

MAKING UP YOUR MIND & STICKING WITH IT



Key Principles

- Giving appropriate attention
- Understanding the child
- Using positive consistency
- Building the relationship

MEET... Laura and three-year-old Romaldo. Laura and Romaldo have a close relationship, but she struggles to make clear rules and stick to them. She has difficulty saying “no” to him and has expressed that she doesn’t like to make rules because she has more trouble sticking to them than her son does.



Giving appropriate attention

In *Episode 6*, we learned that children’s inappropriate or annoying efforts to get attention often stem from a positive goal: the desire to be recognized and appreciated in their family group. This goal is fundamental, and children who have opportunities to make positive contributions to the family, and who are recognized for their contributions, are much less likely to seek negative attention. It is a rare family, though, in which children have no reason at any time to seek inappropriate attention. As hard as parents might try to be conscious at all times of how their own behavior is affecting their children, it is not always possible. Busy lifestyles, multiple demands, unexpected events and life stresses mean that almost all of us at some time will drop the ball: We will not notice or express appreciation to our child for a job well done, for unrequested helpfulness, or for just playing well independently. With good self-management, though, it is relatively easy to get back on track when this happens. Remember the clues that tip you off that your child is seeking inappropriate attention? You feel annoyed, irritated and you slip into “reminder mode.” Monitor yourself for these reactions. When they occur, make an extra effort to ignore the annoying behavior and comment on positive behavior, no matter how insignificant. In addition, create opportunities for your child to be helpful. If your child is resisting your directions or requests, stop making them. Instead, try asking for help. This gives the child an opportunity to make a choice to contribute, rather than being helpful only by following your directions. A small difference, perhaps, but big in the mind of a child who wants to be important and influential in the family.

Understanding the child

We have stressed over and over again that one of your child’s most fundamental goals is acceptance by the family group. In *Episodes 8* and *9*, we looked at how this fundamental goal can become confused. When children become confused about how to

contribute to and be accepted by the family, they often turn to destructive methods to gain acceptance, frequently by seeking inappropriate attention or power. If these efforts don't secure a place in the family, they might seek revenge, or withdraw to avoid participation in family activities. In Episode 6 we looked at how being aware of your child's birth order can help you understand his behavior. Depending on whether a child has older or younger siblings, his perception of himself can be affected. Or, if the child is an only child, he will strongly be influenced by growing up in an adult household. In addition to understanding these more general principles, you can come to understand your child by paying close attention to his individuality. Watch which activities he enjoys naturally and ensure he has opportunities and time to pursue them. Even look at his misbehavior for clues to his interests and aptitudes. Perhaps a negative behavior is an effort at self-expression. If so, work with your child to find acceptable and constructive ways to act on his interests.

Using positive consistency

In *Episode 9*, we said that encouragement is the food that grows positive, happy, and competent children. If encouragement is the food, then positive consistency is the fertilizer. Positive consistency means that rules and routines are fair and reasonable, and do not change from day to day. When parents establish reasonable rules and enforce them consistently, children know what to expect. As a result, they are not confused and don't need to test limits to try to clear up their confusion. Positive consistency means that parents create many opportunities for their children to contribute to family life. It means that parents express their appreciation and respect for their child's effort, good intentions, and contribution. Positive consistency also means focusing on what the child is doing well, not on what she might be doing that is unhelpful. This does not mean dangerous or destructive behaviors are allowed to continue. It means a reasonable consequence occurs, and the child learns there is little to be gained from the behavior. Sometimes the child will need to experience the consequence a number of times before deciding to change her behavior. Remember that without repetition most of us don't learn new skills, so be sure to give the child time to experience and accommodate to the new approach. Over time, with positive consistency, your child will feel encouraged, appreciated and competent—key ingredients for a successful journey from dependence to independence.

Building the relationship

The goal of *Improving Parent-Child Relationships* is to develop a positive relationship with your child. Parents often worry that they need to be perfect or they will damage their child and their relationship with him or her. While every parent wants to do his or her best, children are resilient, and it is possible for parents and children to have warm, positive relationships even when parents make mistakes.





A CLOSER LOOK...

Applying key principles in this episode

Appropriate attention

Should Romaldo Get a Ticket?

