

Kids are Like Pups
By Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

Kids are like pups. They're adorable. But when you bring one home you have to know that it's going to pee on the carpet and chew the furniture. No matter how committed to training or attentive you are, there will be incidents. After all, it's a pup, doing what comes naturally. That includes misbehaving.

I remember, as a new parent, with a couple of kids, being surprised that my offspring would sometimes ignore what my wife and I had told them. How could that happen when I had taken the time to train them so well (tongue in cheek intended)?

Why are we, as parents, so appalled when our children misbehave? They are like pups. They require consistent, repeated training in order to become good citizens in the home and community. Despite whatever excellent training we provide, they're still going to piddle in the wrong place and chew the wrong things sometimes, anyway. So if we know that's true, why do we keep reverting back to hitting them on the nose with a rolled up newspaper when they misbehave? We know from our own experiences, as pups, that it just made us more anxious and bad tempered.

Is there a more effective option? There is. But our kids need more than just behavior training. They need help reasoning out situations and working through emotions.

John Gottman, wrote a great book entitled *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*. It encourages parental coaching. Coaches take kids—where they are—and help them improve. They see mistakes as part of learning and understand that expecting someone to perform beyond his level of development is demoralizing. Good coaches view mess-ups and melt-downs as opportunities to teach rather than punish (which doesn't necessarily exclude consequences).

But parental coaching only occurs when defenses are down. And defenses only come down when kids feel understood and cared about. That means parents need to try to understand before trying to be understood. Parental coaches encourage kids to talk about what they were thinking and feeling prior to, during, and after the incident. If they sincerely empathize with and validate kids' feelings, kids are usually more willing to talk with parents about what they could have done differently and what remedies are needed.

But kids often don't want to talk about their misbehaviors, and parents who insist that offenders talk, may be met with a glazed or icy stare and... silence. Nevertheless, parents who hold the lecture, listen empathetically, and ask for the child's side of the story, are more likely to see their kids open up. And if kids feel understood (not necessarily agreed with), they're more likely to consider the hurt they've caused or the consequences of their actions.

The goal is not agreement, but understanding. Imagine that your 15-year-old daughter says, "I think what Miley Cyrus did, at the MTV awards, was courageous!" Instead of launching into a counter-argument about Cyrus's bad example, it might be more effective to ask what your daughter found courageous and why she thinks the event drew so much media attention. Understanding that she is trying to sort out her own values and beliefs can help you hold the sermon while asking questions that will help her consider other views.

It's not as difficult as it sounds. But it requires parents to refrain from what comes naturally to them. Kids, like pups, will have accidents and misbehaviors. As parents, we should expect those, see them as opportunities for training, and then love those adorable pups.