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The Good News About Bad Behavior

By Lynne Ticknor

A conversation with Katherine Reynolds Lewis, Author of *The Good News About Bad Behavior: Why Kids Are Less Disciplined Than Ever and What to Do About It*

Look around any grocery store across the country and you'll find preschoolers having full-blown temper tantrums, young children yelling at their parents and teenagers refusing to look up from their phones to help the elderly. Where have respect for others and manners gone? And why has rampant misbehavior replaced common decency?

Katherine Reynolds Lewis, author of *The Good News about Bad Behavior: Why Kids Are Less Disciplined Than Ever and What to Do About It*, was asking herself the same questions. Years ago, while she was monitoring recess at her daughter's school, she asked a few older boys to take their rough play to another area of the playground. They just laughed and kept on roughhousing. She moved closer to them and, using her best communication skills, she asked again. This time, they ignored her completely, acting as if she wasn't even there. That playground incident started Lewis on a quest for answers that continues today and has involved speaking to hundreds of experts and parents across the nation.

Lewis was surprised that no matter where she went and to whom she talked, almost all parents agreed that we have an epidemic of misbehavior on our hands. Children's and teens' poor behavior has become a crisis. Most parents are struggling to understand what's going on and, more importantly, how to raise kids in a way that teaches mutual respect, cooperation and self-regulation.

I recently had the privilege of sitting down with Lewis to ask a few questions.

Q: What's happening today that makes children less willing to cooperate?

A: Children today are different than they were a few decades ago. They have less self-control and fewer responsibilities, and our old ways of parenting and teaching aren't working. No longer can you punish or reward your child to get them to behave. It just doesn't work. If you think your job as a parent is harder than it was ten years ago, that's because it is!

Q: You mentioned punishing a child doesn't work anymore. Why not?

A: There used to be a time when yelling at children or washing their mouths out with soap was an effective short-term discipline strategy. I say "short-term" because punitive actions create more defiance and resentment later. Today, we must parent differently because our communities value collaboration and mutual respect more than the command-and-control model of the past. This is why we need different parenting solutions, ones that focus on winning cooperation and moving toward mutual respect.

Q: Children and teens have so much anxiety and stress in their lives today. Is that part of the problem?

A: It is part of the problem. Greg Siegle, a professor at the University of the Pittsburgh School of Medicine, stumbled upon an interesting finding. When kids who were diagnosed with anxiety asked for their moms to stand nearby during the brain scan, the regions of their brains measuring emotional and psychological reactions to fear and stress looked more like the typical child's brain than the anxious children who did not ask if their moms could stand in the room with them during the MRI.

Q: That's so interesting. Are you saying that a parent's physical presence can make a child's anxiety go away?

A: (laughing) Well, no, it's not that simple. We cannot take this one accidental finding in neuroscience and apply it to how we should approach parenting. More studies need to be conducted. But I think it is an interesting idea that parents can try out for themselves. For example, if you sit by your child - possibly even holding your child's hand - does it help him or her regulate their emotions faster? I always encourage parents to try "experiments" like this in their own "family laboratory".

Q: With all the conflicting parenting strategies touted by various experts, can you give us a few of your best ideas?

A: One of the most important aspects of parenting is connection. If you don't already have a strong relationship with your child, start there. I remind myself frequently of the phrase "connection before correction". Children cannot learn if they don't feel connected to the person who is trying to guide them. It's our job, as parents, to guide our children, and we cannot do that if they do not feel connected to us. Pay extra attention to your child's interests and empathize with them when they are having a difficult time.

Q: What about communication? I often hear people say that their children won't talk to them.

A: Yes, that's a crucial part of the formula for effective parenting. Children and teens don't want to talk to their parents for fear of being criticized or judged. We really need to listen to what our kids are saying. Use reflective listening to make sure you really understand what your child is saying and, more importantly, feeling. People, especially children and teenagers, don't come right out and say how they feel. It's our job to help them identify and express their feelings in an appropriate way rather than exploding with anger, annoyance, fear or helplessness.

There are many other parenting ideas that Lewis shares in her book, " The Good News About Bad Behavior" that involve teaching children how to develop self-control and emotional regulation. Here are a few that I found particularly helpful:

- The parental role isn't to make sure children are well-behaved, it's to give them increasing independence and responsibility. It's important to allow them to make mistakes so they can learn from the consequences.
- Instead of asking, What will make my child behave?. ask yourself What skill does my child need to learn to make a better choice in the future ?
- If I help my child learn to regulate his or her own emotions and I model self-regulation, positive behavior will naturally occur.
- Focusing on emotion coaching and teaching life skills prepare children for their future more than academic success, athletic prowess or artistic talent. Stop putting pressure on kids and give them time and space to just "be".

For additional parenting techniques and solutions to today's most pressing parenting challenges, join Katherine Reynolds Lewis on May 15, 2019 from 8 to 9:30 p.m. for a webinar as part of PEP's Noted Parenting Author Series. Lewis, a PEP educator and author, will present a 45-minute talk followed by a Q&A. A recording will also be provided for registered participants. Register at pepparent.org/noted-author-series/.

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