

RESOLVING PARENT-CHILD DIFFERENCES

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Twelve-year-old Sandra and her mother were arguing about whose responsibility it was to clean up Sandra's room. Mother felt Sandra should do it, but Sandra said she would not clean her room.

What is going on between Sandra and her mother? Mother wants Sandra to be responsible for cleaning her room; however, she is asking in a way that makes Sandra defend herself. On the other hand, every time Sandra defends herself, Mother becomes more and more defensive. An argument develops. How will Sandra and her mother resolve this difference?

How to Resolve Differences — So Everyone Wins

Exploring alternatives is an important parenting skill to learn and use because we live in a world of constant compromise and negotiations. No one can make the decisions all the time; consequently, one must learn to give and take. Exploring alternatives means being able to resolve a difference between a parent and a child so each will feel good and understand the difference. It involves reaching mutual agreement.

A parent should keep uppermost in mind that exploring alternatives is different from giving advice or telling the child, "Do this . . ." or "I think you should . . ." Telling or giving advice is not helpful to the child for the following reasons:

1. Advice only makes the child more dependent on the parent. It does not help the child learn to solve problems and become independent.
2. Many a child is skeptical of advice from an adult and really does not like to be told what to do and how to do it. Instead, the child really wants to be involved in the decision.
3. Who is responsible when the parent's advice doesn't work? The parent or the child?

To help a child explore alternatives and differences means to assist the child in identifying, considering and evaluating

the options available to solve a difference. It means helping the child decide on the best course of action and then making a commitment to carry out the decision.

The steps involved in exploring alternatives are:

- Stage 1:** Defining the difference or problem.
- Stage 2:** Seeking out and generating alternative solutions.
- Stage 3:** Exploring, thinking and evaluating alternative solutions.
- Stage 4:** Selecting an alternative and implementing the solution.
- Stage 5:** Setting a future time to evaluate the progress.

While at first it may seem easy to implement this practice, there are some key points to understand before using this process in the parent-child relationship. Sit down with the child and explain the process of exploring alternatives and how it will help in resolving differences. It is necessary to remember that each person involved in the difference is a human being; therefore, each should be treated with dignity and respect.

Differences are resolved best when each person understands what is involved in each stage of the process. When applying each of these stages to a difference within the parent-child relationship, the parent is able to avoid many other problems associated with a conflict. Although some differences will solve themselves or will be easy to work out without going through all the stages, it is recommended that a parent and a child understand what is involved in each step.

Stages of Exploring Alternatives

Stage 1: Defining the difference or problem

This is perhaps the easiest stage, if a parent will:

1. Be sure the time is right for exploring alternatives for the child as well as the parent. A child, like everyone else, resents being interrupted or delayed.
2. Meet the issue head on. A parent should not be afraid to say, "There is a problem that has come up and I

would like your help in solving it.”

- a) Tell it like it is. If you as a parent feel strongly about the issue, it is important that you send a “responsive-I-message” to the child.
- b) Avoid put-downs or blame that only serve to build up defenses and lessen the chances for resolving the difference.
- c) Make it a joint operation. A parent should make it very clear to the child that both must join in finding a solution “we both can live with,” where no one loses and the needs of both parent and child are met. It is necessary for the child to believe the parent is sincere in wanting the child’s help, and will respect the child’s ideas.

The first stage of exploring alternatives must be handled successfully before the other four stages can be satisfactorily attempted. In some parent-child differences, this step seems very simple; for example, the selection of a dress. The problem is clear: “What dress is to be purchased?” It is less clear if the problem is “Does Sally need a new dress?” Here the difference may really be “Does she need a new dress more than new slacks?” Or “Does she need clothes more than a special school activity that costs money?”

