

Eye on the Prize:

Shifting from Reacting to Teaching & Learning

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Years ago, a couple was driving through the mountains near Boulder, Colorado. As the husband steered their car through a number of turns, his wife started to feel a little carsick. When she mentioned this to her husband, he said that he was feeling fine. She was a very resourceful woman who believed that *“if it’s possible for one, it’s possible for anyone.”* So, instead of feeling annoyed, frustrated, or angry with her husband, she became very curious. She wondered how it was possible for him to be feeling fine while she felt dizzy and nauseous.

Right away, she noticed that he was leaning back comfortably in his seat, while she was tensely leaning forward watching the road in front of the car. Taking a cue from her husband, she settled back and quickly her focus shifted from the front of the car out to the horizon. When she asked her husband about his visual focus, he said that he was almost always aware of the mountain range in the distance even while negotiating sharp turns. Within a few moments after her shift in focus, her dizziness subsided and her nausea went away.

Often when we parents correct our kids, our focus is on the immediate situation instead of the long-term horizon. Out of stress, annoyance, and frustration, we often snap at our kids. We yell, we send them to their rooms, and we sometimes say hurtful things that we later regret. What we also do is miss an opportunity to teach and learn with our kids.

One afternoon, a few years ago, I went to pick up my sons from school. My younger son, Morgan, who was about six at the time, came running up to me and asked me to hold his Gameboy. He said that he needed to talk to a friend and would be right back. When I looked at his Gameboy, I noticed that it was still on. So, I switched it off to save the battery. When Morgan returned, I gave the Gameboy back to him. Immediately, he got very angry and yelled at me because in turning off the Gameboy, I had lost the progress

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he'd been making. *While it was OK with me for my son to feel angry, it was not OK with me for him to talk to me the way that he did.* I angrily took his Gameboy from him and told him to get in the car.

My anger didn't last very long. By the time we got home (about 10 minutes later) my focus had shifted from the immediate to the long-term, which made a very productive exchange possible:

- First, I explained to my son why I'd gotten angry (being talked to disrespectfully) and encouraged him to explain to me why he'd gotten upset (losing progress in the game).
- Next, I told him that in the future when someone did something that he didn't like, he should let them know, in a respectful manner, what was the matter and what he'd like them to do differently in the future.
- Then, we practiced the new scenario. Morgan gave me his Gameboy. I turned it off. He told me what I'd done wrong and explained what he wanted me to do differently in the future.
- As a result, we both felt better. I had taught my son a more effective way to deal with a negative situation. He had gotten his dad to really understand him and how to handle his Gameboy.

While that situation was resolved nicely, what has been particularly gratifying is that this pattern of relating continues to persist in our family to this day. If I'd simply kept my eye on the immediate situation, an opportunity for long-term learning and relationship building would have been lost.

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1. **Identify Your Reactive Response:** The point here is to realize that your knee-jerk reactions often provide feedback about things that are important to you. What you can do here is simply pause and ask yourself, "What was important to me in this situation?" Or, "What is the

message being signaled?” In the Gameboy example, it was important to me to be treated with respect as well as for my son to act respectfully.

2. **Appreciate Your Emotions:** Being in touch with our feelings, plays a critical role in living well. Be aware of your response and appreciate the message that it is signaling to you. In the above example, my anger was in response to being talked to in a disrespectful manner and led to a constructive change.
3. **Shift Your Focus:** Look beyond the immediate event to the longer-term lesson or goal you can have for your child. Ask yourself, “What would I like my child to do differently in the future?” Or, “What would I like my child to learn from this experience?” This shift in focus will move you out of a reactive mindset and into a teaching or coaching mode.
4. **Seek First to Understand:** Before you attempt to influence your child’s behavior in a new direction, take time to develop a mutual understanding of the problem. In the Gameboy example, Morgan and I were able to understand each other. This mutual understanding prepares the way for coaching new behavior.
5. **Rehearse a New Response:** This is where we as parents put on our teaching or coaching hats and show our kids a new response. In the Gameboy example, Morgan and I replayed the triggering event but with new behaviors. Be clear about what you’d like your child to learn or do differently and rehearse the new behavior you’d like to see in the future.
6. **Monitor Results:** In the days, weeks, and months to come, monitor the impact of your coaching. Appreciate any signs of success by acknowledging your child’s progress. After the Gameboy incident, I happily noticed a positive change in Morgan’s behavior with his older brother as well as with others, which I acknowledged. If there are setbacks or if the problem persists, gently revisit coaching by recycling through the steps of the process with your child. Sometimes, it takes several cycles before a new habit of behavior is formed.

Discussion: In some Native American traditions, leaders were taught to make decisions with respect for their forbearers and concern for their descendants.

As you incorporate this pattern into your parenting style, it might be useful to keep your own grandchildren in mind. As you are correcting your children today, you are also influencing how they will parent their children in the years to come. By keeping your future grandchildren in mind, you will have your eye on the horizon of tomorrow while dealing with the twists and turns of today.

This article has focused on the parent-child relationship, but you can apply this approach to any relationship. The point is to calmly and respectfully let the other person know what you'd like them to do differently. Instead of focusing angrily on what has happened, you let the other person know your preference by saying, "In the future, I'd prefer you do this."

A Refinement: Although the behavioral rehearsal step is very important for young children, it often isn't necessary with adults and teens. A simple verbal request can do. However, I've found that having clients and seminar participants actually practice new behavior is far more effective than simple verbal discussion. So, you might try the behavioral rehearsal whenever simple verbal request isn't enough.

In Conclusion: I hope that as you shift your focus away from an immediate problem and become curious about the learning opportunity it presents, you will start to take steps to turn your hopes and aspirations for your child into reality.

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