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Allowing Temporary Victories

Twice this week, in meetings with parents about their children's behavior problems, I found myself encouraging the parents to allow their children a temporary sense of victory. The first parent was dealing with chores; the second with rude backtalk. Both parents were aware that their angry words ("Don't you dare talk to me like that!") and worried tone ("How will they ever learn about cooperation and responsibility if I don't get them to empty the dishwasher this minute.") were not helping.

The "Insightful Parenting" approach asks us to look for what to teach in all the moments of childhood, including the ones we wish weren't happening, and to protect the parent-child connection at all times. These two parents were trying to get their children to change immediately and were getting so frustrated themselves that their well-intentioned attempts to help their children learn and grow were making things worse rather than better.

Here's where the idea of allowing children to temporarily feel as if they are getting away with something can help. Certainly children shouldn't talk disrespectfully to their parents, but if we're not careful and if we respond harshly in the heat of the moment, then we are simply talking to them disrespectfully trying to get them to stop talking to us disrespectfully. But if we feel ourselves getting hot under the color and about to handle things in a way we may later regret, we can say something kind ("Not my favorite thing when you talk to me like that," or "that hurts my ears") and put our energies into staying calm and collected. We treat them better than they deserve, better than they are treating us, and we make them dinner. They may gloat or

feel as if they got away with something, but later, at a time of our choosing, when we are breathing in and breathing out, we can sit down with them and tell them they are going to miss their friends or their favorite electronic game or the privilege of being driven places for a week or two. And we will continue to help them with the important work they are doing: learning to speak to their parents in respectful ways at all times.

The other parent was parenting during the witching hour. Everyone had recently arrived home from work and school, dinner was being made, the table needed to be set and the dishwasher needed to be emptied. Sound familiar? Of course it does. Who hasn't had a few too many demands on us when we ask a child to do just one thing ("I ask you to do one thing and you have to make a federal case out of it.") and they fuss, pretend they don't hear us, or tell us they will do it in a minute. If we believe we need to get them to empty the dishwasher right then, we may get ourselves twisted in a knot. If we empty it ourselves, it will probably take less time and certainly less emotional energy than trying to get them to cooperate at that particular moment. Later, again at a time we choose, we use our kind, loving, adult voice, and let them know that children don't get to pick and choose what chores they do and when, and that when parents have to do their children's chores, their children lose their allowance, are taken off a team, or can't have friends over. Really, whatever you decide is an appropriate consequence.

The hard part isn't the consequence. What is difficult is staying calm and having faith that our children will learn more about respect and cooperation if we allow temporary victories. We can treat them in the same loving and respectful way when they cooperate and when they don't and we don't have to worry about the hour or two when they think they got away with something.