

Creating a Cooperative Environment at Home





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This article is excerpted from Cohen's new workbook, *Raise Your Parenting IQ: Moving from I've Had It to I've Got This*. To order a copy, email her at info@insteppc.com or go to Amazon.com.

Taking stock

Are these thoughts familiar to you?

- I wish my kid(s) listened to me better.
- I find myself nagging much more often than I'd like.
- I am not sure which of my child's misbehaviors I need to nip in the bud now and which ones I can ignore.
- I wish I had more positive ways to get my kid(s) to cooperate.
- I want to enjoy my child but find myself using all my energy getting them from Point A to Point B.

Kevin and Maggie are consulting me for parenting help out of sheer frustration and exhaustion in dealing with their eight-year-old identical twin boys, Jack and James, both of whom have ADHD. "I feel like I'm always yelling," Maggie reports. "Why don't they ever listen to me?" The couple's home life is stressful and bleak. Kevin, looking dejected, says, "Sometimes I just want to stay at work." Both parents report that trying to discipline the boys is totally useless. Every evening is spent criticizing and punishing bad behavior. All Kevin and Maggie can do is look at each other and say, "What are we doing wrong?"

Strategies

1 Reverse the negative-to-positive ratio.

Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to correct, criticize, and nag your child than it is to praise them? There are several reasons for this phenomenon, not the least of which is that you may feel it's your job to make sure that you raise a well-behaved, productive member of society, and, when you see your child misbehaving, your automatic parental reaction is to stop it and correct it. The challenge is that some children require more direction than others. Many children with ADHD, for example, have trouble learning from the first time they're reprimanded or even the second time. For some of you, it can feel like your days are filled with a never-ending supply of behaviors to correct, instruct, and shape.

When your child's undesirable behavior continues despite your best efforts, it's hard not to feel discouraged and perhaps even question your adequacy as parents. It's at these times that you tend to focus more on the negative than the positive in your child's behavior.

Maggie says she gets so upset some days that she just can't stop herself from losing it with her boys. "How many times do I have to tell you to stop fighting? If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times that I'm sick and tired of it. Can't you two just give me a break?"

In my experience, the more pent-up annoyance you feel with your child, the more words you're likely to use when criticizing. If you think of yourself as having a daily parenting word bank, begin to use more words noticing out loud the positive rather than the undesirable behavior.

Try Saying This:

“Thanks for picking up your toys the first time I asked. Now we can move on to something more fun.”

Instead of This:

“You never pick up your toys after you play with them.”

Try Saying This:

“I see you are both sitting quietly at the table like I asked. I really enjoy talking to you when we are at the table together.”

Instead of This:

“How many times do I have to tell you to sit down at the table? You drive me crazy!”

2 Ignore the ignorables.

By focusing on the behaviors they wanted to change and ignoring the behaviors they wanted to promote, Kevin and Maggie unwittingly helped establish a negative pattern of communication at home with Jack and James.

All behavior needs an audience. You'd be amazed at how many undesirable behaviors are stopped by simply ignoring them. Kevin and Maggie were able to generate a list of annoying ignorable behaviors the boys regularly exhibited, including whining and bickering. They then agreed to consistently and wholeheartedly ignore those behaviors. Ignoring means disregarding the behaviors verbally, physically, and through withholding eye contact.

3 Say what you mean and mean what you say.

Your words are very important to your child. Even after you've worked on your negative-to-positive ratio, you are still going to need to actively shape behavior from time to time. When this happens, take the minimal approach. Keep your directions clear and simple. Stay cool. Your child needs to know that you're in charge of the situation. The tone of your voice sends an important message. Take a few deep breaths first, if it helps you. Just be certain that you are sure of what you want and that your child is paying attention to you before you deliver the message.

Find opportunities in your daily routine to ask your child to follow directions that you know they will follow. This enables you to continue reinforcing positive behavior and sets the ground work for more challenging directions in the future.

Avoid these parent traps

- **String Directions:** Too many directions at once.
Kevin: “Jack, clean up your room, make your bed, pick up your toys, and come downstairs for breakfast.”
Jack thinks: *What does Dad want me to do exactly?*
- **Repeated Directions:** Repeated directions with increasing frustration, typically ending in yelling.
Maggie: *James, it's time to leave. Let's go now. James, did you hear me? We are leaving. Right now.*
James thinks: *I'll start paying attention when she really means it. That means when she is yelling.*
- **Interrupted Directions:** Instructions are followed by too much talking or too much time between direction and call to action.
Kevin: “Jack, brush your teeth. Do you know what will happen to you if you don't brush your teeth? Your teeth will fall out. That's right. When I was kid, if I didn't brush my teeth, my Dad.....”
Jack thinks: *Blah. Blah. Blah. No need to jump up and do this anytime soon.*
- **Vague Directions:** Not specific to a particular to a particular behavior.
Maggie: “*Stop that right now. Quit it. I have had just about enough of this.*”
James thinks: *Stop what exactly. What does she want me to do exactly?*
- **Question Directions:** Making a request vs. stating a command.
Kevin: “*How about we start your homework now?*”
Jack thinks: “*Hmmmmmm.... how about not?*”
- **Let's Commands:** Tricking your child into getting started.
Maggie: “*Let's clean your room.*” (Maggie begins to pick up herself.)
James thinks: *I can see Mom's got this.*

Parenting is an ongoing process. And, as the parent of a child with ADHD, your parenting skills are tested on a daily basis. You hone your parenting skills with mindful practice. These strategies will help you set the stage for ongoing cooperation at home. 🗣️

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