

Learning Differences

Search for Strengths, Pursue the Positive

By Julie Skolnick



I met with a distraught client the other day. Her son, who attends an independent school priding itself on specializing in differential learners, had a very bad week. The school's disciplinary point system – an ad hoc way for teachers to let students know they are unhappy with their behavior – yielded a number of points well beyond the accepted threshold for her son.

The guidelines for giving out negative points at this school aren't clear. The child just knows that he gets a lot of them and has internalized that he is a "bad" kid,

the "annoying" kid. The one thing that is crystal clear is that her gifted child's learning difference is ADHD, presenting with severe impulse control challenges. Most of the points, the head of discipline wrote in an email to my client, were due to "excessive talking." But giving negative points to an extremely bright child who struggles with a known challenge of impulsivity seems a bit like disciplining a blind person for excessive "not seeing."

Addressing a child's challenges requires compassion, reframing and recognizing the reality of "invisible" disabilities.

Furthermore, children learn from adults who role model patience and understanding. In the spirit of building self-esteem, we must assess a student's lagging skills and collaboratively strategize *with* the student for an effective outcome. We have to accept that some skills take longer to learn and require contextual practice.

Discipline is an interesting concept. All too often attempts at stopping, curbing or changing behavior involve draconian reactions that end up drawing out more of the same nonconforming behavior. What if you can't obey rules? In the case of a physically

disabled person, we provide the mechanics and supports (the ramps, the raised lettering and fingered language) to allow them to accomplish what they can't accomplish on their own. Full support is provided, *required by law*, in perpetuity. Somehow when we enter the fuzzy world of invisible disabilities – social and emotional challenges – figuring out the supports is much more difficult. So human nature goes to "fix it" mode. Do this or else mode. Don't do this and I'll take away that mode. These are the worst possible responses to a child struggling with these hardships.

The truth is, effort on the front end will pay off with great benefits in the long run: more teachable time; reaching a child who probably receives negative messaging daily; role modeling empathy; and infusing creativity into the classroom. Parents too must resist the loud chatter around them to "fix" their child and should focus on advocating for their child by helping others to recognize strengths and challenges. So what are the strategies to accomplish this?

The Strategies

In working with clients, I developed the mnemonic, P-R-A-I-S-E.™

- Personal Connection
- Reframe

- Anticipate
- Incentives and Choices
- Sense of Humor
- Exercise

Personal Connection

First and foremost for teachers, find the hardest child to love and love him. Create a **personal connection** with him. During lunchtime make a date to sit one-on-one with him or reserve a few minutes at the end of the day and ask him what he likes to do and let him tell you. Find out what he wonders about and try to weave some of his interests into your instruction. Or just refer back to your special conversation while he's taking off his coat in the morning so he feels noticed and connected.

Having a hard time getting his eye contact for one of these positive messages? Drop a sticky note on his desk with a personal message: "I really appreciate the way you participated today;" "I love how you sat in your own space in morning meeting today;" or "I admire the way you waited until your friend finished talking before you raised your hand to speak."

This personal connection is just as, if not more, important for parents to create with their challenging child. Make a date to have one-on-one time, even if only for 15 minutes at least once a week. Mark it on the calendar so your child can look forward to it. Make sure you send your child off with a hug in the morning or leave a note if you can't be there.

Anticipate Behavior

When does challenging behavior occur? Does this child need a snack? Do they need more transition time between recess and instruction? When he sits next to a specific child, is it

particularly challenging for him to attend or keep his hands to himself? Is a particular activity or instruction mode difficult for him?

Plan ahead for challenging times. Designate a mutually agreed upon space for this child to go when he needs some "chill out" time, so long as he knows that this is his safe place. Create a signal with him or calmly use agreed upon words, so he knows it's time to go there and that he is welcome to integrate back into the class when he has his emotions and body under control. Give him a physical break during part of instruction time that is hard for him to sit through, by having him deliver a message to the front office or another teacher.

No child wants to be "the bad kid." By making negative assumptions we create a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the child actually defines himself this way and knows what bad behavior is expected of him.

At home it is also important to address challenging behavior during a calm moment. If parents respond in an intense way to a child who is ramped up, the intensity and challenge will only increase. During a moment when your child is eating a snack or sitting in the car with you, bring up the offending behavior and let him know why it's not OK. Ask him to help you problem solve by telling you what he needs to avoid those challenging behaviors and moments.

Incentives and Choices

Give **incentives** and **choices** to the child. Tie what your child loves best to behavior you are trying to modify. For example:

- If you sit at the table for the entire meal and use

CONTINUED ON PAGE 52



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 51

your utensils you will earn
20 minutes of screen time.

- If you brush your teeth
and wash your face in the
morning without reminders
you will earn LEGO time.
- When you remember your
chores for the week you
can pick out a new book or
choose a dessert recipe that
we will make together.

Using choices to help kids
feel in control, but still getting
our adult priorities met, is a
powerful strategy:

- Would you like to take a bath
before or after your snack?
- Do you want 5 or 7 green
beans?
- Would you like to do your
warm up sheet sitting at your
desk or at the back table?
- Do you want to give your
presentation at the beginning
or end of class?

Sense of Humor

Find and use your **sense of humor**. A good guffaw in the middle of a challenging moment can serve as a reboot for the whole class or family. Hand in hand with this strategy is being able to let go for a moment. Check your ego at the door and laugh at the situation. You do not lose power or control; in fact, you gain the ability to teach a very important lesson – how to connect with and understand others.

Exercise

Provide moments of **exercise**. Try brain breaks injected daily where kids get up and dance or touch their toes. These activities are especially important for

kids with social/emotional challenges, but all kids benefit from getting their blood flowing and changing their attention from inward to outward. Use exercise between periods of instruction (15 – 30 minutes), and if kids are transitioning between classes where they were expected to sit still the whole time. Allow doodling and fidgets for kids who need to keep a part of their body busy in order to attend. If a child needs to stand up or pace, give him space in the back of the room and normalize it.

Embracing and honoring supports that allow a child to succeed gives adults the opportunity to see these kids' potential. It's a matter of leveling the playing field. The bottom line is to search for strengths and find the positive. If adults wait for behavior to get "under control" before giving kids positive attention, they guarantee themselves bad behavior and increased negative attention. Fortunately the corollary is also true; encouraging kids to use strategies they need teaches kids how to advocate for themselves and promotes positive behavior.

Julie Skolnick is the Founder of With Understanding Comes Calm, LLC, a service supporting parents of gifted and distractible children. As a consultant, coach and advocate, Julie meets with parents one-on-one, lectures and writes about the true meaning of giftedness, leads Parent Empowerment Groups and provides workshops for parents and teachers. Learn more at WithUnderstandingComesCalm.com, [Facebook.com/WithUnderstandingComesCalm](https://www.facebook.com/WithUnderstandingComesCalm), on Twitter @JulieSkolnick or reach Julie at Julie@WithUnderstandingComesCalm.com.