

Notes from the Field: Positive Tools in Use

from a parent's perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

In the midst of teaching a six-week parenting class, I had the opportunity for some first-hand practice. Morning hassles are always hot class topics, so when my granddaughter spent the night and I needed to get her up and ready for preschool the next day, I decided to take some field notes.

Since I often write about using different tools as parents or caregivers, this was an opportunity to dissect which tools worked, when, how, or if they worked; and why I chose one over another. But first I need to preface my experience. Please remember that my morning had several special features.

The first one was that this was only one morning. Let's face it, day-to-day is a different ball game.

Secondly, I now operate under that unique *grandparent mentality* that makes it possible to rationalize requests for milkshakes at breakfast with the thought that milkshakes do contain milk (not that I've actually served any breakfast milkshakes yet, probably only because she hasn't thought to ask!)

Thirdly, thanks to the blessings of hindsight I tend to forget the lost or missing shoes, coats and car keys; my shrilly delivered reminders such as, "This is my last warning — Get Up NOW!" (those really didn't work! !); or the tears and recriminations from one child to another over who would get the last serving of the worst sugary cereal we ever made the repeated mistake of buying during my children's growing up years. These factors do give my field test morning a definite advantage over my previous day-to-day mornings with our four children. Nonetheless, the tools listed really can work and at least some of the time, especially when I remembered to use them, our real life day-to-day mornings often did flow rather well.

So sit back and join me on my morning field test, and be reassured that such mornings are possible in your lives, too. Be sure to congratulate yourselves on the one out of three days they happen and try not to pull your hair out or loathe yourselves (or your children) on the two they don't.

What problems do you experience?

Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation.

Each issue, we will address your real-life issues.

To assure confidentiality,

names of those submitting problems will not appear.

Elements of several problems

may be combined for this column.

Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

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this column
to parents.

Roslyn Duffy is the co-author with Elizabeth Cray of *The Parent's Report Card* (Parenting Press) and co-author with Jane Nelsen and Cheryl Erwin of *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers and Positive Discipline: the First Three Years* (Prima Press).

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Task	What Happened	Tool Used	Comments
Wake-up	I snuggled next to her and whispered to her while she woke up.	Special Time	This set a soft tone for the morning.
Potty Time	She said she didn't have to go potty (Ha!). I said nothing and hugged her as we walked to the bathroom.	Action No Words Kind and Firm	Using the potty is a given for the morning, not something we needed to discuss (or argue about).
Potty Time	She shook her head saying, "I don't have to." I said nothing. I held up a tube of lip balm and asked if she wanted some. "Un-huh." "I'll put it on you while you are sitting on the potty." She sat on the potty and I turned the water on (it is hard to resist peeing when we hear running water). I put on her lip balm. She peed. I beamed. More hugs.	Ignoring Distraction Alter the Environment Encouragement	I stepped back from a potential power struggle by not discussing the potty. The lip balm effectively helped her forget she was resisting using the potty and once she was on it, nature took over. The running water improved the likelihood that she would pee. The hugs kept us moving along and connected.
Getting Dressed	I held her on my lap and we chatted while I helped her out of her pajamas and into her clothes. I would do part of each task and she would finish it: I pulled her pajama bottoms to mid-hip and she wiggled them the rest of the way off. I put the shirt over her head and she put her arms through the sleeves, tugging her hair out of the collar.	Prevention (clothes already picked out) Special Time	This is a real sticking point for most families. We want children to show independence and dress themselves, yet we often get into power struggles. Since this was not a daily event for my granddaughter and me, holding her and helping her dress was a special treat. The point is that it need not be all one way or the other and there is nothing wrong with making this a nice time to connect. Because the clothes were already laid out, there was no hassle over what to wear (which might have gotten us off track).

Task	What Happened	Tool Used	Comments
Eating	I asked if she would like waffles or sausages. She said, "No." I set out a variety of foods in small portions. Then I got my own plate of food and told her breakfast was ready. She came to the table and ate small amounts of cereal, milk, apple, a granola bar, and sausage.	Limited Choice Giving Choices Special Time Positive Attention	This did not work. Time to switch tools. By laying out a variety of foods I gave her the 'power' to select what to eat or not to eat. I left the decisions up to her. No one likes eating alone, so sitting down with her gave us another chance to spend time together and for me to give her appropriate attention.
Getting up with Food	When our cat came inside, she got up with her granola bar still in her hand and set off to chase the cat. I led her back to the table, pointing to the granola bar and her place at the table. She put the bar down and went off after the cat.	Non-Negotiable Rule Action Few or no Words Kind and Firm	One rule in our house is that food must stay in the kitchen. She knows that rule so I didn't need to repeat it, only point to remind her. Even though she knows the rule — her limited <i>impulse control</i> and of course the appeal of the cat, made following the rule less important to her. I led her back rather than start a yelling match or lecturing, trying to get her to return. I decided what I would do, instead of what I would try to make her do. If she hadn't done so, I would have removed the granola bar from her hand (or she could have sat back down to eat it).
Potty before leaving	She said she had to use the potty and went in and did so on her own.	Nothing	Big Payoff: all the tools put together = Self-Initiative.
Toothbrush Time	She asked to brush her teeth. I helped by providing the needed supplies. When she finished she smiled and said, "I cleaned me."	Prepared Environment	More Payoffs: <i>Cooperation</i> <i>Self-Confidence</i> (If this were a daily routine for us, we could have alternated turns with me doing some of the brushing. Because I want her to experience that feeling of "I can do it!" I wouldn't always insist on taking a turn or doing it for her. (I believe self-esteem rates equal in value with the prevention of tooth decay. <i>I hope no dentists are listening.</i>)
Shoes and Coat	I got her foot into each shoe and she finished putting it on. I handed her raincoat to her. She took it and said, "Thank You," then put it on.	Prevention	I had the shoes and coat by the door, ready to go. Payoff: <i>Cooperation</i> <i>Show of Manners</i>
Good-bye	We hugged and kissed and I handed over her lunchbox. She walked out the door ahead of Grandpa, smiling and waving to me.	Love	Payoff: <i>A Great Start to the Day!</i> I will miss her. I hope she has a great day. She already made mine!

Tomorrow (or tonight or this afternoon) make each other's day — and have your own *Great Day*, too!

The 'Tools'

Action: If you say it — do it, so be careful of what you say!

Cooperation: Many hands lifting the weight make everyone's portion lighter.

Distraction: "Action" combined with something new, shifting attention in a different direction.

Kind and Firm: Think of a tree supporting a fragile bird's nest: the leaves give shade and protection from the wind and sun. That is *kind*. The roots and trunk hold steady. That is *firm*.

Limited Choices: Options: all of which are acceptable. "Would you like to hug Grandma or do the Hokey-Pokey?" These would be effective limited choices, either of which I would love.

Love: The reason we are on the planet with others; also the meaning of children.

No Words: _____ .

Positive Attention: "I notice you. I am glad you are here."

Prepared (or altered) Environment: If you keep tripping on the same rug, in the same place over and over again — either toss the rug, tack it down or dye it bright orange. If your daughter refuses to eat anything but marshmallows — quit buying marshmallows. It is the same principle.

Prevention: Be a fortune teller. Predict what might go wrong in a given situation. Prevent problems before they happen. If a child is too sleepy to wake up in the morning — get him to bed earlier the night before (I know this is easier said than done, but the principle is still true!).

Special Time: This is one-on-one time between people who care about one another. Time talks.