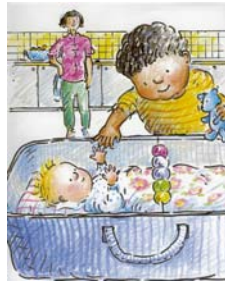


NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE SUCCESS.



It is tempting to think of discipline, or helping children learn acceptable behaviour, as mostly a matter of letting them know when they have done something unacceptable. However, just as important if not more important is letting children know when they do things we approve of, what we want them to do more of. Sometimes, because carers are busy, have other children to interact with, or are distracted, we may take children's desirable behaviour for granted, or acknowledge it to ourselves silently and gratefully without saying anything to the child. When we don't highlight it for the child, we miss a very valuable opportunity. Sometimes taking advantage of this opportunity is expressed as "Catching children being good."

It is important children learn in the early years what are acceptable and desirable ways to behave, not only what not to do. Being acknowledged when they are co-operative or helpful, show kindness and gentleness, display self control, or use words instead of actions to express strong feelings helps them to learn that these are the kinds of behaviour that are approved of. It is important that "doing the right thing" is as much of an attention-getter as doing something that isn't allowed. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, if children figure out that the only way to get attention is to misbehave, they will misbehave. Secondly, positive behaviour is learned when it is identified, labelled and actively encouraged.

If you think about it, teaching children what to do by focusing on what you don't want them to do is like teaching colours by showing them examples of other colours. Instead of saying "That's red" to a child what if you only called the child's attention to colours that aren't red. This teaching strategy doesn't make a lot of sense with colours, neither does it make a lot of sense with behaviour. By making comments such as "I like the way you are being gentle with the baby"; "Thanks for helping clear the table"; "That's great that you said thank you" you are identifying and encouraging these behaviours.

If a toddler learns that being gentle with the baby is something adults like to see, then that behaviour is encouraged. It doesn't mean that the toddler will always be gentle, but it increases the chances. It also supports the development of desirable social skills.

Feeling capable, confident and valued lead to valuing oneself. We want children to see themselves realistically and positively. That is, children need to eventually develop a sense of their particular strengths and talents, and at the same time, have an appreciation of their own limitations and others' strengths. Self-esteem comes from feeling you are capable and valued as a human being. Young children learn this from the interactions they have with others. Only being noticed when you do the "wrong thing" can lead to unhealthy self esteem. This does not mean that adults can ignore children when they do the wrong thing, but they can be stopped or helped in ways that do not humiliate or embarrass them, or make them feel unworthy.

When a child is going through a difficult patch and challenging carers, it is easy to slip into a negative frame of mind, almost to the point of ceasing to see any behaviours to acknowledge and encourage. At those times it is even more critical to find some to comment on positively, in order to support the child to continue to see him or herself as a worthy human being during this difficult time.

Learning acceptable behaviour comes from being noticed and approved of when you do.