Stage 2: Seeking Out and Generating Alternative Solutions

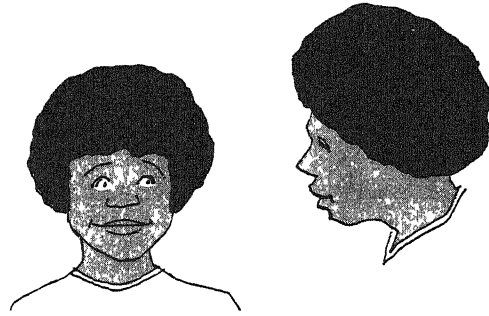
This stage requires both parent and child to consider a variety of solutions. To get the “brainstorming” session going, a parent might suggest, “What are some things we might consider? What are your ideas on solving the difference or problem?” Or “Two heads are better than one. I’ll bet we can come up with some good ideas.” To help generate possible solutions, try to keep these key points in mind:

- Let your child offer solutions first. You’ll get your chance later.
- Allow enough time for the child to think of ideas, especially the young child.
- Be accepting, avoid evaluating, judging or belittling any solutions offered by the child. Evaluation of solutions will be taken up in the next stage.
- Avoid making any statements that convey the attitude that you are unaccepting of any of the child’s solutions.
- Be encouraging, especially when more than one child is involved in exploring alternatives.
- Keep brainstorming for more alternatives until it seems no more can be squeezed out. Usually within 5 to 10 minutes, people have generated about as many ideas as they can.

Stage 3: Exploring, Thinking, Evaluating Alternative Solutions

The next phase of exploring alternatives consists of exploring and evaluating those solutions that seem to solve the difference or problem. This step was described years ago by John Dewey in his decision-making process as “dramatic rehearsal.” That is, acting out in imagination each possible alternative and getting a feel for the consequences of the solution. Dewey’s idea is recommended for use at this point.

In this phase, it is important for the parent to involve the child in exploring, thinking and evaluating the various solu-



tions. A parent may say, “Of all the solutions available to us, which ones seem to get at solving our problem?” or “What do we think about the various solutions we have come up with?” or “Are any of the solutions better than others?”

This can be called the “weed out” phase. Solutions get narrowed down, and only those acceptable to the parent and child remain. A parent must be honest in stating feelings about a solution. This can be done by sending a responsive-I-message such as “I wouldn’t be very happy with that one,” or “I don’t feel that would meet my need,” or “Gee, that doesn’t seem fair to me.”

Stage 4: Selecting an Alternative and Implementing the Solution

Selecting an alternative and implementing the solution will be easy if the other stages of exploring alternatives have been followed and both parent and child have had an open and honest exchange of opinions. To aid in selecting the best alternative, remember the following:

1. Ask questions such as: “Do you think this gets at the solution? Are we all satisfied with the solution? Does this solve our problem?”
2. Decisions are not cast in concrete. No decision should ever be considered final or impossible to change. A parent might say to the child, “Sounds good, let’s try it and see if it solves our problems,” or “I’m willing to give it a try. Are you?”
3. Write it down on paper, especially if the solution involves a number of points so it won’t be forgotten.
4. Everyone involved in the solution should understand that each is making a commitment to carry out the decision. To get this point across, one might say, “Sounds like we are in agreement,” or “I think I understand our agreement to be . . .”

More often than not a good solution to a difference is lost at the second part of Stage 4, the implementation stage. Everyone involved must understand what is expected of them and how to carry out the agreed-upon solution. Those persons involved need to address themselves to the **who**, **what**, **where** and **how** of the solution. For example, “**Who** is responsible for **what**? **When** do we start and **when** will it be

completed? **Where** will it be done? **How** is it going to be done?"

Differences that focus on chores and work duties could be handled by such questions as, "How often? On what days? What are the standards by which the performance is to be judged?" In bedtime conflicts, a parent and child might want to discuss who is responsible for watching the clock, what happens when the child doesn't go to bed, or why the child doesn't want to go to bed.

Questions for implementing a solution should be discussed after the persons involved have made a final decision concerning the problem. Implementation is usually easy after the differences have been resolved.

