

Does your intention to teach really teach?

We are so quick to teach our children what's right and wrong that we miss the most important step—making connection. Without connection, children don't listen, feel misunderstood, and, if they don't like what they're hearing, become defensive and resistant. Our desire to teach is often motivated by fear of what our child will become or what we haven't done right. That fear keeps us stuck in the past or future—it's in the present moment where the teaching opportunity lives.

If we see a child grabbing a toy from another, fear makes us react, and we lecture or yell at the child for not sharing. In order to teach her a better way, it is important to first understand her desire for the toy. Sometimes, we think a punishment is in order. The egocentric child who is not yet empathic with another's point of view, especially when stressed, doesn't understand what is wrong. She just learns that she is bad for wanting.

"But what do I *do* about it" keeps us jumping ahead and missing the moment of connection. We are so impatient to get to the antidote of inappropriate behavior that we can't stop for even a second to understand where our child is coming from. Unless you can wonder what your child might be feeling, guess what he might be after, and accept that as normal, your efforts to teach him to behave otherwise will fall on deaf ears. True empathy means being able to understand what he is after and why. That moment of empathy is your connection. But fear gets in the way. "How can he do that? Why won't he listen? What's wrong with him?" When these thoughts surge, it's hard to connect before trying to control.

A child complaining that his brother hates him is not served by "No he doesn't, He really loves you." A child who is resistant to going to school is better served by your effort to understand what about it is bothering her rather than, "I don't care what you say, you're going to school." A child who wants to blame everyone else for his upsets will not learn responsibility for himself if he keeps hearing that it's his fault and no one else's.

The outcome of events may be the same, but it's how you get there that makes all the difference. The child who says his brother hates him has to stop hitting, but when he hears, "How awful that must feel to think your brother hates you," he will feel understood and be in a better place to work it out. The child who hates school will still need to go, but feeling more motivated rather than forced will only come about when you offer your understanding of her feelings of anger, boredom, or fear of failing. The child who doesn't want to take responsibility for his own actions may have a parent who has not taught him empathy by showing it for him. He can take responsibility when he knows that his feelings are not bad or wrong, when he knows that his actions are a mistake, not a failure.

Connection gives us a window on how our children are viewing their world and how they are hearing what we are saying. All attempts at teaching better behavior are of no avail if children hear a very different message than the one being sent. Our impatience, anger, disdain, or disapproval all break connection and, if consistent enough, send our children in the direction we most fear. Our feelings cannot be helped, but our thoughts can. When we *think* that our children really do want to get it right, but when they don't, it means there is a problem, an obstacle in their way, then we will be able to connect and empathize with their problem—maybe even find out what it is. But when we think they are out to get us or are just being stubborn, rude, and disobedient, we cannot possibly effect positive change. The first way of thinking infuses trust and confidence in the child, a trust he will not want to betray. The second instills distrust and disapproval. What reason will he have to turn things around?

Once connection is made—sometimes words are not even necessary—your child will feel it. Whether then or later, problem solving can happen.

"You really want that toy. When you grab it, what do you think your friend is feeling? What can you do differently so that your friend will want to give it to you?"

"Why do you think your brother gets so mad at you? Is there another way you can tell him what you want instead of hitting?"

“What would you like to do about that assignment? Do you think if your teacher knew that you don’t understand it, she would help? Do you want my help in any way?”

“It never feels good to be blamed for something. How can you look at what happened and do something about it so that you won’t get blamed? I wonder what she would say if she knew you felt badly about it. It’s hard, but when I do something I wish I hadn’t, apologizing for it makes me feel so much better inside.”

Connection is the most important part of parenting. Your child will be affected by times of connection far more than the instruction you are trying to get across.