

Taking Charge of the Wishing Technique

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In some of our workshops, we demonstrate the "wishing technique" that people use frequently to try to get someone to stop doing something. The demonstration involves one person engaging in an unwanted behavior – for example, putting an arm around the other person's shoulder. The person being touched wishes really, really hard that the other will remove her arm.

It doesn't take long for the participants to start smiling or laughing at the obvious ineffectiveness of the technique. Many of us, however, habitually use this technique unconsciously in many aspects of our lives without recognizing that the energy we put into it rarely produces the results we want.

We may wish that the people in our lives would notice that we are tired and need more help with the chores, or that we need help lifting, moving, or carrying, or that we do not want to be hugged, tickled, or touched right now. We may wish that they understood what we were feeling or that they knew we were in pain. The more energy we direct into wishing that the other will notice and change, the more likely it becomes that feelings of anger, sadness, depression, or general upset begin to build up inside as the other person fails to perceive our needs and respond.

When we wish for someone to change her behavior, we may also show subtle physical indicators of discomfort or unhappiness: a flinch, a shrug, rolling of the eyes, a glare, or silence. Sometimes, the other person notices these signs; sometimes, she does not. Perhaps he will guess the true meaning of the gesture; perhaps he will do his best yet misinterpret entirely, making changes in his behavior that actually make the problem worse. Wishing and guessing make a rocky foundation for effective communication.

Some of us embrace the wishing technique largely because we learned as children that speaking up made situations worse, maybe even dangerous. While staying silent or hiding feelings might have been the safest – and therefore the best -- available option for some people in past situations, it is rarely an effective life habit. We can take a significant, positive step toward improving both the safety and the quality of our interactions with others by applying Kidpower's three safety strategies:

1. **Be Aware:** Think about times you have wished people would know what was going on in your head and changed their behavior. Notice if and how much you wish on an every day basis for different behaviors in others. Ask yourself what leads you to wish without taking action. Perhaps you would love to take some sort of action but don't know what you could do or say. Perhaps you are afraid of what could happen. Perhaps you have learned that no matter what you try, it feels like you're wasting your breath. Perhaps the interaction is short-term and temporary and you are simply not interested in trying to change what's happening because you'll be leaving soon, anyway.

2. **Take Charge:** Once you are aware that you are wishing for a change and aware of the reasons for your choice, make a conscious decision about how you are going to go forward. Possible decisions could include:

- **Speaking Up:** This could include basic "I" messages, "I feel...when.... would you please..." For example, "I feel uncomfortable when you roughhouse in the living room. Would you please take the game outside?" It could mean just asking someone, "Please stop touching my hair." It could mean giving information: "I love talking to you but don't want to talk about other people in our family. I'd really like to know what's going on in YOUR life these days."
- **Getting Space:** This can mean leaving, on many levels -- leaving a table, leaving a room, leaving a public transit vehicle, leaving a school, leaving a club, leaving a relationship. This can include creating emotional space by finding ways to keep yourself safe from what's being said or done if you are unable to leave. It can mean changing the conversation topic or just creating a space for alone time.
- **Choosing Not To Act:** This means consciously deciding to do nothing, to accept that choice, and to put your energy and attention into something else besides wishing.

3. **Get Help:** If none of the above options are available to you, if none of them seem to be working, or if you want to develop your level of skill in taking charge, take a look at the resources around you that might offer support such as friends, family, counselors, related books, or social service agencies -- including Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower workshops. While all of us must accept that some things are out of our control, living with the sense that we are powerless to take action when people are crossing our boundaries wears away at our belief in ourselves as strong, competent, valuable people who deserve to be treated well. This belief is our strongest self-protection tool and deserves to be protected and nurtured.

By deciding to be aware, to take charge when we feel uncomfortable, and to get help when we need it, we are impacting not only our own well being but also modeling effective problem solving and safety skills for others in our lives.