Stage 5: Setting a Future Time to Evaluate the Progress

This stage, not always followed through by the parties involved, is very necessary, because not all decisions from the exploring-alternatives method turn out to be in the best interest of either parent or child. Consequently, both the parent and the child need to check back with each other to find out how things are going and to see if each is happy with the decision. A child will often agree to a decision that later proves too difficult to keep up that end of the bargain. A good idea is to check with each other, asking, "How is the decision working out? Are you still finding it to be satisfactory?"

Sometimes in the evaluation session other information turns up that requires the initial decision to be modified.

Evaluation is helpful in the exploring-alternatives process. Evaluation can tell whether the decision made was successful, and if and where changes should be made.

Attitudes and Behavior for Exploring Alternatives

Attitudes are important during the exploring-alternatives process. Both the parent and the child should:

- Want to hear what the other person has to say.
- Want to resolve the conflict.
- Consider and, if possible, accept the other person's feelings.
- Trust the other person to come up with good ideas and solutions.
- See the other person as a separate being, with an individual identity and feelings.

Experiencing these attitudes becomes productive only when the person involved can convey them. Some behaviors that effectively communicate attitudes of understanding, empathy, trust and acceptance include:

- Eye contact (looking at, not staring at, the person with whom you are resolving the differences).
- Attentive body language (natural, relaxed, open gestures and posture). This involves your own style of using your body to communicate your willingness to resolve a difference.
- Responsive listening behavior that does not expand on what the other person has said, but rather encourages that person to continue and to clarify thoughts and feelings.
- Responsive-I-messages that allow others to know one's needs, feelings and limits without downgrading the others.

Why Exploring Alternatives Works

The process of exploring alternatives is effective in resolving differences in the parent-child relationship because:

1. A child is motivated to carry out and implement the solution.
2. A chance is provided for finding a high-quality solution.
3. A child's thinking skills are developed.
4. A democratic philosophy of parenting is more likely to result.
5. More harmony and love among family members is produced.
6. The possibility of the parent being the enforcer is lessened.
7. The need for showing power by either the parent or the child is eliminated.
8. Exploring alternatives gets at the real problems and concerns of the persons involved.

What If . . . ?

There may be some instances when exploring alternatives will not work. Make sure you've gone over the various stages in the exploring-alternatives process to be certain all points have been covered. If, upon re-examination of all stages, a solution isn't found, a few ideas to keep in mind would be:

1. Continue to discuss the matter, but take a break. Sometimes after a break people will have a better idea of what the problem is and how to solve it.
2. Go back to Stage 2 and generate other possible solutions.
3. Encourage yourself and others involved to keep on trying. You might want to say, "Have we explored all of the possible solutions?"
4. Search for an underlying problem. You might say, "I wonder what is preventing us from solving this problem?"

Usually one or a combination of these ways will get the process restarted.

Broken Agreements

A parent can expect agreements to be broken in the early use of this process. A person may be unable to keep up a bargain because of the following:

1. Agreement too hard to fulfill.
2. Lack of experience, self-discipline or self-direction to do the task.



3. Previous dependence on another person to follow through and do the task.
4. Forgetting.
5. An attempt to test another person to see if that person really means business.
6. More expression of acceptance of the decision at the time in order to continue doing something else.

If agreements are broken, the person should be confronted directly and honestly, and informed via a responsive-I-message about what has happened. The confrontation should come as soon as possible. Confronting the person about what has happened is a form of a logical consequence.

The exploring-alternatives process will work if both parent and child understand what is expected. Perhaps the best way is to begin viewing the process as a potential problem, sitting down and discussing it with the child so that when the time comes to use the process, both will be ready.

Who Owns The Problem — The Child, The Parent or Both?

The skills of responsive listening, responsive-I-messages and exploring alternatives are very useful in building relationships with children. The primary purpose of each of these skills is to communicate to the child a sense of worthiness and competence as an individual. To intensify feeling good about self and feeling competent, one must explore the problem of ownership.

