



FAMILY: SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE AT HOME.

Tiny Tyrants HOW TO REALLY CHANGE YOUR KID'S BEHAVIOR.

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Picture an explosive parent who responds to a child's misbehavior by ranting, screaming, and perhaps hitting. Now picture a calm, patient, gentle parent who responds to the same misbehavior—no matter how provokingly awful—by reasoning and explaining. The rage-ball goes ballistic; the patient explainer works hard to see what's going on inside the child in order to get the child to understand why the behavior must change.

Obviously, the two parents have different effects on their kids. They model different responses to not getting the behavior they want, and research tells us that children tend to reproduce what happens at home when interacting with peers. The child who is yelled at and hit is more likely to yell and hit to get other children to behave a certain way; the child in a reasoning home is more likely to remain calm and persuade.

But the two parents have one important thing in common: They're likely to be ineffective in changing the unwanted behavior. Their different approaches have different side effects, so to speak (and, of course, managing behavior isn't a parent's only responsibility), but when it comes to changing behavior, the rage-ball and the patient explainer are startlingly close neighbors on the ineffective end of the spectrum. They embody our natural tendency to fixate on unwanted behavior and unwittingly reinforce it by giving it a lot of attention—and then persist in trying either to punish or to talk it into oblivion, both of which almost never work.

More than 50 years of good science tell us that punishment doesn't do much to improve behavior, so the explosive parent's approach will almost certainly fail. All that yelling and

hitting qualifies as punishment, after all, and punishment doesn't teach what to do. It rarely succeeds even in teaching what not to do.

The patient explainer will probably fail, too. Trying to change a child's behavior by helping her understand why she misbehaves and why she shouldn't derives from an old-fashioned model of human behavior inconsistent with scientific evidence.

Before going further, let me say that promoting understanding plays a crucial role in raising kids. Explanation and discussion build intelligence and language skills, develop a child's powers of rational reasoning, and teach the difference between right and wrong. Engaging your child on a range of topics has another, even broader benefit: It increases the likelihood that he will come to you in the future to discuss things, including touchy subjects. When you explain something to your child, or when he tries to explain his anger to you, his understanding may improve, and that's good.

But a large body of research tells us that greater understanding is not a strong path to changing behavior. If you are smoking while reading this, you will get the point at once. You understand that some behaviors are not good for you and may well hurt others, yet you do them anyway. Kids are no different. In both children and adults, recognition that one is doing wrong does not automatically trigger a process that will alter the improper behavior. Parents typically grasp the weakness of the link between understanding and behavior in themselves but not in their kids. They insist on explaining and explaining why a behavior is wrong, even though verbal instructions have proven to be almost as weak as punishment in changing behavior.

It's true that feedback, which means explaining what was right or wrong about a behavior already performed, can change the behavior of unusually motivated, competent people. If you tell a professional ice skater that she's not performing a jump properly because her arms are in the wrong position, she's likely to adjust them. But she belongs to an exceptional subset of human beings. For most people, feedback does not work wonders.

Explaining in advance what's right or wrong about a behavior is no more effective than feedback. Technically speaking, that explanation in advance, when used all by itself, is an antecedent with no consequences. An antecedent is anything you do to set the stage for a behavior, to prompt it to occur; and consequences are what happens after the behavior—

reward, praise, punishment—that teaches a child to do it again or not. An antecedent without consequences doesn't do much to change behavior.

Fortunately, science does tell us how to change behavior and how explanation can be used most effectively. (Those who wish to see the scholarship can find the relevant research, much of which has been published in the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, cited [here](#), or they can [read my far more accessible distillation](#) for lay readers.)

You begin by deciding what you want the child to do, the *positive opposite* of whatever behavior you want to stop. The best way to get rid of unwanted behavior is to train a desirable one to replace it. So turn "I want him to stop having tantrums" into "I want him to stay calm and not to raise his voice when I say *no* to him."

Then you tell the child exactly what you would like him to do. Don't confuse improving his behavior with improving his moral understanding; just make clear *what* behavior you're looking for and when it's appropriate, and don't muddy the waters by getting into *why* he should do it. "When you get mad at your sister, I want you to use words or come tell me about it or just get away from her. No matter what, I want you to keep your hands to yourself."

Whenever you see the child do what you would like, or even do something that's a step in the right direction, you not only pay attention to that behavior, but you praise it in specific, effusive terms. "You were angry at me, but you just used words. You didn't hit or kick, and that's great!" Add a smile or a touch—a hug, a kiss, a pat on the shoulder. Verbal praise grows more effective when augmented via another sense.

If you don't see enough of the desirable behavior, then you can work on it using simulation play. Wait for a peaceful moment and then propose an exercise. "Let's see whether you can stay calm and just use words when I say *no* to you. I'm going to say *no*—remember, this is just pretend—and you stay calm, OK?" You can even switch roles as part of the game. Most kids delight in playing the parent and saying *no* to the parent playing the child.

Your objective is to arrange for as much *reinforced practice* as possible, which means you want your child to have many opportunities to practice doing the right thing and then be reinforced in the habit by receiving rewards. Your praise is the most important reward, but you can also add little age-appropriate privileges (staying up for 15 more minutes before

bedtime, choosing the menu for dinner), goodies (little five-and-dime gadgets for younger children, downloads or cell-phone minutes for older ones), or treats. And, yes, you reward successful let's-pretend simulation sessions, too. This won't go on forever. A brief but intensive period featuring lots of reinforced practice, often somewhere between a couple of weeks and a month, can make long-lasting or even permanent changes in a child's behavior. Going ballistic never helps, but explanation aimed at improving a child's understanding can actually play a useful part in this approach. When combined with reinforced practice, explanation has been proven to speed up the acquisition of behavior. So, yes, go ahead and explain why it's important to show respect to parents or to play nicely with others. The understanding your child achieves will resonate with the experience of doing the right thing and being rewarded for it. The deep, nuanced science on this topic all points to reinforced practice as the key, but the greater understanding that comes from explanation is an optional add-on that can help good behavior develop more quickly.