

THE REWARDS OF STANDING FIRM AND TALKING LESS



Key Principles

- Observing yourself
- Understanding children's goals
- Following rules and routines
- Taking action; explaining less

MEET... Birdie, four-year-old Jolie, and two-year-old Ellie for the second time. Birdie has made great progress in being more consistent and removing herself from power struggles. She is more firm about rules and has begun following through sooner with action instead of talking.



Observing yourself

Once upon a time, there was an ugly duckling. She was scrawny and white and much bigger than all the other ducklings. This little duckling thought she was so ugly, she stopped looking at her own reflection in the pond. How many of you know the fairy tale about the little swan who thought she was a duck? It wasn't until she accidentally saw her own reflection again, many months later, that she realized she was a beautiful swan. Parents who stick with observing themselves critically can also transform themselves. In time—and often not a very long period of time—these parents will realize that they can be effective, positive parents. Parents who are willing to look critically at their own behavior, will often see that they talk a lot, but don't always walk their talk. When children see this happening, it is their cue to ignore their parents as long as possible. Then, parents are left with few choices: 1) let the child take control, or 2) let things go only so far, then become angry and punish the child. Both responses reduce a parent's credibility and damage the relationship between the parent and the child. In this episode, we will see how a mother's observation of herself helps her transform herself. We will also see how her children come following after.

Understanding children's goals

In *Episode 10*, we learned that much of children's behavior is designed to help them find an influential place in the family. We also learned that when a child cannot find constructive ways to be influential, she will turn to attention- or power-seeking, and even to revenge, to establish herself in the family. When children behave this way, it is an indication that they are discouraged. Usually they are discouraged because boundaries are not clear, or they cannot find a way to make a positive contribution. In *Episode 18*, we saw that Jolie and Ellie pulled Birdie into power struggles and pushed the limits frequently. This is not surprising since Birdie was reluctant to be firm and establish the kind of predictable environment in which the girls could feel

comfortable with their place in the family. In this episode, we will see how Birdie's self-observation has paid off. Her new firmness has begun to build clear boundaries for the girls and, as a result, their goals have begun to shift from testing to participation.

Following rules and routines

Rules and routines provide a structure in which parents can observe themselves and understand their children's goals. When parents observe how they interact with their children, they have insights into how their own behavior affects their children's behavior. Similarly, when they try to understand not just what their children do, but why, they gain insight into how to meet their children's goals in constructive ways. But these insights need a pipeline into family life. Rules and routines provide the pipeline. By establishing and following reasonable rules and routines, parents create a place in their life with their children where they can make positive changes. When parents respond by constructively supporting their children's goals, children appreciate and accept the order it brings into their lives. Remember, with order comes freedom. When the environment is orderly, predictable, and well-designed to meet children's needs, children are free to grow and expand their skills and knowledge. In addition, when children make contributions to family life, they are less likely to misbehave or test family rules.

Taking action; explaining less

When rules and routines are reasonable, children are usually quite willing to go along with them. But, even when rules and routines are reasonable, children will test the limits, especially when they sense that a parent is indecisive. We saw this in *Episode 9* when Jonathon, a generally cooperative, reasonable child, took advantage of Esther's concern about his small size by turning dinner into a minor power struggle. We saw the same thing in *Episode 17* when Katelyn dawdled over dinner. The lesson from these examples is clear: establish a clear rule, communicate it to the children clearly, then take action without explaining when appropriate. Turn on the TV of your mind like Michael's father did in *Episode 11* and observe yourself. When you see yourself reminding or warning your child, change the channel.



A CLOSER LOOK...

Applying key principles in this episode

Observing yourself

No More Pulling teeth

In Birdie's discussion with Dr. Morse at the beginning of this episode, Birdie comments that she feels much better about her relationship with her girls now. In the past, just getting through the day felt like "pulling teeth." Now, we see Birdie handling many situations easily that would probably have turned into power struggles in the past. For example, when the girls don't want to wash their hands before a baking activity, Birdie moves forward without their participation. When they see her doing this, they wash their hands. Later, during her discussion with Dr. Morse, Birdie says that watching herself on tape helped her become more aware of how much she talks without following through. Seeing a videotape helped her see what was really going on, and provided the insight and motivation she needed to change. Now, she

needs to keep a mental video camera pointed on herself and watch herself as she interacts with the girls. When Birdie “sees” herself talking to much, she can take action. Eventually, the habit of talking too much will be replaced with the habit of taking action quickly.

Understanding children’s goals

If I Don’t Get My Way, You’ll Be Sorry!

