
The Sunday Telegraph

\$3.00 • www.nashuatelegraph.com

SERVING GREATER NASHUA, N.H., SINCE OCT. 20, 1832

Vol. 187, No. 102 • Sunday, May 17, 2020

GUEST SUBMISSION

Family life bound to be challenging during pandemic

By **KATE BERNIER, LICSW**

Director of Child, Adolescent
& Family Services

Life for most of us has changed significantly in the past few months. With school buildings closed and most people sheltering at home, parents and children are together in close quarters for extended periods of time without the usual external distractions and activities. This is unprecedented in our lifetime. Some suggest this could lead to high levels of stress and have a negative effect on the mental health of families. At the same time, we hear of families playing games, taking walks, and watching shows together. Could the enforced closeness lead to family members rediscovering each other and connecting in healthy ways? One thing seems certain: that children are receiving an increase in parental attention, and this is something children crave more than anything else.

When children receive a parent's undivided attention, they feel seen, they feel they matter, they feel a sense of belonging. When they have the benefit of a parent's positive attention, they gain confidence, a sense of identity and purpose, and pleasure in relationships. In turn, this can show up as positive character traits such as seeking support in relationships, showing empathy, and having healthy social values.

Of course, it is not a question of either/or. It is likely that families will experience both struggles and gains. For some families, the effects of the pandemic may be especially difficult. Emotions and behaviors can become magnified in close quarters and there are limited ways to avoid each other. Below are some tried and true principles of parenting for behavior management that can be useful in both good and difficult times.

showing love and affection, or is furious, both signify that the child matters and has an effect on the parent. The second principle flows directly from this one.

Principle No. 2:
Whatever you pay attention to, you get more of.

It is understandable that parents might respond to outrageous behavior with a strong and extended emotional response, but unfortunately it also communicates the power and importance of that behavior and it is likely to be repeated.

Principle No. 1: Parents' attention is like gold. (Spend it effectively.)

As mentioned above, there is significant value in parents giving time and attention to a child. Attention has an even greater value when it is emotionally rich. Whether a parent is

When children are showing the behavior that parents want, they are often ignored, as parents don't want to interrupt and are grateful for an unworried moment. In fact, those children may feel unappreciated while a misbehaving sibling sucks up all of the parent's attention. In contrast, if parents provide attention to good behavior, especially with an emotional bonus – affection, excitement, humor, kindness – children respond by seeking that positive attention over and over. If they continue to receive positive attention for that behavior, it will continue to expand.

To discourage unwanted behavior, it is best to keep the attention to the minimum necessary. If a behavior can be ignored consistently, it will generally go away. Unfortunately, if a parent eventually gives in or explodes, the child learns to persist in the behavior to get the emotionally packed payoff. Consistency is hard, but the results are worth it.

standable, but it is not effective as a parenting strategy. Venting anger shows a loss of control and signals to children they are now in charge of the adult's emotions. For children this might be thrilling or terrifying, but either way, it is a powerful connection and since children seek connection, they may resort to this behavior again.

Principle No. 3: You don't have to prove that you are the parent.

That means that you don't need to respond when a child argues, you don't need to have the last word, you don't need to force a surrender from your child. You have the luxury of walking away, of ignoring, of taking time to consult with yourself about your plan of action. You and the child are not equals and nothing will change that. That makes No. 4 very important.

Principle No. 4: Keep your eye on the prize.

Generally, parents have a goal of raising happy and successful children. Every parental restriction is traceable to a positive intention - to make sure children get enough sleep, have the advantages of a good education, know how to get along with others, and so on. It is never about winning power struggles. In fact, trying to win a power struggle can lead to parenting that shames, humiliates, and damages self-esteem and confidence. Keeping an eye on the long term goal can help parents be more confident in their decisions, even if they are not popular, and respond in ways that protect their child's self-esteem and show that they care, even when they have to be stern.

When behavior can't be ignored, parents are most effective when they are firm and restrained, limiting the expression of emotion and using as few words as possible. As soon as children begin to move in the right direction, showering them with praise will encourage them to continue. Parental anger is under-

means it is important to teach respect respectfully, model accountability by admitting mistakes, and apologize when wrong. It means when we do something we regret, we make a repair. It means thinking about how we handle our anger and what we would like our children to learn from that. Not being perfect all the time reminds us that children can't be either – which leads to Principle No. 6.

Principle No. 6: Be forgiving (and start with yourself).

Parenting is a guilt-making process. Babies are born innocent and they deserve perfect parents – but that is not what they get. No one does. Fortunately, research tells us that when children know they are loved and that parents want what is best for them, they generally do well.

Forgiveness is important because when parents are hard on themselves, they are often hard on their children. Children may then become deceptive or defiant, believing they can never please their parents. When parents model forgiveness for themselves and others, they create space where children can try hard, knowing that failure is not the end of the world. Forgiveness makes it easier for parents to

Principle No. 5: Darn! This is a hard one.

You are role modeling all the time. Regardless of what parents say to their children, children learn the most from watching parents. That

acknowledge their own missteps and make a repair, modeling accountability. Children are then much more likely to trust parents with the truth.

**Principle No. 7:
Teach what they don't know.**

When a child does not comply with a request it might be taken as defiance. This can lead to a cycle of anger, punishment, revenge, and a hostile relationship.

Another approach might be for parents to ask themselves, "What does my child need from me right now in order to be successful?" Are they overwhelmed and need the task broken down into segments?

Do they feel incompetent and need coaching, instruction or encouragement? Do they need to learn how to switch gears? Do they need to save face?

When parents see their child's bad behavior as an indication that there is a skill missing that the parent can teach, it removes the blame and shame. It guides the parent to a response that is in line with the long-term goal of the child's success; and it shows the child the parent's positive motivation even when they are giving a consequence.

We are in the middle of this significant health crisis and we probably

have a fair amount of time left while we continue this unplanned social experiment. It is an experiment that showcases the importance of parenting. If parents keep in mind a few basic parenting principles, they may be able to reduce their stress and find family life more gratifying.

If children benefit from this extended time with their parents, this may be the silver lining in our current situation.

Should you need assistance, we are still open and are accepting new patients. Please call us at 603-889-6147. We also have 24/7 Emergency Services available by calling 800-762-8191. For more information about any of our programs, you can also visit www.gnmh.org.



**YOU ARE
NEVER ALONE.**

Phone: (603) 889-6147
24/7 Emergency: 1-800-762-8191
www.gnmh.org

Note: For some families, the isolation that is a part of sheltering at home will lead to increased risk for domestic violence and for child abuse.

If you are experiencing either of these or you suspect that someone you know is a victim of either of these, don't hesitate to call DCYF for suspected child abuse at 800-894-5533 (in state only), or 603-271-6562 (out of state). The number is staffed 24 hours a day, including weekends and holidays. Call Bridges in Nashua for suspected domestic violence at 603-889-0858.

**We remain open and are
safely providing services.**

We have been serving our community for the past
100 years and we are looking forward
to the next 100!

Responding to COVID-19 has put a strain on our
resources. If you are able to assist us with a
donation, we would greatly appreciate your help.

Please visit www.gnmh.org/donate.

Thank you!