

Create Emotional Safety ~ Be a Powerful Positive Adult Leader

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If I want to begin a class in a noisy room full of children or adults, then I step into the middle of the crowd with a lot of energy so that they have to see me. I smile, and say loudly and cheerfully, "I really appreciate how well all of you are paying attention!"

This "power of positive thinking" approach works like magic most of the time. My enthusiasm and humor capture the interest of my audience long enough for me to get them involved in what we are going to do next.

Suppose I were to plead tentatively, "Wouldn't you like to pay attention, please, please, please?????" We might still be there wringing our hands as the children run wild and the adults chatter to each other.

Suppose I were to put my finger to my lips and say, "Shhh!" impatiently or even snarl, "Shut up you little brats or you'll be sorry!" This would probably give me a quiet group of children. Unfortunately, they might be thinking about how awful I am or worrying about being in trouble instead of listening to what I am saying next.

We want to model for children adult leadership that is powerful and respectful rather than either wimpy or mean.

But I Turned Out Okay

Many adults have had childhoods where their parents or teachers were unfair, unkind, and even destructive in their use of authority. Some adults follow this example, reasoning, "After all, I turned out okay. Children

need adults to tell them what to do.”

Do you remember being physically hurt, threatened, or emotionally shamed when you were disciplined as a child? What else do you remember about that experience? Most adults say that they remember being upset with the person who did it rather than the lesson that was being taught.

As adults, it is important to think about what message we want children to learn about the best way to behave when they don't like something. Children learn much more from how they see adults handling problems than from what adults tell them that they should do. Suppose that children see their adults trying to get them to obey by hitting, yelling, or making sarcastic insulting comments. We should not be surprised when these children do the same things in order to get what they want or when they feel frustrated.

Inhibiting Free Expression

Long ago, an older friend of our family named Fred came to visit late one afternoon. At age five, Chantal had had a long day and was tired. My daughter looked away when Fred tried to talk with her. She refused his invitation to play a game. Instead, she wrapped herself in her favorite blanket and curled up on my lap.

Fred extended his hand towards Chantal and said in a very friendly voice, “If you're feeling angry, you can hit my hand.” Astonished, Chantal glanced up at me.

“No she can't!” I said firmly. “Chantal, it's fine with me if you sit quietly here or go play. You already know that hitting people when you're feeling tired or grumpy is not allowed in our family.” Chantal nodded and wandered off to check up on what her little brother was doing.

Fred looked very puzzled. “Irene,” he said. “I thought you believed in honoring the free expression of a child! I was just trying to give Chantal an outlet for her negative feelings.”

I curtailed my own free expression of thoughts about where I wanted to put Fred's version of child psychology. I reminded myself that Fred was probably feeling sad that his normal ways of connecting didn't work with Chantal.

“Fred,” I explained patiently, “Just like adults, children need the opportunity for free expression within safe boundaries. I believe that unlimited freedom leads to chaos. Anyway, your naming Chantal's desire to be left alone as being angry was almost certainly inaccurate. Sometimes the best way to honor children is to watch them with appreciation as they are going about their own business instead of feeling the need to entertain them.”

Abdicating Adult Leadership Does Not Make Kids Happy

In today's society, adults are often so fearful of being destructive in their use of authority that they go too far the other way and fail to take leadership at all.

It is normal for caring adults to love children, to want them to like us, and to try to make them happy. It is important for children to have the opportunity to express their feelings in ways that are respectful, to

understand that their actions have consequences, and to be guided in how to make safe choices.

I have seen adults who are trying so hard to avoid telling children what to do that they give all of their own power away. This sets a terrible example for children and usually makes them very anxious. When children feel as if they are the ones in charge instead of the adults, their lives can feel out of control.

In the name of giving children freedom, some adults believe that the only way to empower children is to let them make all the decisions. Since children lack experience and judgment, an environment where adult leadership is abdicated and the children are running the show tends to become extremely unpleasant fairly quickly. Instead of just leading, adults then often end up pleading with children, trying to persuade them to agree to behave more constructively in ways that can become emotionally coercive.

Unfortunately, this cycle can get so out of balance that adults sometimes get to the end of their rope and explode with frustration, often modeling the destructive behavior that they were trying to escape.

Children are best served by seeing their important adults model how to lead in balanced ways that are both powerful and respectful. Even if children might be unhappy in the moment, they will feel more secure in the long run if they understand what is expected of them. Within the security of having clear boundaries and agreements, children can then be encouraged to develop their own leadership skills in specific situations where they can be successful.

As Molly put it, "All I wanted was for my children to be happy. I gave them everything they asked for. I did everything for them. One day, I stood back and watched them. I suddenly realized that they were whining and rude and sounded miserable. What they needed from me was not for me to try to make them happy and cater to their every whim, but for me to be in charge of helping them grow."