In a parent-child relationship, like any relationship, not all goes smoothly. There are times when differences or problems occur. These times should be expected and regarded as normal events that every parent and child must learn to deal with constructively.

The first task of a responsible parent during times of differences and problems is to decide who really owns the difference or problem. Problems can sometimes belong only to the parent or to the child, or the problem can be shared by the parent and the child because of a difference in what each needs from the other, or the problem can be all of the family's.

For you as a parent to determine problem ownership, the simplest way is to ask yourself:

- “Whose problem is it?”
- “Who is experiencing difficulty with whom?”
- “Whose purposes are not being met?”

For many parents, it comes as a surprise that they will not lose their job, spouses, friends or even be ridiculed and shamed by their neighbors for allowing their child to own the problem.

Dr. Thomas Gordon has given us some help here in trying to sort out whether the child owns the problem, there is no problem in the relationship or the parent owns the problem. Gordon defines problem ownership in the following manner (1970, p. 64):

1. The child has a problem because of being thwarted in satisfying a need. It's not the parent's problem because the child's behavior in no way interferes with the parent. The following are examples of problems owned by the child: Sally is feeling rejected by her friend Sue. Jimmy is not doing well in school. Eric is sad because he didn't make the basketball team.

2. The child is satisfying personal needs — that is, the child is not thwarted — and the child's behavior is not interfering with the parent. Consequently, there is no problem in the relationship.
3. The child is satisfying personal needs — that is, the child is not thwarted. But in this case, the child's behavior is a problem to the parent satisfying a need. Consequently, the parent owns the problem. The following are examples of problems owned by the parent:

Tania is walking all over the living room furniture.
Linda keeps interrupting the conversation you are having with a friend.
Billy leaves his toys around the house.

Parent beware! There are times when the problem really belongs only to the child. Too often, as a parent, one will make the mistake of thinking that all of the child's problems are the parent's problems. That is not true or even fair to the child. In fact, if a parent behaves as if this were true, the parent denies the child a chance to try the child's skills at problem solving. Remember, a child has the right to solve problems and work out solutions.

Once a parent decides on who owns the problem, there will be several options open for action. For example, if the child owns the problem, the parent may decide:

- to listen responsively
- to explore alternatives
- to allow the child to face the consequences of independent behavior
- to do a combination of the above

If, on the other hand, the parent owns the problem, the parent may decide to explore alternatives within self or to do rational self-counseling.

Keep in mind that a responsible parent learns to identify who owns the problem or crisis, and then feels good about taking the appropriate action that in the end develops a self-confident child and adult.



To Think About and To Talk About — For Discussion

1. What is meant by exploring alternatives?
2. How does exploring alternatives differ from telling or giving advice?
3. Why is giving advice or telling a child ineffective?
4. What are the steps involved in exploring alternatives?
5. How does exploring alternatives differ from giving solutions?
6. What are some behaviors that effectively communicate attitudes of understanding, empathy, trust and acceptance in exploring alternatives?

