Oh, behave!

“Try to influence a kid’s thought patterns at the level of the soul. Going beyond: follow my directions because I said so.”

—Thomas McIntyre, PhD

Obedience can certainly be helpful if not convenient. Obedience could save a child’s life at times. But what about mindless obedience? When a child is expected to obey **routinely** without the benefit of understanding.

Thomas McIntyre, PhD has some thoughts on this, “I don’t want my child following directions. Not just follow directions when adults give them.” A child’s going to think no matter what you do or say. But if the parent maintains an environment that encourages thinking, that freedom can ultimately produce positive results. Such as a child with a deep understanding of right and wrong even when you’re not around.

“I don’t want them listening to child molesters and drug dealers,” said Dr. McIntyre. “I want my kid to know internally what is right and what is wrong and to do the right thing.”

Dr. McIntyre is a professor at City University of New York’s Hunter College and author of the **Behavior Survival Guide for Kids: How to Make Good Choices and Stay Out of Trouble**. He’s worked with teachers, children and parents on some of the most difficult behavioral cases imaginable. He says there are two guiding principles parents should live by:

- **Walk the Talk**
- **Speak Thoughtfully**

These two guiding principles are deceptive in their simplicity. Let’s take a look at walking the talk first: “Our **example** is the main instruction that children receive in making correct decisions in demonstrating behaviors,” said Dr. McIntyre.

“They’re watching us. We are the teachers. They’re trying to figure out, ‘how should I respond to this world? How should I handle situations?’ They’re watching our actions.”

So as parents are we going to respond perfectly to every situation every time? No. The goal is to get it right as much as possible and to be forgiving and understanding as we ask our children to do the same.

**Here are some examples to think about:**

“When we hear teachers yelling at the top of their lungs, ‘I want it quiet in here. No yelling!’ – while they’re yelling— what is the real message here? Oh, I don’t yell around this person but yelling is a way that you talk with others who you think you can control.”

or,

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2/3/2009
"I'll be out at a grocery store and one kid will hit another kid and a parent will come up and say, "no hitting!" —while they hit the kid. And what does that really say: "Well, you don't get to hit around me, a more powerful person, but when you're the power figure you get to use hitting."

Speak Thoughtfully

"How we say things also delivers a powerful message," says Dr. McIntyre. Be deliberate, calm and even in your tone and choose your words thoughtfully. "Quick, sharp-tongued, barkers-of-orders break the communication bonds with their youngster that they're going to need someday when they're pre-teens and teens. We want them to seek our guidance when they're facing troubles and unfortunately bossy parents create bossy kids."

We teach respect by being respectful. If we listen, our kids become better listeners.

"What I would recommend is that when youngsters are resisting following a direction, that we actually ask questions and we listen to and we lead them into discovering better ways. Once we've decided on what the better way is, we then role play it so the the child is experienced and practiced in this new way. And it then becomes the default response and the youngster then demonstrates the behavior that we would like to see."

Okay, so how do you do it?

Please have an open mind before you read this next sentence. Are you there yet? Is it open? Okay, here it is: Save "no," "don't" and "stop," for emergencies only. Dr. McIntyre uses this approach with kids with severe behavior disorders and he says it's working great.

Yes, for most of us that probably sounds like crazy talk. What do you say if you're not saying "no," "don't," and "stop?"

Just tell them what you want them to do. Put the positive first so the child feels directed toward the desired behavior instead of the feeling of, "Oh, I'm in trouble again."

Dr. McIntyre admits he was not brought up this way. He says he had to learn it. "Now, was I able to do this immediately? No way," said Dr. McIntyre. "I would say things like, 'Don't touch the glass!' And then I would catch myself and think, 'I haven't told the youngster what I do want him or her to do in this situation.' So then I would follow it up with a specific description of what I would like to see. 'Hands off the glass. We don't touch because then we get our fingerprints all over the glass.' While I would say avoid 'no,' 'don't,' and 'stop,' those do come out of our mouth. They're our immediate reaction. But then we follow up with what

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Leading with what you want done instead of what you don’t want done gives the child an opportunity to focus on directing their energies in a constructive manner. That can actually be satisfying for a kid, and a satisfied kid is usually a better listener. Better listening leads to better learning, and so on.

**Be Specific!**

This approach works if you’re specific about what you want and express it in simple, concrete terms. “And not being vague and nebulous like, ‘Be good,’ said Dr. McIntyre. “It would be how can this youngster be good right now? Instead of, ‘stop hitting!’ say: ‘We use only nice touch.’”

If all this advice is really worth anything, why are there so many people (um, most of us) who didn’t have the benefit of this type of parenting who are perfectly okay?

“What comes through everything is love. The positives outweigh the negatives. The feeling of belonging and acceptance and having trusting bonds with one’s parents is primary.”

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