



The Litmus Test: Long-term Parenting

Parents often ask: “What’s the best way to handle this misbehavior?” We want to do it “right”, and we want to be effective, but sometimes the best method just isn’t clear.

First, ask yourself “Is it misbehavior, or is it. . .”

1. Hunger, or lack of rest? If so, it’s likely NO discipline method will work. Take care of those physical needs first.
2. Normal behavior for the age of the child (such as a 2-year-old biting)?
3. Lack of **skill**--have you taken time for training to achieve the behavior you want?

Once you’ve considered those things, you’re ready for the litmus test: By your action, is your child learning what you intend to teach? This is where we remind ourselves to “beware of what works”, because what “works” may not encourage the long-term result we desire. For example, counting to five (or three, or whatever number) “works”, in that it often stops the “misbehavior”. But what is the child learning (in addition to how to count to five)? Is she learning that she has until the number 5 to stop, that mom doesn’t really mean it until she gets to five? And is that what Mom wants her child to learn? Or is Mom trying to teach her daughter to respect others, and to get along in the world?

If respect is the long-term lesson, perhaps a better response to misbehavior is to take a moment to figure out the **belief behind the behavior**. Then address the belief, rather than the action. For instance, tonight my son was reading the Sunday comics and began batting and crumpling the paper, making a lot of noise in doing so. I was reading, too, so this was quite annoying. And how I felt (annoyed) was my first clue to what his belief was at that moment. Using one of the best Positive Discipline tools, the Mistaken Goal Chart, I saw that it’s likely Ben wanted “undue attention”. His belief (out of his awareness) was “I count (belong) only when I’m being noticed”. I’ve been down this road many times with Ben, so I know my best response (the one that will teach him respect for others with kindness AND firmness) is to acknowledge him. “Ben, I love you and I will spend special time with you when I finish reading this chapter”. This has worked consistently for us—what he longs for is to feel he has importance, and I can respond to that desire by giving him what he needs. But you notice it’s on **my** terms, which is respectful to him **and** me. When I finished the chapter and spent time with him, we talked about other ways (that aren’t so annoying) he could ask for attention. We agreed the next time this situation comes up, I will simply place my hands over my heart—this is his reminder and assurance that I will be with him soon; that I notice him and want to be with him, but in a way that’s respectful to me, too.

Okay, here's the other thing: Just as for Ben, if I'm tired, or hungry, or don't feel well, NO discipline philosophy will work because I won't have the energy and stamina to use it. I need to take care of MY physical needs, too. I continue trying because I really do want Ben to grow up to be a loving, respectful, capable, competent person. I know in my heart of hearts that treating him with dignity and respect is my best opportunity to achieve that. And I'm in this for the long haul!