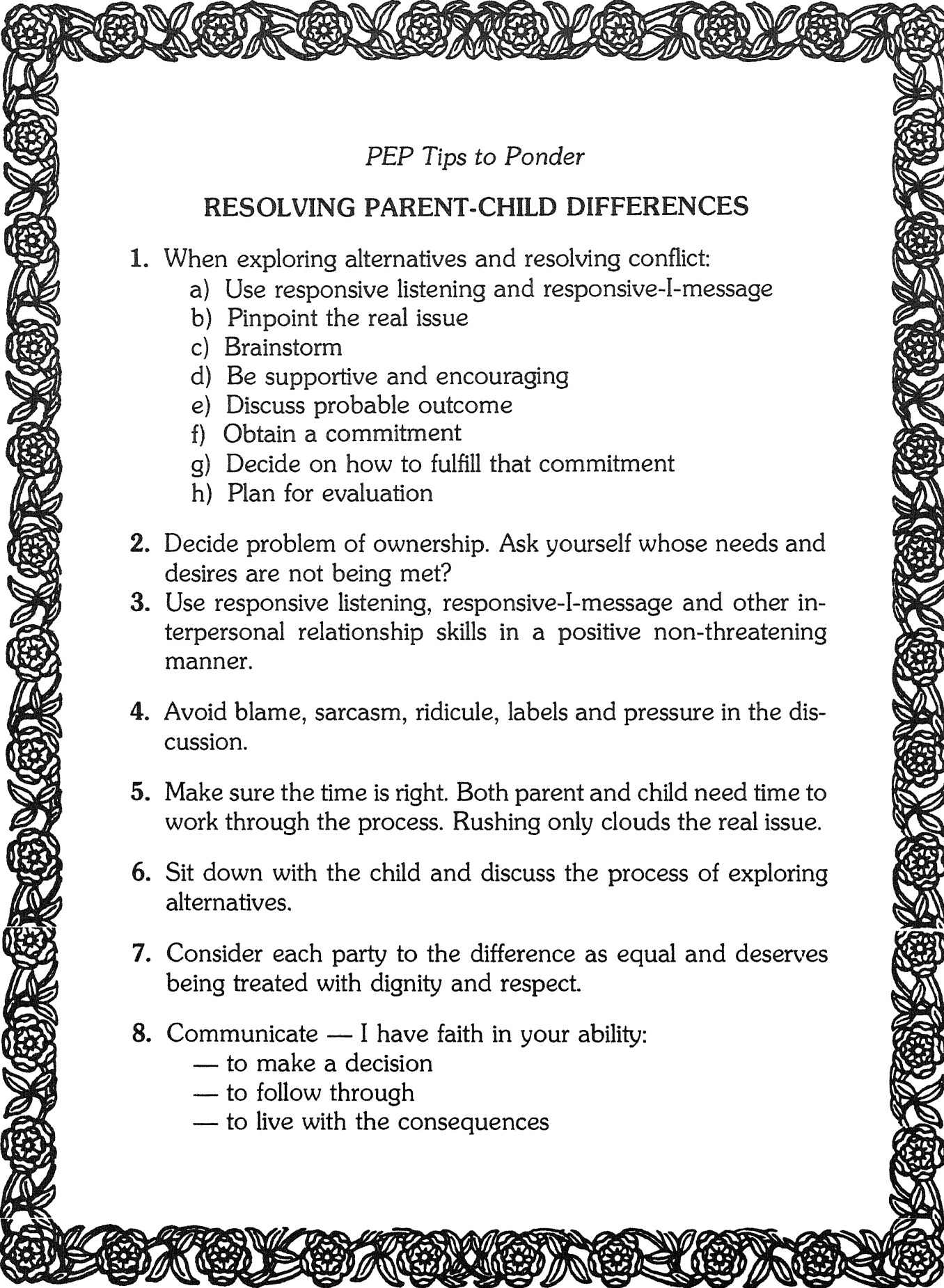
ESSENTIALS OF EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES

