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Asking the Right Questions

When thinking about the behavior of children, just as when thinking about most other topics, a little bit of knowledge can be dangerous. I can think of a lot of illustrations for this point. For example, I know that health people (not necessarily to be confused with healthy people) say that we should limit our intake of red meat. Health people suggest that we find nutritious substitutes for red meat, such as beans. I know beans are good for me. Even children know that. In fact, often the first piece of prose learned and recited by young boys is a poem that sings the praise of legumes—particularly the positive effects that legumes have on the circulatory system.

But you can image my bean consuming confusion when I gained three pounds after substituting beans for a portion of the red meat that I was regularly consuming. A health person cleared up my confusion by telling me that the gustatory impact of beans does not extend to chocolate-covered espresso beans, which I was consuming by the handful. Who knew?

It's not uncommon for us to become familiar with a new child behavior management strategy (new to us, anyway) and to think that this new strategy (which might also be called a *fad*) is the answer to all of the child behavior questions that we have ever had or may ever have. A couple, friends of mine whose first child was going through the terrible twos, stumbled on a remarkable strategy to solve their child's behavioral challenges—*natural consequences*. Every time their child did something undesirable and experienced an adverse consequence, this couple would join hands and dance merrily ring-around-the-rosies-like as they sang out "natural consequences, natural consequences." It's true that children learn from the consequences of their behaviors (both positive *and* negative), but this does not supplant the need for teaching, parenting, supervision, and intervention. I doubt these parents would sing their natural consequences song as their child played kick the can around the lip of an active volcano.

A more effective approach to behavioral challenges than reliance on the daily miracle strategy is to try to figure out why a challenging behavior is occurring, and a popular approach to finding answers is to ask questions. While asking questions is a good idea, it's probably *not* a good idea to ask a child why he is behaving in an undesirable manner—at least not at first. Initially asking children questions about why they are engaging in an undesirable behavior can lead down a path that is less than productive. Here are just a few of the questions that I have heard teachers ask students *in front of other children*:

"What's wrong with you?"

"Why do you act crazy?"

"Did you take your medicine today?"

I have heard parents ask their children an array of goofy questions, but one of my favorites is the extremely trendy: "Are you ready to clean your room?"

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I have found that the best person to start asking questions when a student misbehaves is the teacher, and the question that you should start with is: "Could I do something different that will make this behavior less likely to occur?"

Sometimes people are reluctant to ask this question of themselves because they perceive that the answer assumes or implies *blame*. Let me assure you—asking this question is not about blaming yourself (or anybody else) if a child under your supervision has a behavioral problem. The goal is problem solving, and blame assigning rarely helps with problem solving. The point of asking the question is this: people are different, and people respond to situations in different ways. If there is something that you can do differently, you may be able to prevent the behavior or make it less severe in a very unintrusive way.

The next question that I think can be extremely useful is: "What does the child get out of the problem behavior?"

You really have to be able to step back from the situation in order to answer this question. The answer may seem asinine. A student who steals a pencil from another student does so to get the pencil, right? Maybe. The child could steal a pencil to get your attention. Or to get the attention of other children. Or it could have been a completely impulsive act. Or the child might hate the activity you are about to start and stole the pencil to avoid it by being sent to the office. Looking a little deeper than the first glance can often put you on the path to effective problem solving.

Another question that you should entertain early in your problem solving process is: "Is there a possibility that this is a physical problem?"

I know a man who is a surgical nurse. His five-year-old son started to complain of bellyaches. They tried the over-the-counter remedies and various other things for a few weeks, after which they went to see a pediatrician. The boy was found to have a football-sized abdominal tumor. The story has a happy ending. The tumor was surgically removed and the boy is fine. The father, though, being a nurse, really beat himself up thinking that he should have known that his son had a tumor.

Hindsight, of course, is virtually infallible. The point is that students can have medical issues that cause behavioral symptoms. Though stimulant medications are considered an important component of evidence-based treatment of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, failure to administer medicines on a consistent schedule can *result* in behavioral problems. Children can have medical issues such as diabetes that can have behavioral implications. Some medicines used to treat asthma can cause children to go haywire. Two things that continue to surprise me when I'm working with children, and that I always assess if there are behavioral problems, are sleep and caffeine intake. You might be surprised by how many children are in a chronic state of sleep deprivation, which can profoundly affect behavior. Excessive caffeine use, likewise, has become common for many children. I often see young children walking around stores drinking "energy" drinks or latte-type coffee concoctions. If you don't think caffeine can affect your behavior, try going to work without yours.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Whenever undesirable behavior occurs, view your approach as "problem solving."
- Avoid the unproductive temptation of blaming—either yourself or the child.
- Try taking a step back, and think about what a child may be getting out of misbehavior.
- Always start by asking what you might do differently—you might find a simple, nonconfrontational solution.
- Children, just like adults, are prone to illness and other physical issues, and some of these can cause or contribute to behavioral problems.

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For more discussion, the reader may see:

Chernofsky, B., & Gage, D. (1996). *Change your child's behavior by changing yours: 13 new tricks to get kids to cooperate*. New York: Three Rivers.