



Postcards

from the Road Less Traveled

By Ellen Notbohm

Behavior Is Communication: Yours, Mine And Ours

This past spring, your intrepid Digest editor Veronica Zysk and I had ourselves a little adventure. We created my new book *Ten Things Your Student with Autism Wishes You Knew*. In doing so, we knew we wanted to go beyond nuts-and-bolts teaching tactics and strategies. Critical as those are, we wanted to go much deeper, into potentially uncomfortable places where we would confront the unique demands that autism places on all teachers, whether educator, therapist, parent, fellow student or sibling or child with autism himself. We are all equal partners in that circle of learning. There can be no such thing as a teacher or parent-teacher who is not also a willing learner.

In recent years I've become increasingly fascinated with neurotypical adult responses to the challenging behaviors children with autism frequently present. I've observed a very wide spectrum of responses to the spectrum of so-called autistic behaviors. Too frequently, what I see is a lack of curiosity about what is causing those behaviors. At worst, this lack of curiosity includes an assumption that the child could change his behavior at will, if only he wanted to. Only slightly better are halfway efforts to address these behaviors by attempting to interrupt or extinguish them, squashing the symptom but disregarding the source.

Behavior is probably the most discussed, debated, dreaded and perhaps misunderstood issue within autism. And yet taming this beast comes down to one simple concept: All behavior is communication. Your child or student is giving you information about factors seen or unseen in his environment that are affecting his ability to cope with his overwhelmed sensory system, impaired language functioning, emotional or physiological issues, social expectations. He is telling you that his so-called "negative" behavior is preventable, but only if you are willing to root out and address the cause.

And there is a reciprocal factor at work here too. What is your behavior telling him? We have to acknowledge that our own behavior is information we are imparting to the child about his environment. We can't question what his behavior is telling us without also questioning what our behavior is telling him.

Dr. Cliff Arnall, a British psychologist specializing in seasonal disorders, has calculated that January 24 is "the most depressing day of the year." Holiday cheer is gone, the bills are coming in, the weather is the worst of the year and ...most New Year's resolutions have already fallen by the wayside. This statement is a powerful reflection on our attempts, as adults, at modifying our own behavior. In my new book, I write:

"I urge you to be as gentle in your efforts to change your student or child's behavior as you could reasonably expect of yourself. It strikes me as sheer lunacy how much we expect of our students with autism in the area of behavior modification when we as adults find it so difficult to accomplish ourselves. Every darn New Year's, out come the same tired old behavior-modification resolutions: lose weight, stop smoking, spend less money, exercise more. By the end of January, it's usually all over but the shouting... We all know too well how demoralizing it is to swallow the fact that we didn't keep any of those resolutions, *didn't manage to change our behavior...* What real right do we have to expect greater inner fortitude of a child living with perpetual neurological challenge than we are able to muster ourselves?"

You may have read far and wide on the subject of behavior modification, but how much of what you've read asks you to focus not just on the child's behavior, but in equal part on your own adult behavior and the role it plays in the equation? If you can accept that your child's behavior may be a response to your own behavior, here is some food for thought, some ways we can begin to turn the tide.

Are you making a bad situation worse?

Believe this: your child truly does not want the spirit-crushing feedback he gets from "bad" behavior, nor does he intentionally melt down, lash out or otherwise disrupt family or classroom. Ask yourself honestly if your response to his "bad behavior" is prolonging rather than resolving the crisis. Raise your voice; he hears the volume and tone, the anger and the scorn, but not the words. Trying to shame him out of a behavior, letting him "learn a lesson the hard way," teaches only that he cannot trust you to protect him and guide him respectfully. Making him follow double-standard rules that are different than for peers or siblings squashes his self-esteem and only makes it harder for him socially. Comparing his character or efforts to that of a sibling or other student is unfair and irrelevant.

At one time or another, we all make decisions in the heat of the moment that we later regret. If you do "lose it," you can still produce a positive result by modeling how a responsible and compassionate person issues a sincere apology. He needs to learn that everyone messes up sometimes, even you, and that even when the mistake looks huge, we can still make things right and move on.

If you are not getting through, try another way.

The definition of insanity is always doing things the same way and expecting different results. If despite your repeated efforts, your child or student's behavior isn't changing, maybe the behavior that needs to change is yours. If his behavior hasn't changed, you haven't found the root cause yet. Look further. When teaching isn't working, the burden is on the parent/teacher to change the teaching.

Are your "rewards" really rewards?

The interests of children with autism are usually quite a bit narrower than those of their NT counterparts. Assuming that they will find "typical" rewards motivating is a mistake. Bryce is a walking case study, having spent his lifetime being offered meaningless rewards for school and sports activities, such as McDonald's coupons (he is a Supersize

Me devotee and never eats at McDonald's), Jolly Ranchers and candy canes (dislikes all hard candy), branded paraphernalia relating to TV characters in whom he has no interest. Being rewarded for good behavior with "treats" your child or student hates (*ice cream hurts my teeth!*) or toys he doesn't understand (*glad YOU like Star Trek Monopoly*) will not inspire change. If you want to know what rewards your child or student will find motivating – ask and observe.

Walk your talk.

Be the change you want to see in him. If you yell, mock or hit when you are mad, he will too. If you are going to try to stop her stims (repetitive behaviors such as rocking, tapping or twirling), you can't expect her to understand why while you're chugging all those Diet Cokes, cracking your knuckles or your gum or jingling your keys. Want him to learn to not interrupt and to pay attention to you when you talk? Make sure you are giving him the same courtesy.

Is the behavior harmful, or just annoying to you?

Behaviors that affect health or disrupt the classroom or home should be first priority. Then give some thought to other behaviors you find 'inappropriate' or 'negative'. I know, that incessant hair-twirling or tongue-clicking really dances on your third nerve. But of what real importance is it? Health and safety issues trump mere irritations every time. Carefully choose your battles and focus your efforts where they will have the greatest benefit, one thing at a time.

Centuries before the concept of 'autism' emerged, Sir Isaac Newton described the behavior equation perfectly in his Third Law of Motion: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Your words, your attitude, your actions and your reactions are determining factors in your child's environment and his response to it. Only when we take a clear-eyed look at our own behavior will we have a chance of positively impacting our children's. ■

(This article is adapted from Chapter 4 of Ellen's upcoming book. Visit www.amazon.com to preorder.)

Ellen Notbohm is author of *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew*, a ForeWord 2005 Book of the Year Honorable Mention winner and recipient of iParenting's 2005 Media Award. Her new book, *Ten Things Your Student with Autism Wishes You Knew* will be released in October 2006. For article reprint permission, to learn more or to contact Ellen, please visit www.ellennotbohm.com.



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