Exploring Alternatives	Interpersonal Relationship Skills To Use	Parent Attitude To Exhibit	Parent Behavior To Exhibit	Message Exchanged Between Parent & Child	Probable Reaction in Child
1. Defining the conflict or problem	Responsive listening Responsive-I-messages	Wanting to hear the person Wanting to be helpful Accepting other's feelings Appreciating that feelings are transitory	Relaxed, calm, open gestures and postures. Tone of voice should convey the above and so should body posture.	I want to hear you. I trust you. I'm willing to help.	Frustration and anger, changing to cooperation and involvement, respect of self and of parent. Child begins to feel self-confident, and becomes resourceful. Contributes to identifying problems.
2. Seeking Out and Generating Alternative Solutions	Responsive listening Employing RSC in order not to judge solutions, just to accept them	Wanting to hear the person Wanting to be helpful Accepting other's feelings Appreciating that feelings are transitory	Relaxed, calm, open gestures and postures. Tone of voice should convey the above and so should body posture.	Your ideas are just as good as mine. True some do seem ridiculous, but that's OK — so are some of mine. We are both fallible human beings capable of making a mistake.	Learns to be accepting of others' ideas. Realizes that it takes many ideas to solve a problem. Believes in equality. Has increased social feeling.
3. Exploring, thinking, evaluating alternative solutions	Responsive listening Verbal following Responsive-I-messages Open questioning Summarization	Wanting to hear the person Wanting to be helpful Accepting other's feelings Appreciating that feelings are transitory	Relaxed, calm, open gestures and postures. Tone of voice should convey the above and so should body posture.		Child learns to be accepting of all efforts of self and others. Child develops desire to stay with the tasks of solving the problem. Child feels good about self. Child learns persistence.
4. Selecting an Alternative and Implementing the Solution	Responsive listening Responsive-I-messages Open questioning Summarization	Wanting to hear the person Wanting to be helpful Accepting other's feelings Appreciating that feelings are transitory	Relaxed, calm, open gestures and postures. Tone of voice should convey the above and so should body posture.	I accept your ideas. I have faith in you to make the right decision Your contributions count.	Child learns to be accepting of all efforts of self and others. Child develops desire to stay with the tasks of solving the problem. Child feels good about self. Child learns persistence.
5. Setting a Future Time To Evaluate The Progress	Responsive listening Responsive-I-messages	Wanting to hear the person Wanting to be helpful Accepting other's feelings Appreciating that feelings are transitory	Relaxed, calm, open gestures and postures. Tone of voice should convey the above and so should body posture.	Your ideas have merit. Even though you tried and failed or succeeded I still accept you for what you are — a human being.	Child learns to rely on self, begins to implement exploring alternatives in other aspects of life. Child feels good about self.

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10/79—5M

Issued in furtherance of cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Roy M. Kottman, Director of the Cooperative Extension Service, The Ohio State University.



PEP Tips to Ponder

RESOLVING PARENT-CHILD DIFFERENCES

1. When exploring alternatives and resolving conflict:
 - a) Use responsive listening and responsive-I-message
 - b) Pinpoint the real issue
 - c) Brainstorm
 - d) Be supportive and encouraging
 - e) Discuss probable outcome
 - f) Obtain a commitment
 - g) Decide on how to fulfill that commitment
 - h) Plan for evaluation
2. Decide problem of ownership. Ask yourself whose needs and desires are not being met?
3. Use responsive listening, responsive-I-message and other interpersonal relationship skills in a positive non-threatening manner.
4. Avoid blame, sarcasm, ridicule, labels and pressure in the discussion.
5. Make sure the time is right. Both parent and child need time to work through the process. Rushing only clouds the real issue.
6. Sit down with the child and discuss the process of exploring alternatives.
7. Consider each party to the difference as equal and deserves being treated with dignity and respect.
8. Communicate — I have faith in your ability:
 - to make a decision
 - to follow through
 - to live with the consequences

7. Why is exploring alternatives so effective in solving problems?
8. What does the author say about agreements that are broken?
9. What is needed in order that exploring alternatives will work in the parent-child relationship?
10. What should one do if exploring alternatives doesn't seem to be working?
11. What is meant by "problem ownerships?" Why is it important for you as a parent to recognize who owns the problem?

Resources

1. Dinkmeyer, Don and McKay, Gary D. *Raising a Responsible Child*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973.
2. Gordon, Thomas. *P.E.T. — Parent Effectiveness Training*. New York; Peter Wyden, Inc., 1970.
3. Gross, Irma and Crandall, Elizabeth. *Management for Modern Families*. New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1963.
4. McGinnis, Thomas C. and Finnigan, Dana. *Open Family and Marriage — A Guide to Personal Growth*. St. Louis; The C. V. Mosby Co. 1976.

