

Directing can be Misleading

Do you remember being a child and being told what to do and what not to do all the time? Do you ever remember being asked what you needed to solve a problem to a situation that went badly, especially if you were the instigator? Was your point of view ever taken into consideration or was it just your behavior they saw? Were you ever asked what you thought was a good idea, or heard understanding words of *why* you might have done what you did and then have help to find a solution rather than being punished or yelled at? Probably not, which is why it's hard for us to give our children the opportunity to brainstorm ideas, think through problems, and be held accountable for their behavior. Parents, teachers, all the adults in a child's life tend to direct and rarely give the child an opportunity to have an opinion, an argument, or a solution.

Directing certainly has its place, but it does not help in teaching our children problem-solving skills. We rob them of the opportunity to think for themselves, find solutions, and make compromises. Too much directing builds resentment or dependency on the people who do the directing. We think we have to tell them what to do, what to think, and what to say—otherwise they won't. We are afraid that they will come up with a solution we don't agree with, say something we don't like, or not do it the way we would.

A dad in one of my groups discovered how simple it could be. He has been battling with his eight year old for almost that long about clothes left all over the floor. Typically the litany would go something like, "How many times do I have to tell you to put your clothes away," "Why do you always leave your stuff all over the floor? I'm sick of it!" Always accusing, blaming and angry.

When we accuse and blame, the child has no choice but to defend himself in any number of ways: ignoring, selective hearing, resistance, acting out, talking back. Think about it. When you feel blamed, does you feel ready to creatively come up with a solution to cooperate with your accuser? Never. Why would we think our children would feel any differently?

This father decided to change his tactic. He plainly and simply said to his son, "What do you think we should do about your clothes?" Without a second's hesitation, his son said, "Get me a basket." His father was dumbstruck at first.

What no argument, no walking away? Then he hightailed it to the store and bought his son a basket. So far there has not been a single article of clothing left on the floor. His son is now invested in his own solution. It would not serve him to ignore it.

A mother complained about her daughter refusing to come in the house for their weekly family night. Having come from a divorced family herself, family time is very important to her. But her nine-year-old daughter saw it differently. She was engaged with several of her friends working on a play. Her mom's agenda was to have pizza and a movie with the family; her daughter's agenda was to stay with her friends. At first, her mother called her in, and she called back that she wasn't ready yet. As anger grew and buttons got pushed, the accusing, directing and threatening began. Not exactly conducive to want to join the family—unless under duress. Family night would become a real drag.

What if this mother had said, "You know how important family night is to me, and I can see that staying with your friends is important to you. How can we work this out so that we both are okay with it?" My guess is that her daughter would have said, "Just let me stay a little longer and then I'll be in." If a little longer got to be a lot longer, mom could say, "I think I'm getting the short end of the stick here. What's the story?" With conversation like this, rather than accusing and directing, solutions are far more likely because the child feels respected rather than controlled. If this mother could own her problem rather than making it her daughter's, the child would be able to hear it without having to defend herself.

After a snowstorm, a dad expected his sixteen-year-old stepson to shovel the walk. It didn't happen right away, so dad shoveled it himself letting everyone know how put out he was with silent but potent resentment—the martyr's tool to gaining control. However, this dad decided to break a long-standing pattern and with much difficulty went to his stepson's room and said, "I don't like how I reacted. It's very hard for me to ask for help. I'm sure if I had asked rather than assumed, you would have done the walk." His stepson said, "Anytime you need anything done, just ask me."

Our children can be amazingly competent and cooperative when we give them the opportunity. But when we direct all the time, they lose their ability,

build resentment, and refuse to give an inch. Most of us were directed and accused and have no model of doing it differently. When we connect first—when we acknowledge our own issues and are respectful of our children’s agendas—the results can be true learning experiences.