

Close Supervision Improves Parenting Skills

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Adults become better parents when they abandon the power struggle and start supervising their children, Dr. John Walkup said at a meeting on pediatric trends sponsored by Johns Hopkins University.

Parents of children with behavior problems describe their children as if they were opaque. That lack of knowledge of their children comes from not monitoring them, according to Dr. Walkup.

"I think that supervision is the basis of conscience. To this day, when I am in a store and pick up a glass, I hear my mother's voice say, 'Put that glass down,'" said Dr. Walkup, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the university.

Lack of supervision of young children increases the risk for everything from accidents to fire setting. A lack of supervision in adolescence increases the risk for substance abuse, premature sexual activity, and delinquent behavior. "The guy who robs the 7-Eleven store without a mask in front of cameras that he can see and then is surprised he gets caught, was not supervised [as a child]," he continued.

Parents who supervise and thus get to know their children do not engage in power struggles with them because such struggles are unnecessary. Power struggles are based on negative reinforcement, with the methods of coercion escalating over time: Each behavior by the child elicits a response from the parent and each behavior by the parent elicits a response by the child.

In an example given by Dr. Walkup, this is the course of a power struggle over whether the child will make his bed:

On day 1, when the parent asks the child to make the bed, they argue back and forth until the parent makes a threat and the child gives in.

On day 2, the child ends the argument by locking himself in the bathroom and remaining silent; then the parent will tell the child that he does not have to make the bed today, just come out of the bathroom.

On day 3, the parent stands in front of the bathroom door during the argument.

On day 4, the child runs out of the house.

"Public humiliation of a parent is always a good strategy," Dr. Walkup quipped.

The effective parent makes sure that the life of a young child has structure. That includes both a predictable daily schedule and expectations of behavior. It also includes specific rewards for meeting the behavior expectations and punishments for not meeting them. Once that structure is in place, the parent's job is one of relapse prevention.

When adults become effective parents, children feel competent because they are responsible for details of their daily routines, such as making the beds. There is less nagging, and children can extend the basic organizational principles they see in place at home to other areas of their lives.

For their part, parents learn what it feels like to be successful and in charge. "They learn what it feels like to 'ignore behavior,' 'set firm limits,' and 'be consistent,'" Dr. Walkup said.

Effective parenting of teenagers is really a matter of monitoring them.

As part of supervising their teenage children, parents should know where the teen is, what the teen is doing, and whom the teen is with. It comes down to attending to the details of the adolescent's life.

Behavioral therapy is an effective way to teach parents how to change their behavior toward their children. Dr. Walkup gave the audience the web sites of two groups of behavior management therapists: www.aabt.org (Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy) and www.academyofct.org (Academy of Cognitive Therapy).