When Laura and Romaldo begin their evening together, Laura lets Romaldo know right away that she is interested in him by asking him about his day at school. Laura and Romaldo are clearly close and enjoy each other's company, and Romaldo seems to be an encouraged, cooperative child. When Laura suggests he play with his Legos, he happily builds a plane, then shows his mother the results. She makes encouraging comments and takes time from dinner preparations to play a game of chase with him. Later the two play a spontaneous game of hide and seek. There is no question that Laura gives Romaldo lots of positive attention. Even with big doses of positive attention, though, Romaldo still tries to clarify areas that are not clear by testing Laura. For example, Romaldo knows he's not supposed to jump off the dining room chair but he does it anyway. Laura has not established a consequence for breaking this rule. The lack of a clear consequence, consistently applied, actually encourages Romaldo to break the rule. How many people would put money in parking meters without the possibility of getting a ticket? Romaldo also tests small limits, getting inappropriate attention from Laura. For example, he waits for Laura to make multiple requests before putting the video away and washing his hands. By establishing clear consequences and following through consistently, Laura can avoid giving Romaldo the inappropriate attention he receives when she reminds him repeatedly to do something. This kind of inappropriate attention actually encourages children to continue their undesirable behavior. To prevent this kind of unintentional encouragement, Laura can continue to give lots of appropriate attention and minimize inappropriate attention by following through firmly with a reasonable consequence when necessary.

Understanding the child

From Cooking and Clean-Up to Games

Romaldo, like most children, pushes limits he is not clear about. But, Laura's positive, respectful attitude minimizes Romaldo's bids for power. Overall, Romaldo is cooperative and responsive to Laura. As Laura identifies areas where she has not established clear rules and/or consequences, and works to become more consistent, Romaldo will become even more encouraged and cooperative. Are there areas, where Romaldo is testing that Laura can take as clues to his interests? For example, while jumping off dining-room chairs can be dangerous, jumping in the right situation can be a healthy, natural impulse. Rather than squelch Romaldo's impulse, Laura could work with him to redirect it. This would show Romaldo that Laura cares about his interests and will give him an outlet for a healthy impulse. At a time when Romaldo is not jumping from the chairs, Laura could suggest they have a talk about jumping. She could ask him what he likes about it and work with him to set up a time and place where jumping is allowed. Perhaps jumping could occur at a special time at home when pillows and a stable jumping surface can be arranged. Or perhaps, jumping could be reserved for the playground. By working with Romaldo in this way, Laura would letting Romaldo know she wants to understand and encourage him and is not simply interested in setting up and enforcing rules.

Positive consistency.....

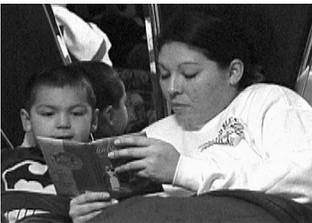
Laura's Weak Point

Food is a common bone of contention between children and their parents. Parents cajole and remind their children to eat. Children dawdle and resist. Part of the reason for this dynamic is probably that children understand they have an advantage in this area. Parents fear that if their children don't eat, they will go hungry or be undernourished. Even though it is reasonable to remove a child's plate if she isn't eating well, many parents are reluctant to do so. Harder still for parents can be not allowing dessert if dinner wasn't eaten. Even though the child must not be hungry if he didn't eat dinner, no dessert can seem harsh when the rest of the family is enjoying theirs. In this episode, Laura is faced with this dilemma. She has told Romaldo ahead of time that she bought ice cream, but that he needs to eat his dinner if he wants some. Even though it's reasonable for Laura to have dessert (she ate her dinner), she feels uncomfortable eating in front of Romaldo. She even says that one reason she does not like to have rules is because she breaks them more than Romaldo does. And that is exactly what happens. After getting ice cream for herself, she lets Romaldo have a small bowl, but only at the table since he makes a mess. Then, finally he joins her on the couch with his bowl. And he makes a mess. Laura can really only blame herself for this state of affairs. In contrast, Laura has had good results using positive consistency to improve the bedtime routine. Over a period of several weeks, she has been firm and consistent about the importance of staying in bed once Romaldo has had his story and settled down for the night. Giving in to exceptions is a slippery slope. Once Laura decides finishing dinner is as important as a regular bedtime and follows through consistently with a reasonable consequence, Romaldo will undoubtedly stop pushing the limits and become a more cooperative eater.

Building the relationship

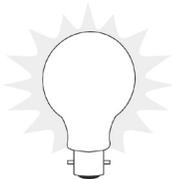
Just for the Pleasure

It is clear, from seeing Laura and Romaldo in action together, that they have a lot of affection and appreciation for each other. Neither is perfect, yet it is easy to imagine that they have years of continued enjoyment ahead of them.



Action Guidelines from This Episode

- Positive interactions reduce negative behavior.
- Focus on what you will do rather than controlling the child.
- Avoid making rules you are not committed to.
- Children can tell when you have really decided.



YOUR TURN

What would you do?

1. What can you do every day this week to let your child know you appreciate him or her and enjoy his or her company?