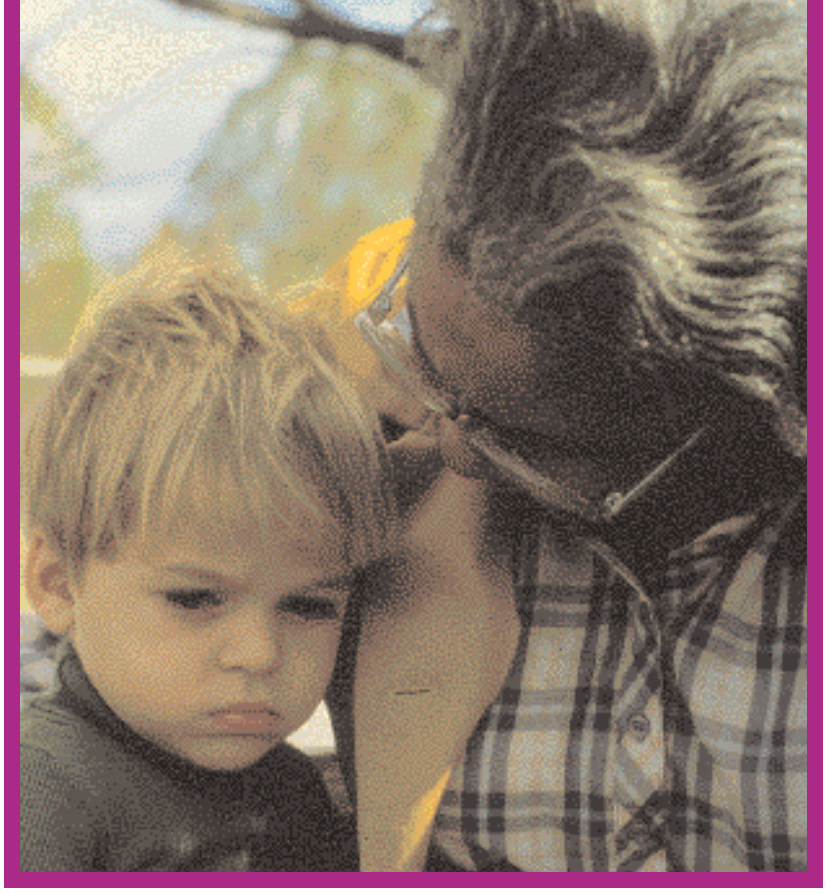

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Hard Joys: Managing Behavior with a Creative Mind and a Playful Spirit

by Lilli-ann Buffin

"I just love children" is a response you can count on from applicants for employment at child care centers. Each time I hear these words, I ask myself, "Is that an 'informed' love of children, or the enthusiastic, but naive, response of the inexperienced?" Anyone who has worked daily with children knows that working with them can be a joyful experience — and extremely hard work.

Sooner or later, every child experiences difficulty. For some, it is a fleeting moment brought on by hunger or fatigue, or difficulty sharing a prized toy. For other children, the difficult behaviors spread out into longer "stages" consistent with the issues of their development. A much smaller group of children will struggle intensely with deep and powerful internal pain related to extreme life events or health/mental health disorders.

At difficult times, children need our help. With a creative mind, playful spirit, and a few tools, we can reshape these trying behaviors. Here are six tools I find to be indispensable:

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• Teamwork! Sharing a philosophy and approach to difficult behaviors is essential to success. This includes the ability to work together to generate positive, creative solutions, and a willingness to be playful, even silly, at times.

• A deep understanding of normal development and the ways children learn.

• Remembering that behavior, *not words*, is the language of childhood. It is up to us to interpret these signals.

• Every child has a preferred energy zone for the physical release of emotion.

• A good working relationship with parents is essential for success.

• A thorough knowledge of community resources is necessary when problems are serious.

Remembering Play

Children learn best through play. They will take greater emotional risks in the spirit of play than in the course of their more structured, routine, or serious times of the day. Through play, children can address their most painful emotions and difficult behaviors without threatening their sense of self. They can gain insight and develop new habits.

We know all of this when it comes to setting up our schedules, developing curriculum, and observing free play. But what happens to us when a child's behavior challenges us — when redirecting, substituting, distracting, reminding, and time-out just don't work?

When our own irritation increases, our ability to think clearly decreases. As a result of this crisis mentality, we jump to a solution to relieve the immediate tension we feel. Without addressing the *real* problem, the chosen solution probably doesn't work. This further increases our level of emotion, which appears to the child as anger. The child reacts. We feel increasingly frustrated and incompetent. This lowers our self-esteem and that of the child. We are caught in a descending spiral. Too many episodes like this can destroy our relationship with the child. We can be left facing a more serious behavior problem.

Seeing Behaviors As Signals

Difficult behaviors that do not respond to our typical approaches may be a child's way of "signaling" that something not immediately obvious is the real issue. It may take some thought and effort to resolve the real problem successfully. Summer vacations bring to mind a couple of examples of the signals I have observed in my child care experience.

One four year old girl began creating a terrible scene each morning when her mother tried to leave the center. The child would scream, kick, cling to her mother, and try to run out of the building. After a couple of mornings like this, the mother came to my office wanting to know "**WHAT IS GOING ON AT THIS CHILD CARE CENTER?**" Truly, the child had never had any previous problems separating.

