

Consistency in Parenting Has Been Given Too Much Value

By Dr. Scott Turansky

Most parenting books talk about the value of consistency. And, if you're using behavior modification to mold your child's behavior you had better be as consistent as possible. But a heart-based approach relies on different tools to bring about change in a person, and consistency takes a lesser role.

Behavior modification is a system of changing behavior that was recognized as a science in the early 1900s with Pavlov and his dogs. Pavlov realized that he could teach a dog to salivate by consistently ringing a bell when providing food so that even when the food wasn't present, the dog would salivate. It was an amazing discovery that quickly made reward/punishment models the standard for smoking cessation programs, weight loss training, and job performance.

Many parenting strategies today emphasize reward and punishment to create an external environment that will maximize change. And it works for the short term. But as kids get older, they start asking the wrong questions in life such as, "What's in it for me?", "Are you going to pay me for that?", and "What's the minimum I need to do to get the reward?"

If you're trying to get your kids to jump through hoops, then you could give them a positive reinforcement each time they do it and it will consistency help make it happen. Behavior modification is based on a humanistic philosophy of change—that people are just higher forms of animals—so parents can use the same tools on kids that animal trainers use on dogs.

Creationists start in a different place. They realize that the same Creator who made animals also made people, but he gave each individual a heart. That one fact brings another whole bucket of parenting resources to the table. As parents learn and use a heart-based approach, they can help their kids move away from an entitlement mentality and bring about the maturity, responsibility, and Godliness they so long to develop.

Jill shared with us an example. She had tried to use a star chart to motivate her eight-year-old son to have a good attitude with homework. It worked for about one week, but then the bad attitude was back. So, she started paying him in marbles with a reward waiting when he received enough of them. That worked for a couple of days, but then the bad attitude was back. Then Jill learned more about the heart and about how an attitude is more than just behavior but is influenced by beliefs. Beliefs exist in the heart and aren't easily influenced by rewards and punishment.

Jill talked to her son about maturity, the value of working hard, and challenged the belief that a good attitude was only possible when he was having fun. Her son grabbed on to the idea that having a good attitude even when things were unpleasant was admirable. He wanted to become the kind of person who could bring joy into others' lives even in tough times. Now, homework became the arena to practice.

Jill's solution might not work with your child because every child is unique and different. But each child does have a heart, and there are many avenues that can reach it. Jesus used creativity and life experience to train the hearts of his disciples. Parables and participation in ministry developed hearts that were committed to the work of sharing the Gospel.

Many parents today need a revolution in the way they think about parenting. Moving away from reward/punishment models to a heart-based approach will bring about change that is more real and longer lasting. Why? Because it comes from the heart.

Dr. Scott Turansky and his wife Carrie have five children and four grandchildren. They live in New Jersey where Scott is the co-founder of the National Center for Biblical Parenting. He's written fourteen books on parenting and conducts live parenting seminars each week all over the country. You can learn more at www.biblicalparenting.org.