

DEALING WITH BIDS FOR ATTENTION & POWER

EPISODE 4



Key Principles

- Managing yourself, not the child
- Having positive expectations
- Using logical consequences

MEET... Juanita, Miguel and nine-year-old Devante. Until Juanita recently married Miguel, she raised Devante alone. Now Miguel is trying to establish his role in the family. Juanita and Miguel are working on being mutually respectful to give Devante a positive role model, and working to give Devante attention when his behavior is appropriate, while not giving him attention when he is disruptive or unreasonable.



Managing yourself, not the child

In *Episode 1*, we looked at how Kathy managed herself when Joseph was vying for attention while she was trying to talk on the phone. In this episode we look at how parents can avoid arguing with their child by managing their own behavior rather than the child's. Arguing easily leads to damaged relationships because, unlike a discussion, the nature of an argument begs for a winner. When one person wins and another loses there are usually destructive effects down the road in a relationship. If a child feels he or she is always the loser, resentment and passive resistance often develop. If a parent feels like the loser, he or she might feel ineffective and, in reaction, become either quite authoritarian or simply give up and stop providing needed guidance. Parents and children can best maintain goodwill by avoiding arguments altogether. Sidestepping them, working to resolve them with reasonable discussions and turning to outside knowledgeable people when necessary are all useful strategies. Keep in mind that arguments and discussions are not the same thing. Discussions—characterized by talking over a topic, listening respectfully, and looking for common ground or solutions—can be constructive relationship-building experiences. In contrast, arguments are characterized by people interrupting each other and expressing their opinion without carefully listening to others.

Having positive expectations

Most people are familiar with the idea that children will live up to expectations. What is equally true is that they will also live down to expectations. While most parents want to be encouraging and positive, it can be surprisingly easy to unintentionally communicate low expectations or discouragement. For example, if a child has been

working to improve his or her behavior—perhaps by being more responsible about chores at home or getting schoolwork done on time—the parent might comment on the chores or assignments that weren’t completed, rather than on the ones that were. Choosing to comment on the negative side of the equation, rather than on the positive side, sends the subtle message that some degree of failure was expected. Imagine the alternative effect on the child of commenting on the successes only and stating your belief, in a friendly and encouraging tone, that by next week you hope to see improvement.

Using logical consequences

In *Episode 1*, we saw how Kathy used a combination of natural and logical consequences to encourage Joseph to take responsibility for his choices about eating dinner. In this episode, we see another situation in which consequences are used to encourage a child to participate in family routines like mealtimes and clean-up chores. In this episode, though, we see clear examples of logical consequences in action. The parents make reasonable decisions about going ahead with activities without their son’s involvement. Since their child is expected to participate, he will experience consequences for his choice of non-participation. These consequences motivate the child to change his own behavior without parental pressure or punishment. Some parents have difficulty establishing a true logical consequence. This is not surprising. It can be hard to do. It’s easy to set up a consequence that is not logical—in other words, not related to the situation (no dessert until you finish your homework) and also punitive. To avoid this, keep in mind that a logical consequence needs to be related to the behavior (allowance is given for chores; if chores aren’t done, no allowance) and it should not be punitive. When a consequence is logical and non-punitive, most children will change their behavior on their own.



A CLOSER LOOK...