I asked the mother if there were any changes or impending changes at home. There were none. I recalled hearing this little girl speak about going on vacation. I asked her mother about this. With excitement, she described all their plans. In response to my questions, the mother acknowledged that her daughter had no experience with vacations. I asked if there was a chance the child feared her mom would drop her off at the center and go on vacation alone. Her mom was willing to consider this. We worked out a plan to have a calendar at school and one at home to mark off the days, and allow the child to have a transitional object between home and school. There were no further problems separating.

That same summer, another four year old was brought to the office for aggressive behavior quite uncharacteristic of him. Sitting next to him with my arm around his shoulder, I said, "You don't usually get into trouble. That tells me something is troubling you." Between sobs, he shared he was going on vacation, flying across the country. His mom told him he would have to use the potty before they left. His interpretation was there were no potties in this foreign state. He did not know how he was going to "hold it" all week. Some information, support, and a brief talk with his mother eliminated the stress.

Another example from my own parenting experience involves my five year old daughter, Emily. Emily had always been a joy to take shopping. A few months ago, she began having tantrums in the stores. One Saturday morning, she stormed into the house declaring, "Daddy is stupid!" From Emily's point of view, dad was stupid because he would not buy her something she wanted. I told her I thought her behavior was telling me that she needed some money of her own. She would then be responsible for getting, or not getting, what she wanted. This idea appealed to her. We worked out an allowance system that has been a real joy. We have seen so much enthusiasm and responsibility. We have watched her struggle to make good choices and to understand the concept of value. Her

behavior told us the time and the child were right for an allowance.

Thinking About Energy Zones

Sometimes a child's difficulties will be expressed in a physical release of tension. There are those children who spit, bite, yell, or want to. Others will hit, slap, pinch, or want to. And yet others will run, stomp, kick, or want to. Claudia Jewett has described these as "energy zones." Recognizing a child's energy zone opens the door to creative problem solving by redirecting the energy but continuing to use the child's preferred "zone."

Two of my most poignant experiences with this concept involved two kindergarten-age boys. One of them had great difficulty controlling his behavior at meal time. The lunch table could become quite out of control as the other children reacted or joined in. One day, I brought a tape recorder and a cassette of instrumental music to the lunchroom. I announced, "Today we are going to *eat to the beat*." Dramatically, I began to eat my lunch to the rhythm of the music. After a few bites, the children were laughing, eating to the beat themselves. We had a great time! No problems at the lunch table that day. Afterward, this child came to me privately and said, "Lilli, I could be good every day if I had music." That moment is forever etched on my heart. He not only had some insight into his "problem," but he could see a solution. He could take himself and his problem more lightly and yet do something about it.

The second child repeatedly hit, slapped, and knocked things over. The teachers were growing frustrated and the mother weary of such reports. Finally, one of the teachers came to me completely out of ideas. We discussed this child's energy zone — his hands. I suggested the teachers talk with him in a spirit of hopeful problem solving, *not humiliation*, and offer him a pair of latex gloves to help him remember to use his words, not his hands. He accepted the gloves and the other children supported the effort. At the end of the second day, the teacher came back in utter disbelief. There had not been a single incident in two days! What a joy for the boy and me to greet his mother at the door that evening.

An eight year old girl I saw in therapy a number of years ago would pick at her skin until bleeding sores developed. As an intervention, we found a small, smooth stone she could carry in her pocket. We called it her "worry stone." She could reach into her pocket and gently rub it or turn it over. (For someone at risk of throwing it, a pom-pom might do.) It was not a cure for all of her problems; but it diminished the skin condition, the ridicule from peers, and the constant reprimands from grown-ups.

If you allow your mind to wander through the energy zones, a lot of creative, even fun, solutions begin to emerge. Instead of getting into a battle of words with a child whose energy zone is in her mouth, why not say, "You have a lot of energy in your mouth right now. Try chomping on a carrot (or sipping water through a straw, or singing into the tape recorder . . .) to get it under control. Then we can calmly find a solution to this problem." The child who has so much energy in his legs and feet that he cannot rest might respond to a furry strip at the bottom of his cot on which he can rub his bare toes. The child whose hands are getting him into trouble could stop and fold some washcloths. Giving children time *and* a task to get their emotional energy under control can be more positive and meaningful than time out alone (see "Time Out" by Roslyn Duffy, pages 61-62). It also gives the child insight about her energy zone and ideas for gaining control when you are not present.

Exchanging ideas with parents gives them a few more items for their tool chests and you more information for interpreting the child's signals. Parents will be reminded of your competence and caring, and you will gain their support and participation. Parents know what hard joys their children can be. However, when a child's difficult behaviors are intense, frequent, dangerous to self or others, or do not respond to our best collaborative efforts, we must make use of community resources to refer the child for appropriate help. We would not hesitate to suggest a vision, hearing, or speech evaluation. We should not ignore signs of a serious behavioral or mental health disorder.

Let's use the same creativity and playful spirit to teach children about their emotions and self-control as we do to teach them about their world and how to use tools and materials. Our joys will be greater. With practice, creative solutions will come naturally. The seasoned applicant for employment won't merely say, "I just love children," but "I can speak their language; I can travel in their zone."

References

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