

Who Is In Charge? You or the Child?

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Who is in charge of that challenging situation? Is it you or the child? In my past articles I have encouraged children to be given freedom of expression but when they push the boundaries consistently, who is in control? I quite understand the frustrations that adults face when they struggle to stop unacceptable behaviour (including with children that have learning and behavioural difficulties). Quite often, for younger children, some people argue that they have no understanding of their behaviour. "They are too young to understand what they are doing" I have often heard, especially from mothers. This argument also comes through most times to explain the negative behaviour we get from children with learning difficulties. Why are we making excuses and giving explanations that shift the blame to no one and everyone? It is time to learn how to take control as adults and kick out that unacceptable behaviour.

As a teacher and parent, there were times when I actually had to question my own firmness in certain situations. I asked myself, who is now in charge, the child or me? When an adult starts to feel like this, the child feels he or she is in control and will begin to show lack of confidence in that adult. This could be a dreadful situation for both the adult and the child.

I remember when I just started working with foundation stage children aged between 2 to 5 years. I had to explain the ground rules to the children almost every day as a reminder to help them retain the information, process the information and act out the information. One of the children seemed to enjoy pushing the boundaries every day. He would simply laugh and run off after displaying certain unwanted behaviour. I got upset and worked up and became helpless sometimes. I felt this child was in charge and I was losing control. My colleagues and I would call his name severally every day. This gave him lots of attention and he succeeded in being the "boss". He knew exactly how to wind us up and he did get all the attention and enjoyed it. I felt trapped in his world and knew I had to do something quickly to help him, the other children and I gain control of this unwanted behaviour.

I researched approaches to negative behaviour and attention seeking. I attended a behavioural training and asked experienced professionals and teachers about how they would deal with similar situations. He became my daily project. I took out time every day to observe this child. One day, BANG! I got the solution which I will share in this article. Daily observations gave me the answers I had been searching for. I have used these techniques over the years and to a large extent, they have yielded positive results in favour of the child and the adult.

1. In a formal organization like a school, set out the rules and let the rules also apply to you. Where the adult is exempted from some rules, explain the reason for the exemption to the child. Ensure parents and carers are aware of the ground rules and boundaries so that they can also remind the children of these at home.
2. For parents/carers, while at home, work together with the child to establish the ground rules and they should also apply to you the adult. Be a good role model for the child. There may

be some exceptional rules that do not apply to you, explain to the child the TRUE reason for this. Work together with the school authorities to make behaviour uniform both at home and at school. Let the consequences for unwanted behaviour be same or similar. Consistency is a strong key that helps to encourage a child to stop unwanted behaviour.

3. Be firm (but with good reason) with children (including those with learning and behavioural difficulties). Show and tell children firmly consequences of unwanted behaviour and follow it through after at least three warnings in a day. I would suggest you take away something they really enjoy like watching television, a toy or special place they go.
4. Do not make excuses for children's unwanted behaviour. All children to a large or small extent understand acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. You have to be consistent and fair in your approach to dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
5. Encourage the child to look into your eyes when talking about an unwanted behaviour. Stay calm but firm. Let the child understand and know that you are in control for their benefit.
6. Talk to children about different emotions like being; sad, happy, angry, grumpy etc.
7. Use social stories to act out unwanted behaviour and let the children be the jury and judge.
8. Where the behaviour is repeated to get that negative attention, try to ignore it unless it becomes a health and safety matter before you intervene. Avoid giving the child eye contact when an unwanted behaviour is repeated for negative attention. Encourage other children and adults to ignore the child displaying unwanted behaviour. This gives the child time to re-think his/her actions in that lonely moment.
9. Keep the child busy. Plan activities of interest for the child, get the child engaged throughout the day both at home and school. These could be a good way of distracting the child from remembering certain unwanted behaviour.
10. Praise the child as he or she continues to show acceptable behaviour throughout the day.
11. Have a sandwich approach to discussing a child's behaviour with the child. Explain to the child what went well, did not go well and what they could have done better. Ask them to think about times when they showed acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Let them judge themselves and give you a feedback about how they feel about different behaviour they exhibited throughout the day.
12. Remember to always praise the child when acceptable behaviour is shown. Talk less about the unwanted behaviour and avoid referring to past events. Encourage parents and carers to do same at home.
13. Parents, especially mothers, be firm! Follow through without sympathy the consequences of unacceptable behaviour. Stop allowing your child be the adult and you taking the place of the child by succumbing to unacceptable behaviour. Work consistently together with other adults involved in a child's life to stop unwanted behaviour. Be the adult and stay in charge and allow the child take responsibility for their actions.