

Problem-solving for parents

A Southern California parenting consultant teaches parents a formula for finding solutions to problem behavior

By Claudia Miller

Anyone with a toddler knows the feeling. You've asked and begged,

bribed and threatened. Before you know it, you're yelling or spanking. You think: There must be an easier way to be a parent!

Ann Corwin, a family parenting consultant for more than 20 years, has taught thousands of parents a problem-solving formula that works from the toddler years through adolescence. Last fall the state Department of Social Services invited her to train family support workers how to teach parents to use her S.O.L.V.E. formula.

Her goal, Corwin says, is "to empower parents to feel a little better when they're feeling stuck. Too often parents feel like they don't have any power. I want them to remember that they do."

S: State specifically what the problem is.

Parents often tell Corwin, "he never listens," or "she always hits her friends." The key to problem-solving is taking a step back to figure out the problem. Does the child hit her friends when she's tired because she skipped her nap? Or when she ate very little breakfast? Corwin uses an example of a mother whose two-and-a-half-year-old son would spit in her face—but only when she asked him to do something he didn't want to do.

"It's important for parents to learn why their child is behaving in a certain way," Corwin says, "so they can pick the appropriate response."

O: Observe your child's behavior, what you do in response, and how your child reacts to you.

When the problem comes up, Corwin asks parents to pretend there's a video camera on their shoulder, recording the entire incident. What is the child doing? What is the parent doing? Who got angry first? The mother whose child was spitting observed that when the boy spit, she would bend down and talk to him, explaining that his behavior was wrong. She gave him lots of attention, Corwin, points out.

Jen Levine, a mother of a two-year-old in Orange County, realized it was taking her and her husband two hours to get their daughter to bed at night. The child would pop up every few minutes until Levine gave her more snuggling. Often she would wake up in the middle of the night and want the same attention. "My husband and I were totally inconsistent because we felt we were at our wits' end," says Levine.

L: Learn what is developmentally appropriate for your child's age

How do you know what behavior is age-appropriate? Many resources are available—at family resource centers, child care resource and referral agencies, or schools and colleges with parenting classes. Parents can also consult web sites, such as www.americanacademyofpediatrics.com or www.parentingpress.com, or books on child development.

"Parents need to understand, for example, that a two-and-a-half-year-old is almost completely body-driven in his behavior. The child who spits is simply using this form of communication to let his mother know that he doesn't like what she said," says Corwin. "It looks aggressive, but for the child, it's just a way of communicating." By learning what behavior is typical for each age, she says, "parents can figure out if they're expecting too much from their children."

Ann Marie Jennison, another Orange County mother, went to see Corwin when her four-year-old son refused to have a bowel movement in the toilet. Jennison and her husband had tried bribery and threats. They even made a celebration called "happy potty day" when he used the toilet.

Corwin explained to the Jennisons that not all four-year-olds are potty-trained, so their son's behavior was not unusual. She suggested that their son was looking for control, very important to four-year-olds.

V: Vary your behavior and attitude for desired behavioral changes in your child.

"The only way to get our child's behavior to change," Corwin emphasizes, "is to change our own behavior." For example, the mother with the spitting toddler realized that she was giving her son lots of attention when he spat. At Corwin's suggestion, the next time he spit, she picked him up from behind and took him to his room.

"He was told that when he could calm himself down, he could come out of his room, but Mommy was not going to be with him when he spit at her," Corwin says. When he calmed down, Corwin says, "at that point, the mother could say, 'you've stopped spitting, you're calm now, and I really want to be around you again.'"

Not all parents will feel comfortable with Corwin's advice to isolate a child who's misbehaving. Some will want to try other responses. But any parent can use Corwin's basic method: changing your own behavior and observing the results.



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When children seek attention in inappropriate ways, Corwin adds, you want to stop the bad behavior, "but you also have to teach them how to get your attention appropriately. Then parents need to be sure to give them the positive attention that all children need."

Because Corwin could see that the Jennisons' son was trying to get more control, she suggested ways they could meet that need. She suggested that the Jennisons tell their son that he was in charge. He could poop either in the toilet or in a diaper—no big deal. They also gave him more "jobs" around the house, to help him feel he was in charge in other ways. "After about two weeks, he was completely potty-trained," says Jennison.

Levine and her husband learned to use the same routine every night to put their daughter to bed. After books and snuggle time, they said good night and left the room. They told their daughter that if she got out of bed more than once, she would lose her favorite television show the next morning. "She had to learn that we were serious, and it took some nights of listening to her scream, which was very hard," Levine said. "But now I know that if I'm direct with her, she'll do it."

For kids who keep popping out of bed, another strategy recommended by some parenting experts is to meet their need for contact with you by going back in briefly to check on them every five or ten minutes.

The Jennisons figured out ways to meet the need their child was expressing. Levine created consequences for inappropriate behavior. Parents can find their own mix of these and other strategies.

E: Enforce boundaries for the problem behavior.

The key is prediction, so your child will know exactly what you are going to do when they behave in a certain way.

"None of us is born with impulse control," Corwin says. If a child gets more attention by misbehaving, he'll keep misbehaving. "On the other hand, if a child is isolated when he misbehaves, he learns to change his behavior. You don't want children to fear you, but you want them to realize what they're doing is wrong."

"As my kids are getting older, I feel like I've set a good foundation for them in the way I discipline," Jennison said. "I'm able to be a very relaxed parent and rarely have to yell because we deal with problems early on. My kids are able to predict what our reaction will be to their behavior."

For more information

see Corwin's web site, www.parentingdoctor.com.