

Children's public behavior can be a good teacher

What thoughts go through your head when you see out of control children in public? No one feels comfortable in that situation, least of all the parent of the child. Try an experiment. Ask yourself, *What is this child trying to tell her parent and why?* Or *What is this child trying to protect herself from?*

Don't stop with *She's after candy, and her mother won't let her have it*. See if you can understand the dynamic. She's crying because she wants something that she can't have. Then think what it must feel like to be her right then. Is her parent embarrassed by others watching? Is this parent yelling or dealing with her child physically in a way that makes the child want to protect herself? Or is the parent being patient and understanding with the reaction of a child not getting what she wants?

So much of children's difficult reactions at home and in public happen out of self-defense. When we come at them with faces and voices that are angry, children are left with no option but to react with self-protective, defensive behavior.

If Tommy thinks he is being attacked when his mother glares at him in anger and embarrassment after he has grabbed a toy from the shelf, he will naturally go into fight or flight mode. Depending on his temperament he may choose to protect himself by 1) yelling back at his mother, or 2) running off with the toy as his mother chases him yelling at him to stop, or 3) putting the toy back on the shelf—all in order to protect himself from the perceived attack. We tend to misinterpret these behaviors perceiving the first two as resistant, disobedient or "bad" and the third as obedient or "good." No option is either good or bad, but all are self-protective.

If Tommy's mother wants to help him learn, she needs to understand these reactions and address his self-protective motives. Even with the third choice, his compliant behavior is in response to an external cue (his mother's anger). What we ultimately want is for him to respond to an internal cue, which tells him how to rectify the situation as opposed to reacting out of fear of his mother. This is a slow, gradual learning curve starting with doing what his mother tells him to doing what feels right. The process will happen sooner when his mother remains calm and empathic toward his desires and motivations.

When Tommy's mother can calmly speak to him without blame or criticism, ("You wish you could have that truck."), he does not need to protect himself and is then free to respond to the situation less defensively while expressing his desire. ("I have to have it!") If his mother can stay removed from her fear of what others are thinking, she can help him if she sees his desire rather than his defiance. ("It's hard to see things in the store that you want and not be able to take them. This has to stay on the shelf until someone can pay for it. We could put it on your wish list if you want.")

Running away or yelling back does not feel good, but at the time, fearing angry retribution, defensive reactions seem necessary. When his simple desire is acknowledged and normalized, Tommy does not feel wrong for having it. He can more easily cooperate.

I have recently seen a few episodes of *The Dog Whisperer* with Caesar Milan. He works with dog owners to understand what is going on in the mind of the dog. When they do, they understand what kind of behavior the dog responds well to. It is not about forcing behavior with fear of punishment. As Caesar says, when the dog is in a state of tension, his mind is not open, and he cannot learn. He helps owners see when the dog is experiencing tension so owners can change what they are doing. The cues of tension in children may be a bit different, but the same principle holds true. Children must be in a relaxed state to most effectively assimilate what we want them to learn. When we react in anger, tension builds.

Any child you see who is crying, fighting, pulling away, running away, throwing, or screaming is in a state of tension. That state is far more intolerable to a child than to an adult—so many of us, unfortunately, have learned to tolerate almost constant tension. When we fear what people will think or that our children are growing up to be monsters, that tension drives our reactions, and builds tension in our children. Power struggles result. Nothing positive can be accomplished.

Certainly, when children are behaving uncooperatively or simply acting on their impulses, our tension will build, and we will react. We are human after all. But if we can focus on what is going on inside our child's head, rather than what they are doing to us, we are more likely to feel compassion, and tension will ease. Wait, if you can, for the ease before trying to teach appropriate behavior.

Observing the scene in public is a good learning tool. It's easier to see the dynamic when you're not caught in it. Then you will have compassion for the parent.