

SENSE OF SELF HELPS KIDS BEHAVE WELL

By Deborah Medvick

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El Cerrito Aug. 24 - The next time your child is driving you crazy, don't scream. Instead, take a close look at your child and examine your own parenting behavior, advises Peter Haiman, Ph.D., parent counselor of Berkeley. "Children's behavior reflects the condition of their development needs," Haiman said. "How parents respond to their children has a tremendous effect on how they learn and feel about themselves." For 30 years, Haiman has been helping parents understand themselves and their children. This fall, his parenting classes are offered through the adult education programs at Albany and Piedmont High Schools.

During the series of four classes, parents of pre-school age children can learn practical techniques for rearing their children. It's not what he teaches, but how he teaches that makes Haiman's classes different from other parenting programs. He doesn't use a prescribed set of lectures about child development, but builds his classes on what parents say they need to know for their particular situations.

According to Haiman, when children's normal developmental needs are met, they are less likely to misbehave.

In an article published in *Mothering* magazine last summer, Haiman described the home environment that best meets these needs as one that nourishes a strong sense of trust and autonomy.

"Infants have the need for attachment," Haiman said. "And how this need is met determines whether children learn to trust or distrust the world.

"When children feel safe and supported, they reach out to learn without being afraid of making the mistakes necessary for learning," he said.

"On the other hand, when children feel that 'mom and dad will love me only if I don't make mistakes', they will lose the motivation to learn, as well as a sense of themselves. These children will grow up being only what their parents want them to be."

Haiman believes that honoring the mistakes made in the effort to learn enhances our children's motivation to learn.

"When infants feel they can trust the world around them," he said, "they gain joy and self-confidence which lead to inner security."

From age one to four, Haiman said children have a strong need to express their individuality and independence.

"They want to make up their own minds," he said. "When parents don't see their children's actions as normal, healthy behavior, and respond by issuing more commands, the battle lines are drawn. As a result, simple activities such as dressing, brushing teeth, and going to bed become a test of wills."

So what's a parent to do?

Haiman advises parents to give children choices, not commands. "By giving choices," he said, "you are helping your children experience their individuality and achieve a healthy sense of themselves."

For example, instead of telling your child, "I want you to brush your teeth", Haiman suggests that you ask your child, "Do you want to brush your teeth with your red toothbrush or green one?"

"In this way," Haiman said, "parents can lead the child to the desired behavior while allowing him to feel a sense of autonomy."

Haiman believes it is important for parents to understand why their child's behavior "drives them up the wall".

"Parents blame the kids for making them angry," he said, "but the young child is not the cause of their anger. Parents are really angry at their parents."

"As a child, the parent may have been angry and frustrated with parents who would not allow him to express his independence. This old anger comes back when their own children try to express the same need for autonomy and the parent remembers how he was forced to do things his parent's way." Haiman said.

To help parents recognize patterns from their childhood, Haiman has them write down their feelings about their children's behavior.

"In this way, they can begin to see the real cause of their anger, let it go and understand what their children's behavior is really saying," he said.