Parent-Child Situation

Exercise I: An area of concern is presented below followed by questions related to each step in the exploring-alternatives format. In order to understand how to use exploring alternatives, ask a member of your family to take an appropriate role, and the two of you deal with the problem as if it were your own.

The Problem

Joan, age 12, has been given the responsibility of caring for the family pet — a dog named Ralph. In the last few days Joan has neglected her duties. Mother is becoming very displeased about this, because she is the one who has to follow through feeding and walking the dog.

a) Define the problems. What is the problem? What are the feelings Mom has about the situation? What are the feelings Mom has about Joan not living up to her agreement? What are Joan's feelings? Use responsive listening and responsive-I-messages to define the conflict.

b) Seek out and generate alternative solutions. What would Mom like to see Joan do differently? What does Mom want for herself? What does Joan want?

c) Explore, think about and evaluate alternatives. Both Mom and Joan must decide on the implications of those solutions that best resolve a conflict. Use self-talk to determine how you feel about the alternatives.

d) Choose an alternative. Both Mom and Joan must agree on one solution and how to implement it. All skills might be used here.

e) Evaluate the choice. Did it solve the problem? All skills might be used here. Ask yourself how you feel, then ask about the other person's feelings. Do you both feel good about the choice? If no, why not? If yes, why? Talk about your feelings.

Exercise II: So that the process of exploring alternatives has some personal meaning to you, list all the problems that you can think of that pertain to your family situation. Rank the problems in order of how easy or how difficult you feel they would be to solve. Share this list with someone in your family and discuss the reasons for your particular ranking.

NOTE: There are many good things that happen in the family. If identifying problems has you feeling a little "down," make a list of the many things that you consider to be "strengths" in your family.

For this exercise, you will want to use all the parenting skills you have learned.

Exercise III: To determine who owns the problem in the following situations, consider the criteria found on page 5. Mark a "C" if the child owns the problem, and "O" if no problem exists in the relationship, and a "P" if the parent owns the problem.

Ownership of
Problem

- | | |
|--|-------|
| 1. Rita is feeling rejected by her friend Sandy, who is playing with the new girl on the street. | _____ |
| 2. Bill is misbehaving in public when his parents are present. | _____ |
| 3. Sally just will not go to bed on time. | _____ |
| 4. Paul is very uncooperative in the morning. | _____ |
| 5. Sam is messing up the room. | _____ |

At-Home Activity

Plan to use the process of exploring alternatives and problem ownership in the parent-child relationship this week.

MY BLUEPRINT FOR IMPROVING MY PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

1 In my parent-child relationship, I am specifically concerned that.

2. My usual response to this specific parent-child relationship concern includes one or more of the following

(Place a check mark beside the concern(s) you consider most unacceptable.)

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking, Lecturing | <input type="checkbox"/> Getting Angry | <input type="checkbox"/> Threatening, Yelling
Warning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Staring, Nagging | <input type="checkbox"/> Analyzing | <input type="checkbox"/> Criticizing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Giving Orders, Commands | <input type="checkbox"/> Punishing, Removing
Privileges, Shaming | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |

3 I believe that, during the past week, in my own parent-child relationship I:

	More	Less	About the Same		More	Less	About the Same
Acted More Calmly				Used Natural and Logical Consequences			
Acted Instead of Reacted				Stimulated Independence			
Listened				Used Rational Thinking			
Acted Firmly and Kindly				Stimulated Responsible Decision Making			
Encouraged Rather than Discouraged				Enjoyed My Parent-Child Relationship			
Communicated Love and Mutual Respect				Took Time For Myself			
Withdrew From Conflict That Didn't Involve Me							

4 The Atmosphere in our family has changed to one of:

	More	Less	About the Same		More	Less	About the Same
Friendliness				Self-Discipline			
Cooperation				Planning and Working Together			
Mutual Respect				Fun With Family Members			
Understanding				Distrust			
Tension and Strife				Confusion			
Involvement							

5. This week I learned:

6. I plan to change my parent-child behavior by: