

“I’ve tried everything and nothing works!”

Wish I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard an exasperated parent say that. They’ve tried everything in their arsenal of parenting tricks. But that arsenal includes time-out, grounding, isolation, withdrawing privileges, yelling, spanking, giving up and letting them have their way, or waffling back and forth between them all. These techniques all fall under the reward and punishment method of parenting—how families have been handling their parenting frustrations for generations. They don’t work. Parents know this. But they don’t know that there are alternatives.

We need a new arsenal that generates from an entirely different source. The source we now draw on is fear and distrust—kids are up to no good, they can’t be trusted, we know best, they have to learn to do what they are told, we have to nip it in the bud, they have to show respect before they deserve it, obedience is necessary because otherwise they’ll never learn.

The source we need to draw from is a core belief that children want to be successful, that they are never happy being manipulative or out of control, that they very often know what is best for them when given the chance, that they are far more capable than we give credit for, and that what they need is good modeling and structure with limits so that the needs of all members of the family are equally respected and cared for. Then it doesn’t matter what we actually do or say. It does matter that we listen and learn to read behavior cues.

We need to trust that our children are unique and require expectations that work for them, not their brother. When expectations are set appropriately, they will meet them successfully. So when they act out, we will look to the expectation, not to a bad child. In other words, we will realize that if our child wants to be successful, and he is not, it means he doesn’t know how, given the present circumstances, and that something is in his way of being successful. It may be that he is saying he can’t meet up to what he thinks is expected of him.

Jared often doesn’t get his homework in on time, punches his sister regularly and is resistant every time his parents ask him to do something. They have tried sending him to his room, not allowing him to go to baseball practice or watch TV unless his homework is done, grounding him for the weekend each time they learn that homework is delinquent, and yelling at him until they are at their wit’s end. His parents are exhausted. Jared is getting more and more belligerent. His father said, “We’ve even taken his bike away because he loves biking more than anything. It’s really important to

him. Wouldn't you think he'd want it back enough to do what he has to do? But no, nothing works."

The reason it doesn't work is because Jared is learning to believe that he can't be trusted, that he never does anything right, that his parents don't want him around, that who they really care about is his sister, and that he can't seem to ever be who they want him to be, so why even try. Not his parents intention.

Jared has always had a hard time in school unlike his older brother who is in honors classes. He has never been motivated in school, to do team sports, or to cultivate friends. He worries his parents. Will he graduate from high school, want to do anything besides computer games, ever have any friends? All these fears cause parents to put the pressure on with all best intentions of motivating their child. The problem is, parents are running their own agendas and projecting their own fears onto the experience of someone quite different from them. It is hard to step back, see who this person is at every stage of development, and carefully assess what expectations are needed.

If Jared is compared to his brother, if only in his parent's mind, he knows it. If they think that he has a mean streak because he hits his sister, he knows it. If they fear he'll never amount to anything, he knows it. Children don't know how to say, "You're wrong about me. I'm not a bad kid, I'm just having a hard time." They pick up on the expectations, know they can't meet up, and decide they're failing. So they fail.

What keeps us stuck with inappropriate expectations is the fact that other children are able to rise to meet higher expectations. That's because they can—it's who they are. But so many children can't in some area or another.

Make sure you are not setting the same expectations for each child. Read the cues you are getting. Your child isn't failing because he wants to. Learn where each child is able to be successful. Meet him there. When he is successful, then raise the expectations. When expectations are too high, failure to meet up is inevitable.