

Lighthearted, Subversive, and Really Cool Ways to Improve Your Children's Behavior at Home and Have Fun, III



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Sometimes it's hard for people in families (and elsewhere!) to take the bull by the horns when they get mad. Ideally, someone would say, "You know what? We need to talk. I am really angry with you!" Unfortunately, people often show that they are upset in other, less constructive ways. The first intervention below is designed to help members of your family honor negative feelings. As in my earlier articles in this series, this approach to behavior management succeeds because it uses humor and an activity to reinforce the message.

In the Doghouse

First recruit a crafty member of the family to make the doghouse. You will want to hang it on the wall in a prominent place (perhaps the kitchen). It should be roughly house shaped (a square with a pointy roof) and have room inside to hold a tag for each family member. It should also have space outside the doghouse for the tags to be stored when not in use.

Your doghouse can be a cutout, or an outline on a piece of cardboard, with cardboard name tags attached using pieces of Velcro tape. You might also make a durable plywood doghouse, painted or varnished, with hooks to hold hanging tags. Your tags can be plain or dog shaped, as you choose.

Once you have a builder, explain at a family meeting that, when construction is complete, anyone who has a beef with anyone else in the household needs only to hang the offender's name in the doghouse. When someone is in the doghouse, the Powers That Be (one or both parents) will know that it's time to call a meeting, identify the plaintiff, and solve the problem.

Tardy Tunes

If you have one or two people in your family who hold everyone else back by failing to be ready on time for outings (or even for dinner), wrack your brains for

a short, silly song. (If you can't think of one, ask other family members for suggestions.)

You might try "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"—or you could borrow from my father's extensive repertory: "The waiter hollered down the hall, `There's no bread, sir, with one meatball'" (the refrain repeats)—or you could pick your own tune.

Explain to family members that from now on, anyone who isn't ready for action at the agreed-upon time must perform the ditty on the spot for the rest of the family. This intervention comes from a creative schoolteacher who tired of watching stragglers enter the classroom after he had started talking.

No Certificates

Sometimes children argue incessantly whenever a parent says no. Solve this problem in your household by generating a pack of No Certificates on your computer. Have fun with this project. Use nice clip art, fancy borders, and maybe special paper. Each certificate should read "I took no for an answer."

Explain to your child that certificates can be redeemed for special prizes. Five certificates, for instance, might get your junior advocate more time with you, an outing to a favorite park or to a ball game, or something else that is interactive and builds your relationship. Bestow certificates as appropriate when your child bows to your superior wisdom. (You may be able to prompt the desired behavior by saying, "Look, here's a golden opportunity to earn a No Certificate!")

Super Swears

Bad language is a problem in many families, and like fleas, it sometimes enters the house from outside sources. (One parent recently told me she had discouraged her six-year-old from bringing it home by explaining that dirty language is bad for the ears the way cigarette smoke is bad for the lungs.)

To counteract the allure of many well-known swears, it may help to have a few satisfying alternatives. To locate yours, grab the biggest dictionary you can find, and call a family meeting. Have family members look for uncommon words that aren't melodic and have some hard sounds in them. One of my favorites is "aardvaark." Thereafter, when something goes wrong, your youngster can, with your blessing, call out, "Oh, A-A-R-D-V-A-A-R-K!!!!!"

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