No one likes me, so why bother trying to be nice? They are a counter-weight in emotional memory to the painful moments of life. For example, paying

special attention to taking in good experiences gives an anxious child the internal sense of being loved and safe that he of all people really needs, and it enables a spirited child - zooming around so much that new experiences are constantly crowding out old ones before they have a chance to register deeply in memory - to integrate positive experiences at all.

You can teach your child how to make good moments a part of himself at night as well, typically after you have already helped him relax and let go of upsetting feelings. As with those skills, you can encourage him to use what he's learning on his own, both in the evening with you in the room, and during the day by himself. Here's a powerful, step-by-step method:

- Review the day and talk about or visualize the nice moments within it, such as sweet times with you, accomplishing something, learning a new skill, or an acknowledgement from others. Especially look for events that are the opposite of how a child might characteristically feel, like reminding a cautious kid who was nervous about petting a dog that it was really fun when the animal licked his hand.
- As he recalls these, help him sense the positive feelings that come with them[, either by recalling how he felt earlier in the day or by evoking how he's entitled to feel right now]. It's important that he not just recall a nice event, but that he have a nice feeling.
- Encourage him to let the positive feeling sink in to his body, like water into a sponge. (If you haven't already, show him how water soaks into a dry sponge.) He could also imagine that there's a treasure chest in his heart, into which he places a picture of your smiling face, a great time with his father, a success riding his tricycle, and so on. Remind him that he is taking you and his dad with him wherever he goes, and that he can draw on the memory of these good feelings whenever he wants. While he is having this good experience, he could touch a part of his body, such as his wrist or heart, so that he can "cue up" the nice feelings again, in the future, just by touching that same part of his body.

Using the Goodness to Over-ride the Negative

- As an optional bonus, (especially for older children) you could finish up by having your child visualize a difficult situation - while remaining completely relaxed, with a strong sense of feeling good inside - and see himself acting effectively. Start with relatively easy situations, and work up to more challenging ones as the days go by. For example, you could ask a cautious child to imagine being accidentally bumped while standing in line at preschool, and see himself staying relaxed and calm, not worried about being hurt. Or you could ask a spirited child to imagine another child beating him in a board game, and then see himself shrugging it off, staying relaxed and calm, not getting mad or knocking the board over, and telling himself he'll probably win next time. Then, have the child imagine the positive outcomes that would result and the good feelings he'd have.

You can also use this technique as the basis of a powerful, three-step exercise. First, the child imagines the situation (while staying relaxed), sees himself acting in an effective, positive way, and imagines how good that will feel. Then he imagines the same situation, but this time he sees himself acting in the old, not-so-great ways, and he imagines the bad results and crummy feelings that would occur. Third, he makes a conscious choice about which way he wants to act (hopefully, the positive approach!), and then he visualizes that and the results.

Taking Charge of His or Her Mind—awareness, relabeling thoughts and taking action

Even young children can be taught how to gain more control over their thoughts, feelings, and wants. Adjusting their approach to the age of the child, there are lots of ways that parents can teach three useful skills:

- Self-observation - It's crucial for a child to be able to notice when she is slipping into, or already in, a state of being that could be a problem, such as getting rigid or revved up. Just noticing it puts her back in the driver's seat - like the rider of a horse who suddenly realizes her mount is heading the wrong way. You can help by being like a mirror, reflecting the child back to herself so she can see herself more clearly; it's simple to do this by saying - in a gentle, non-judgmental way - what you think might be going on, like: You gotta have the red cup, right? Or: Are you feeling kind of zoomy? You can also ask a child to step back from herself and tell you what's happening inside: How excited are you right now - a little, medium, or a lot?

- Talking back to his or her thoughts - Your child can also argue with the wrong or overly negative thoughts in her mind. As usual, you start by doing it for the child, and then encourage her over time to do it more and more on her own. (A fun way to move in that direction is to take turns coming up with a reason why some negative thought is wrong.) For example, if she is worried about burglars, you could help her come up with this list of reasons why she's safe: The house is all locked; lights are on; no one has ever been burglarized in our neighborhood; three dogs live next door that bark at anything that moves, and burglars stay away from dogs like that; our house does not look rich. Or let's suppose that your spirited son was excluded from some group of boys in kindergarten, and he thinks no one likes him and school will be horrible. The rebuttals could include: It happened once but it may not happen again; it happened for a reason that you can change (i.e. don't grab the ball from one of the boys in the group); mom will talk with the teacher who will try to help out; kids are mean for lots of reasons (like their brother was picking on them) that have nothing to do with you, so it does not mean anything about you if they are mean; you played with other kids later that day and it was fun; there are other kids you could become friends with; you are a great and special person in such-and-such ways; you will make lots of new and better friends in the future; we love you a ton; your dog loves you; you are lovable; love and a sense of your own worth are deep in your heart and will never go away.

- Making good plans - It's so helpful for a child to be aware of the plan that's currently in place, the need sometimes to make a new plan, and the basic idea that it's not OK to change plans unless mom or dad agrees. You can tell a child what the current plan is: We're getting ready to leave, and you shouldn't be trying to do anything else. Or ask - neutrally, as a coach and teacher, not a scolding parent - what she thinks the plan is: What are you supposed to be doing right now? Or have her tell you what her plan is for something: How are you going to clean up the cereal on the counter? What are the steps? If she gets rigidly locked on to a plan in her mind - like she has to get into the car before her younger brother - that needs to change, you can talk with her about the need for a different plan: Yes, you thought you could get in the car first. But Bobby's sick, he's got the runny nose, so I didn't want him to stand in the wind while you got in the car. I'm sorry, but we had to make a new plan. That happens sometimes. Finally, suppose your spirited, rather impulsive daughter sometimes changes the rules in games in order to win, and that creates problems for her with other kids. You could say: Did we agree

you could roll the dice twice? No, we didn't. The plan in this game is each person rolls once. You can't change the plan unless everyone agrees.

To recap, the psychological skills you give your child will not make a difference overnight. But if you stick with them for several months, in most cases you'll see a substantial improvement. If you don't, that would suggest a greater extreme of temperament, or perhaps other issues, that are worth discussing with a specialist in child temperament, your pediatrician, or a therapist who works with children.

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In our next column, we'll cover how to improve temperamental problems in children by optimizing their health and brain chemistry - which naturally has other benefits to a child as well.

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