

TEACHING WHAT MATTERS

by Dan Coulter

Wouldn't the world be a better place if our kids hung on our every word? If they worshiped our wisdom and lived to do everything we told them to do?

Probably not, but it's easy to feel that way. And it's so tempting to try and impart our gems of wisdom as they come to us. Often we do exactly that, as if we were applying post-it notes to our kids' bodies, expecting them to keep each note handy and reach out and find exactly the right advice at the right time.

Like that's going to happen.

So do we always have the right to get frustrated when they do something we've told them not to do -- or fail to do something we now expect of them? For many kids, I think getting ad hoc advice as it pops into their parents' heads must be more like getting peppered with pebbles. The pebbles are annoying and most of them just bounce off.

This all came to mind as my wife and I talked with our son, who has Asperger Syndrome, on the last day of his winter college break. We were bursting with advice and ideas on things Drew could do to improve his study habits, keep his room cleaner, store his clean laundry differently...and on and on.

We had our advice pebble slingshots out and had started peppering our son before we came to our senses and got realistic. We wound up talking about just a few things we'd like him to do differently and discussed practical ways he could make these changes.

This was much more in line with the way his brain absorbs information. Like many kids, he has a hard time changing habits he's developed over a long time. A habit is like a template in your head. If you want to change the behavior, you have to rewrite the template - and that takes time and effort.

So it makes sense to pick the most important habits you want your child to learn - or to unlearn - and work on them one at a time. One of the things we focused on while Drew was home this college break was using email. He routinely uses instant messaging to talk with his friends, but has had a hard time remembering to check his email on a regular basis. This was not only frustrating to us as parents, but had the potential to cause problems at school. His college instructors and administrators often communicate with students through email. So not checking email meant risking not knowing about assignment changes or school announcements.

Our solution was to send him emails while he was home and remind him to check them every day to help him get in the habit. Also, when I drove him back to school, we set up his computer to automatically open his email program every time he turned on his computer as a reminder to check for messages.

My wife and I were delighted when he began promptly responding to our emails - and ecstatic when he began generating his own. We heaped on the praise in subsequent email messages.

That's important too. Sometimes its easy to use on our kids what we used to call "exception reporting" when I worked for the phone company. "Exception reporting," means only getting a report when something goes wrong. If your kids only hear from you when you're telling them what they need to change, you're probably not a lot of fun to be around. You may also get tuned out a lot.

We've found some of the most important things to work on with Drew involved safety skills and self-advocacy skills. Safety skills include more than avoiding physical danger. We've talked with him about scams and not giving out personal or financial info on the Internet. We've also talked about how he needs to approach his instructors to make sure he understands assignments and knows what he needs to focus on to do the best possible job in a course.

Yes, we'd like his room to be neater and cleaner, but as long as he's not breeding deadly E. coli or typhoid, we're not likely to start staging surprise inspections.

The cliché's "pick your battles" and "don't sweat the small stuff" have their roots in sound reasoning. Think about the skills that are most important for your son or daughter to learn to live independently. These are probably the most important things you can work on. And it's much easier - as we've learned - to work on these things while your kids are still living at home.

Test runs are also invaluable. Telling your child how to do something pales in comparison with showing him and then having him do it himself. Many of our kids also need to have complex actions broken down into clear steps. For example, making a purchase in a store's checkout line involves:

1. Selecting your item or items.
2. Checking their prices and making sure you have enough money to buy them.
3. Finding the checkout counter and standing in line.
4. Keeping focused in line. Remembering who you're standing behind and moving forward when that person moves.
5. When you reach the checkout clerk, handing your items to the clerk or putting them on the counter where he or she can reach them.
6. Waiting for the clerk to total your purchases and tell you how much you owe.
7. Handing the clerk enough money to pay for the purchases.
8. Waiting for the clerk to hand you your change, if you have any coming.
9. Waiting for the clerk to put your purchase in a bag, if it requires a bag or if the store's checkout clerks just routinely bag merchandise.

10. Taking your purchase and your receipt with you when you leave the checkout counter and the store.

When Drew was young and learning about shopping, he was easily distracted and didn't always remember to step forward as a checkout line moved up. I also observed him handing his money to the clerk with his merchandise instead of waiting for the clerk to ring up his purchase. With some guidance and practice, he absorbed his "checkout etiquette" and was able to go shopping on his own with no problem. Letting him handle checkout chores whenever it was practical during shopping trips helped build his skills and confidence. There's no substitute for letting your child do all these steps himself, only stepping in to assist if you absolutely have to, and giving him or her immediate feedback afterwards.

It's never too early to identify key life skills and start practicing the most important ones. Working consistently on these "core skills" will be much more effective than just peppering your kids with advice as it pops into your head.

As for all those unused pebbles of wisdom, I'm thinking of using mine to build a life-size replica of the Great Wall of China. Now if I can just figure out what to do with all the leftovers...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dan Coulter is the writer/producer of a series of Asperger Syndrome-related videos, including: "Asperger Syndrome Dad: Becoming An Even Better Father To Your Child With AS." Visit his website at www.coultervideo.com