

## The Parent's Corner

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When working with children or adolescents, research suggests that getting the parent's or caregiver's involvement is vital for success in therapy. The research, however, falls short on describing to clinicians just how to accomplish this task. Therapists frequently struggle with parents who are resistant, non-supportive, or who seem to undermine various aspects of the therapeutic process when working with minors. The aim of this article is to help therapists re-examine their current beliefs and perception regarding parent involvement in therapy.

To help raise the therapist's awareness and understanding of potential parental obstacles, several fundamental concepts need to be identified. First, all behavior serves a purpose. Sometimes these purposes are conscious ones such as deliberately going to eat when one is hungry. Other times, these purposes are nonconscious or not present in the *awareness of the individual*. For example, you might be rude or short with a spouse or co-worker because you are tired and really don't want to have to have a long talk about some particular issue. In either situation, conscious or nonconscious, there is still a purpose behind the behavior.

Second, we keep behavior that works for us and disregard behavior that doesn't work for us. If we want attention from a particular person and find that asking questions and listening attentively seems to increase the likelihood of that person spending time with us, then we are likely to keep that interaction style. On the other hand, walking up to a person and mumbling incoherent syllables will most likely not increase the person's interaction with us so we will change our routine if the goal is to have interpersonal connection.

Third, people will not stay in a position of inferiority. We all strive for some type of control or mastery in our lives. When people or situations place us in a helpless or discouraging position, we tend either to fight it

or flee from it in order to re-establish the feeling that we count, we are capable, and that we make contribution in society. Only in extreme situations of helplessness when all perceived options are exhausted, do we give up and display a frozen or learned helplessness reaction.

Keeping these three principles of human psychology in mind, examine the parents you are currently struggling with and see if you can determine the purposefulness behind their behavior. In parenting classes, one of the most common areas for power struggles is around the use of spanking. Parents believe that spanking works, whereas, parent educators cite research after research that demonstrates that spanking doesn't work (for the long-term purpose of disciplining).

So why do many parents argue the "effectiveness" of spanking when empirical research doesn't support it? The answer lies in the principles listed above regarding human psychology. Most parents who are interviewed about spanking will report that they don't necessarily like hitting their child, but it is the only thing that seems to work. Many of these same parents will also admit that their children will re-offend or commit the same misbehavior at a later time even after having received a spanking. Parents typically spank their children out of frustration because they have exhausted all of their ideas on how to address a problematic behavior in their child. Spanking serves the purpose of helping the parent out of a perceived position of inferiority because they can feel superior by inflicting physical pain on the child in retribution for feeling embarrassed or out of control over their child's conduct.

In many parent education programs, parents report a reduction or elimination of the spanking reaction to child misbehavior after learning the principles of effective disciplining and the use of natural and logical consequences. Thus, as parents are equipped with more knowledge and understanding their tendency to feel inferior or helpless is decreased. This in turn, leads to fewer instances of having to lash out physically to re-establish a sense of power and control over the child.

Once the parent learns new and effective methods of addressing a child's misbehavior, the spanking reaction frequently no longer works for the parent because the new knowledge has tainted the spanking process. Specifically, the spanking reaction was serving a nonconscious goal of re-establishing perceived power over the child. Through education, the nonconscious goal is brought into awareness and combined with more effective means to achieve the same goal. Consequently, the spanking reaction no longer "works" for the parent in the same manner as it had done previously so it is abandoned.

Although the parental reaction of spanking was used to illustrate the three core concepts in addressing behavior for the purpose of this article, many other behavior choices can be analyzed in the same manner. By keeping these core concepts in mind, a therapist can systematically identify and address any number of issues that may have previously been perceived as "resistance" by the parent or client. The purposefulness of behavior, keeping those behaviors that work for us, and our natural tendency to *strive for power/superiority in our lives* are fundamental forces that make each of us the individuals we are in society. When a therapist's objectives are not congruent with a client's perceptions on how to meet these core issues, most likely the therapeutic process will experience a stalemate until goal alignment can be achieved.