

You know it because of the intimacy of your relational connection with your child. And then you play that against them in the name of good behaviour. The same goes for a removal of privilege. You choose that just-right-privilege for them to lose based on what you know will be most upsetting to them. As for reward systems, they might as well be called *Not-Reward-Systems* because the opposite of getting a star on the chart is not getting a star. That is, behave well and you secure my approval. Behave badly and no star for you!

Enabling healthy growth and development with connection

The bottom line is this: I have never met a child who has actually enjoyed misbehaving. I have only ever met children – some of whom have the most extreme kinds of behaviours – who are simply trying to have a significant need met the only way they know how. All behaviour is a form of communication. When big people can step in to fill the need of a child who is struggling, then not only is damage to the child's developing brain and sense of self avoided, but in fact, wonderful growth can occur!

How do we do this? Recall that a child's most essential need is that of connection. At a neurological level, when a child is engaged in challenging behaviour, he has *regressed* into his primal, emotional brain. In this state, no logical thought or problem solving is possible. The child needs to be calmed and regulated through compassionate responding by one of his special big people. Once settled, the child's problem-solving brain will come back online and the behaviour will dissipate. What's even better is that as this happens over and over again, the child's brain becomes increasingly better at self-regulating. Eventually, they will mature into an independent being capable of making good choices, solving difficult problems, and managing their impulses.

To help big people in responding to their children's challenging behaviours, I have developed a three-part mantra:

See it. Feel it. Be it.

See it. Feel it. Be it. A primer for big people when dealing with little people.

See it refers to the very swift action of simply observing what is happening with your child. This is where traditional responses to behaviour begin and end. The focus is solely on what can be seen with the eye – the behaviour – and making it stop. Instead, we want to take it further.

Feel it invites you to go deeper. What is happening for them underneath that behaviour? Maybe they are feeling shame, judgement, or anger. For certain, if they are engaged in challenging behaviour then there is some kind of a big feeling underneath it. Rather than thinking of your child as being naughty, think of them as struggling. And meet them there. It is in that moment of landing exactly where your child's heart is that you will find your own heart awakening to what your child really needs from you.

Through his work on conscious attachment parenting, David Loyst, MSLP and creator of Reference and Regulate, brilliantly adapted *Feel it* into two parts. He noted that sometimes we can't feel what is going on inside of the child because we are overcome by what is going

on inside of us. Are you feeling triggered and upset by your child's behaviour? Do you have waves of judgement or shame or anger rolling through you? This must be tended to first. Human beings are the only species known to regulate their brains from the outside. So, if you are feeling all jumbled inside, you will struggle to settle your child. If this happens frequently for you then it may be worth exploring what it is about your belief systems that has you reacting internally in these ways to behaviours you are witnessing in your child. Said Loyst, "It is only when we *Feel it* inside ourselves and care for that, that we can then feel what is going on for the child and *Be it*."

Be it is when you take your awakened self and respond to your child as the compassionate human being that you are. Big people at this point almost always want to know exactly what that will look like, asking, "But what do I do?!" Wayne Dyer is famously quoted as saying, "We are human beings, not human doings." It isn't what we should do that is the focus. Rather it is, "What should I be?" When you can really see and feel your child for who they are, you won't need a magic list of tricks and strategies. Instead, you will flow capably into that moment, being for your child exactly what it is they need you to be.

Creating a consistent world of connectivity with your child

With all of this in mind, it becomes clear that any discipline strategy that involves disconnection as a theme is not going to be workable. Instead, how an adult responds in the moments of challenging behaviour must be fuelled by connection. And beyond that, it is on the adults to more generally set the child's world up to be full of all that resonates with healthy development.

When responding in the moment to challenging behaviour, this is the time to focus on your relationship with your child, rather than on the behaviour. You can drop a quick flag like, "That needs to stop," but then swiftly move into taking care of the child's emotions. The idea is that you respond to your child's dysregulation with relational connection to get them settled. Once settled, you can revisit the behaviour and remind them of your expectations for next time. This also doesn't mean that you just drop all of your rules and expectations. Children need that containment to feel safe. Rather, it means that you hold your rules and expectations firmly in place with kindness and compassion.

Beyond the moments of challenging behaviour, think about how your child's world is set up. Have you created a daily existence that has them marinating in relational connection? Do your children look to you as their wise and capable big person? Do your children feel like you are safe to lean into? Do your children know they can count on you to keep boundaries compassionately in place, even if they don't always agree with them? Children grow best when the drip-drop-drip-drop minutia of their daily experience is flavoured in all of these wonderful ways.

So, the next time that your dear little one acts out, remember this: the science of child development makes it pretty darn clear that discipline has very little to do with the child's behaviour, and everything to do with the big person's behaviour. Children will behave as they do because their brains are, as yet, immature. When surrounded with optimal conditions, the child will grow in exactly the way that nature intended. The only concern of the big person is to ensure that those conditions have been consistently created, including, and especially, in all those moments of challenging behaviours. •