Applying key principles in this episode

Managing yourself, not the child

In the Kitchen with Devante

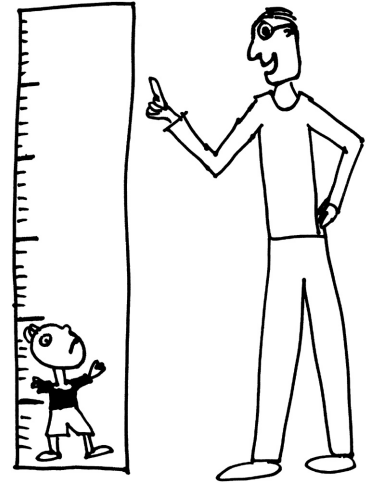
During dinner preparations, Devante initiates several topics of conversation that seem to be designed to play Miguel and Juanita off against each other and stimulate an argument. First he mentions that Miguel has had popcorn in the afternoons and that he hasn’t let Devante have any. Juanita jumps in asking questions, but as the conversation becomes heated, she discovers that Miguel had given Devante popcorn, but took it back when Devante got smart with him. This makes Juanita irritated with Devante for misleading her. Since Juanita was not there, she might be better off to just sidestep the issue by telling Devante and Miguel that she’s sure they can work it out between themselves. When Devante announces that he is not going to wear his retainer during dinner, Juanita wisely stays uninvolved in a potential argument by saying she will call the dentist to find out what Devante should do. Because the family structure has recently changed with the addition of Miguel, Devante is probably

looking for attention. Do you think giving him positive attention and offering him opportunities to help with meal preparations might reduce his bids for inappropriate attention?

Having positive expectations

Improvements at School

Devante has a history of receiving warnings at school. In an effort to encourage him to improve at school, Juanita has tied his allowance to getting no warnings at school. When Juanita asks Devante if he got any warnings at school that week and he says “no,” she expresses surprise, then congratulates him. By congratulating him, Juanita has responded in a positive and encouraging way. Children are very perceptive, though, and often pick up on subtle aspects of their interactions with parents. By expressing surprise that Devante didn’t get any warnings, Juanita has given Devante the impression that Juanita was expecting him to get more warnings.



Children live up to positive expectations, and down to negatives ones.

Using logical consequences

Dinner and Chores

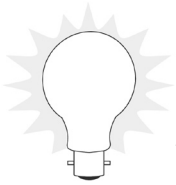
When Devante says grace before dinner, he adds a humorous dig at Juanita and Miguel by thanking God for getting Juanita and Miguel to have dinner with him. The real reason Devante is eating with the family regularly is because he has been getting home in time for dinner. At one point when he was often late, Juanita and Miguel decided that they would go ahead and eat without him. Devante didn’t like this solution, but he quickly learned that if he wanted to eat with the family, he needed to be home by dinner time. This is a good example of a logical consequence. Juanita and Miguel put into play a very reasonable—or logical—action plan: starting dinner without waiting for Devante. This resulted in a consequence that Devante didn’t like: missing dinner with the family. Experiencing this logical consequence motivated Devante to make changes in his own behavior without being punished or scolded by his parents.



After dinner, family chores begin. Devante is responsible for vacuuming, but indicates he’s not interested in doing it tonight. Miguel effectively helps Juanita sidestep a power struggle by offering to do the vacuuming if she’ll pay him the money she would have paid Devante. Soon, without any further discussion or argument, Devante is up and vacuuming. This is another example of a logical consequence (If you want the money, do the work!) that motivated Devante to make a different choice and change his own behavior.

Action Guidelines from This Episode

- Avoid power struggles by not arguing.
- Expect the best, and it's more likely to happen.
- Let children experience the consequences of their decisions.
- Act on children's choices, allowing them to experience consequences and to reconsider their decision.



YOUR TURN

What would you do?

1. Have you been involved in a small disagreement with your child that becomes an argument and then a full-blown power struggle? By catching this kind of progression early and managing yourself well, you can sidestep a power struggle. Watch your interactions during the coming week with the goal of preventing a disagreement from becoming an argument or power struggle.
2. If your child is trying to improve his or her behavior in some way, how can you focus on the positive accomplishments without giving a lot of attention to small failures?
3. When your child makes a choice that you think she will regret, do you have a tendency to step in to protect her from the consequences? If you do, next time this happens, allow your child to experience the result of her own choices. If she becomes upset, be empathetic and calmly mention that what happened is a common result of her behavior. Be matter-of-fact and understanding.

