

BEING FIRM WITHOUT BEING AUTHORITARIAN

EPISODE 2



Key Principles

- Taking action; less talking and explaining
- Working with two-parent differences
- Learning to observe yourself

MEET... Rick, Linda and their six-year-old daughter, Tiwana. Rick and Linda both come from authoritarian families and would like to raise their children differently. They are finding, though, that the old ways are hard to change. They are working on avoiding power struggles with Tiwana, and being consistent. They are also learning the importance of supporting each other's efforts and not interfering with each other.



Taking action

Taking action rather than talking builds credibility. If you tell children more than once to stop doing something that is inappropriate or to start doing something they need to do, then you teach them that when you say something you can be ignored. In contrast, when you act and the child experiences a clear consequence from the action, he or she will be inclined to listen and cooperate. It is reasonable to talk to the child and to explain initially what the limit is and why the limit exists, but it's not necessary to ask and explain repeatedly. When this happens, the child is getting attention for not cooperating, as well as learning that what you say is not what you mean.

Two-parent differences

It can be challenging for two parents to be consistent with their children, to know when it's best to stay uninvolved in a disagreement or power struggle between the other parent and the child, and when it might be appropriate to become involved. Added to this challenge is the fact that children are often very skilled at playing one parent off against the other to get their way or to fuel a power struggle. Parents need to discuss privately how they want to handle situations with their children and be clear with each other about if, or when, they want the other parent to become involved. It's easy for one parent to become engaged in a situation between the child and the other parent—in fact, it can seem like the natural thing to do. Usually, though, it is a distraction from providing the child with a clear limit and consistent message. Additionally, it can undermine a parent's efforts to build credibility with the child.

Learning to observe yourself

Many parents focus all their attention on their children—what their children do, don't do, and how and when they do it. Yet, much of children's behavior is a result of what *parents* do. Learning to observe yourself goes hand-in-hand with the idea discussed in *Episode 1*, that managing yourself well can be one of the best ways to build credibility, establish a positive relationship with your children and help them become cooperative. If you are unclear or inconsistent, is it reasonable to expect children to respond consistently? If there is an inconsistency between what you say and what you do, your child will model his or her behavior on yours. While self-observation can be challenging, it can also help you see how what you do influences your children's choices and behavior.



A CLOSER LOOK...

Applying key principles in this episode

Taking action *Tiwana's Dinner-Time Adventures*

During dinner, Tiwana gets a lot of attention for doing things she shouldn't be doing. Her mother tells her to sit down and not get up until she's done eating. In fact, she tells her several times because, despite Linda's repeated requests, Tiwana continues to jump up and down from the table. When Rick tells her not to spray the table with Windex because his food is still there, Tiwana gets in one last squirt before stopping. Linda and Rick are doing a lot of talking, and while it's clear Tiwana knows what they want, she's not cooperating. Instead of talking, Linda could pick up Tiwana's plate when she gets up from the table, and comment that Tiwana must be done with dinner since she's not at the table anymore. With this approach, Tiwana might kick up a fuss the first few times, but would quickly learn that she should take Linda's reasonable meal-time request seriously. If Rick were to take the bottle from Tiwana and put it on the shelf without letting Tiwana get a rise out of him, her interest in "getting in the final squirt" would diminish. These kinds of actions can be effective and reasonable, provided they are carried out in a firm and friendly way and not done punitively.



Two-parent differences

Handling a Difficult Bedtime

Linda is trying to get Tiwana to bed, but allows herself to get pulled into an argument about Tiwana's messy bedroom and the fact that earlier in the evening she told Rick her bedroom was tidy. Tiwana is good at arguing and distracting her parents from their goals—in this case getting her to bed on time. As the argument escalates, Rick intervenes and unintentionally undermines Linda's efforts to work things out with Tiwana. While Linda probably could have avoided the argument altogether by choosing another time to talk with Tiwana about her bedroom, now that the situation has arisen, she could use it to establish credibility with Tiwana. However, when Rick becomes involved, Tiwana takes advantage of the distraction and tries to get him to become her ally. If parents want to help the other, it is better for the two of them to have a private conversation to discuss how they want to handle similar situations and what kind of help, if any, they want from each other.

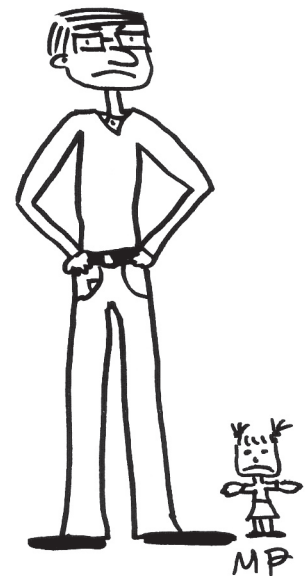


Learning to observe yourself

Linda and Rick's Efforts to Change

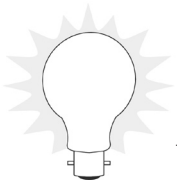
Both Linda and Rick recognize that they have brought the authoritarian style of child-rearing from their own childhoods into their relationship with their children. Even though both want to do things differently, Linda sees herself as still being quite authoritarian, and Rick recognizes that he and Tiwana get into power struggles easily. Remember, observing yourself and understanding how your behavior contributes to challenges with your children can be difficult, but worth the effort. Sometimes when we change ourselves, we are surprised by how much the world around us changes. In his initial interview with Dr. Morse, Rick said he is trying to engage with Tiwana constructively to prevent power struggles from developing. This allows Tiwana to behave in relation to changes Rick makes, rather than in reaction or resistance to his authoritarian demands.

Why can't you just do what I tell you to?



Action Guidelines from This Episode

- Avoid telling children what they already know.
- Resist assisting the other parent unnecessarily.
- Resist the temptation to argue.
- Be firm despite bids for sympathy.



YOUR TURN

What would you do?

1. Is there a routine that is not going well with your child in which you might be able to effectively use action rather than words?
2. Are there situations in which other adults affect your ability to be consistent or work things out with your child? What can you do to help the other person understand when it is helpful, and when it is not helpful, for them to become involved?
3. As you go about your day with your child, notice situations that don't go as well as you would like. Notice what you are doing, saying and feeling at those times. The things you notice can provide clues to changes you might make to improve your relationship with your child. Pick one recurring situation and start there by looking at what you might be doing that encourages your child's difficult behavior.

If you feel this way sometimes, that's normal. There are no perfect parents, only courageous people like you trying to do a good job.

