Solving Common Family Problems: Five Essential Steps

May 28, 2012 by **Kenneth Barish**

Engaging children in the solution of problems.

In every family, there will be problems. No matter how positive and empathic we have been, kids will still argue and misbehave, and ask for more than they can have. The demands of our daily lives—and of theirs—will inevitably create conflict and misunderstanding.

Often, there is a recurring problem. The problem may be getting ready for school in the morning or going to sleep at night. Or doing homework, or fighting with siblings. Children may be demanding or disrespectful, or refuse to cooperate when asked. Over time, these common problems of daily living begin to erode the quality of our relationships with our children – and our own pleasure in being parents.

So often, families get stuck. Despite our best intentions, children become stubborn and defensive—and so do we. In today's post, I will outline five essential principles that we should keep in mind in attempting to solve any challenging problem of family life.

Step 1: Take a Step Back

The first step in solving any recurring problem in the life of a child is to take a step back. Problems of family life are best solved – and perhaps can only be solved—proactively. When we are reacting to our children's behavior, we will often be reacting badly. Clinicians and parent advisors of all points of view agree on this point.

Children want to solve problems, and they want to do well. Like us, however, they may become frustrated and even feel hopeless that solutions are possible. And, like us, they may just not know what to do.

Look for causes, not just symptoms. You will solve problems more successfully when you have been able to identify the daily experiences in the life of your child that are sources of painful feelings. These may be frustration in learning, or frequent criticism, or bullying, or exclusion. Then, listen to your child's grievance. Let him tell you what he believes is unfair in his life. Tell him what is right about what he is saying before you tell him what is wrong. You can say, for example, "I know you feel that we are always on your case about your schoolwork, and maybe we are. But we're worried and we need to solve this problem."

Step 2: Place the Problem Before Your Child

Once you have identified a recurrent problematic situation and made some effort to understand its causes, the next step is to place the problem before your child. Say, for example, "We have a problem in the morning, when it's time to get ready, and I often end up yelling at you," or "I think

we have a shower problem," or "A lot of times, we have a problem when I tell you that it is time to turn off the television."

Step 3: Elicit Your Child's Ideas
It seems almost reflexive for many parents, when faced with a child's defiance or lack of cooperation, to attempt to solve this problem by imposing a "consequence" for their child's misbehavior. Although some problems may require this approach, I recommend that you first engage your child in an effort to solve the problem—to elicit her ideas.

In this way, you will often be able to engage her in a search for solutions. She will then be less absorbed in angry and defiant thoughts, less stuck in making demands or continuing the argument. She will begin to think, even if just for that moment, less about getting her way and instead about how to solve a problem, how her needs and the needs of others might be reconciled – an important life lesson, for sure.
Once you have placed the problem before your child and asked for her ideas, give her some time. You can say, for example, "Why don't you think about it for a while? Let's talk again later, or tomorrow, and see what your ideas are." In doing this, you will be teaching yet another important lesson, because this is how most problems in life should be solved.

Step 4: Develop a Plan
In my experience, almost all children respond positively when I tell a family that "I have a plan" to solve a recurrent problem of family life. They may be skeptical, but they listen with interest. Deep down, they want a plan, as much as we do. (I will offer plans for solving specific family problems in future posts.)

Step 5: Express Appreciation and Praise for Increments of Effort and Success
Be sure to offer praise and appreciation for every increment of your child's effort at compliance and self-control. Your acknowledgment of her effort and progress is a basic principle of successful problem solving.
Psychologists have learned from psychotherapy research that ongoing collaboration is an important element of successful therapy. This is also true in solving problems with our children. We should regularly, proactively, check in with children, and ask, for example, "How do you think we are doing with our morning problem?"
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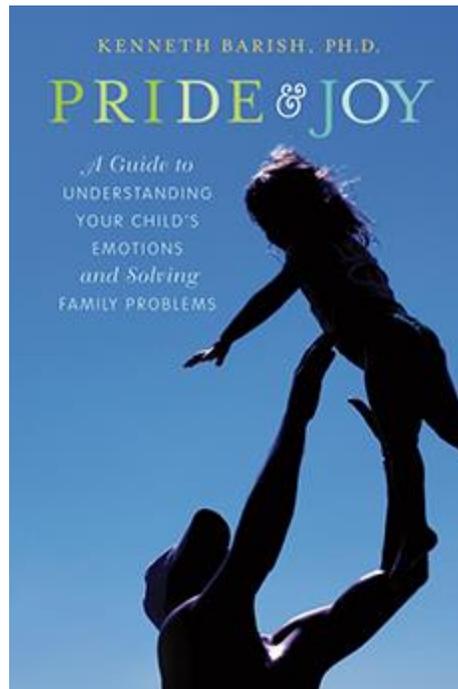
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