By observing herself, Birdie has gained insight into how her behavior encourages her children to be uncooperative. Birdie can gain additional useful insight into how family life can be improved by looking at the goals of her children’s behavior. Let’s look at dinner time. Birdie has established a new, reasonable rule that if the girls fiddle around at dinner time, their behavior is telling Birdie that they are done with dinner. When Jolie puts her feet up on the chair, Birdie removes Jolie’s dinner. Jolie protests and fusses. Birdie ignores her and goes about her business. Jolie tries to pull Birdie into an argument about dinner, but Birdie doesn’t get involved. Soon, Jolie is crying and having a tantrum. Birdie continues to go about her business, getting Ellie ready for her bath. Upstairs, and out of Birdie’s sight, Jolie calmly explains to Ellie that she is unhappy. Clearly, Jolie can turn her behavior on and off, depending on who she is trying to influence. At first, Jolie tried to push Birdie to give in. When Birdie didn’t, Jolie escalated her behavior with a long tantrum of revenge. But even then, Birdie continued with the business of the evening, letting Jolie know that she was standing firm about the dinner time rule. Birdie could see that the goal of Jolie’s dramatic behavior was to manipulate her to give in. Finally, Jolie tried to have the last word by saying she wasn’t hungry anyway. Do you think Jolie will fiddle around at dinner again?

Taking action; explaining less

The Fairness Trap

Birdie did an excellent job of taking firm action at dinner time. Earlier in the day, though, she struggled with taking firm, prompt action. When the girls are not able to get along while playing a CD, Birdie tells Jolie to go upstairs. Birdie wants the girls to understand that if they can’t play well together, they will be separated. This is a reasonable rule. Why should Birdie have to spend her time refereeing the girls? In addition, the girls have a history of hitting, something Birdie wants to discourage by separating them when it happens. Birdie’s rule and consequence are reasonable, but Birdie waffles because she isn’t sure exactly what happened. She wants to be fair. As a result, she allows herself to be sucked into a discussion with the girls about what took place. Soon, both girls are crying and Birdie is setting timers and managing the girls’ time-outs. Since it is impossible to know exactly what happened, it is probably best for Birdie to stick to her reasonable consequence of playing separately. Then, she can feel confident that when she follows through, she is being as fair as the circumstances allow. If the girls don’t want to be separated or be required to go upstairs, there is a simple solution. They can choose to play well together. If Birdie follows through firmly on the new rule, soon that is exactly what they will do.



Taking action; explaining less

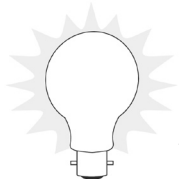
Like Night and Day



Birdie made rewarding and encouraging progress with her girls in the month or so between the times she was videotaped. We can see that she is a more confident parent and the girls are responding to her increased credibility. The hand-washing incident is a good example of this. When the girls saw she was firm, and watched as she started doing the things they had hoped to do, they got on board with the program. When Birdie was firm about dinner being over, Jolie pushed hard to get Birdie to give in. In the short-term, it might look as if Birdie's efforts to explain less and take action sooner were a failure. After all, Jolie spent the evening throwing a temper tantrum. But, at the end of the evening, Birdie's credibility had undoubtedly risen several notches. It's unlikely Jolie will fiddle around at dinner very many more times. Yet, when Birdie was indecisive about the CD incident, the girls took advantage of her waffling to draw her into a power struggle. In the future, Birdie can state the needs of the situation calmly and tell the girls they will each spend 5 minutes alone in their rooms. If they protest as Jolie did about dinner, Birdie can simply go about her business with the expectation that the girls will get the point and choose to behave differently next time around.

Action Guidelines from This Episode

- Conveying that things will move ahead will reduce power struggles.
- Follow through even when there is protest.
- Make things manageable, rather than completely fair.
- Know that children use tantrums to try to get their way.



YOUR TURN

What would you do?

1. During the next week, imagine that you are a movie director making a movie of yourself. Your goal is to use your film footage to look for ways you can change your own behavior when your child does something you don't want him to. Pick one thing you do that you think is encouraging behavior in your child that you don't want to see in your child. Change your behavior and notice if your child's behavior changes soon after.
2. Is there a routine activity, like meals or bath time, when your child dawdles or fiddles around. Talk with her about how you would like to see things change. Discuss a reasonable consequence that will occur if things don't change. Explain the first time around why things need to change. For example, it's not fair for you to have to spend your time as a referee between siblings. The next time the behavior occurs, follow through with the consequence. Be prepared for some resistance, perhaps even a tantrum. Hang in there, though, and watch for positive changes.