

6-26-20 Reframing the View

There's a lot going on isn't there? It is incredibly challenging for all of us, no matter what age, color, creed, background or beliefs.

Wait a minute; beliefs, maybe our beliefs do make a difference and maybe our beliefs can change.

Current circumstances have reminded me of something that happened with my youngest son when he was only four years old. Eric was four and his sister Joanna was three years old and they attended a Head Start program while I was in college working on my master's degree in Health Promotion. Eric's teacher had a daily routine of asking these four-year-olds as they lined up waiting for the bus, "If you feel that you deserve a sticker, put your hand out and you may have one." I was the only parent in both Eric's class and Joanna's class who picked my children up at the end of the day. All the other children took the bus home. I was the only parent who witnessed this daily routine.

One day I said to the teacher, "I don't think Eric knows what you mean by deserve." She responded, "Oh he will. We talk about it." Although my instincts and my undergraduate degree in psychology told me that this was not a good practice, I decided to give it some time and learn more about it through observation.

The day arrived when an observation confirmed my beliefs about the teacher's daily practice of asking the students what they deserved. I arrived at Eric's class just as the children were getting ready to exit the classroom to go to their bus. Eric saw me and came running over and rammed his head into my belly crying so hard that he could barely speak. He said through gasps and hard sobs, "I...didn't ...get ...a ...sticker!"

The teacher returned to the classroom and before I said a word, she announced, "I am so proud of Eric! He chose to not get a sticker today!"

I asked what happened and this is what I learned: Out at recess, (which by the way looked like a large dog kennel, surrounded by a chain link fence and around the play equipment was not bark mulch but small stones), a few of the boys were seen throwing the small stones through the chain link fence out into the woods. The teacher felt that is why Eric made the right "decision" to not get a sticker.

After hearing this explanation, I had a few questions for her. "Let me see if I've got this straight. While outdoors at play time today, hours earlier from now, a few of the boys were throwing stones. She nodded her head "yes". Did they throw them at anybody? I was told no, only into the woods. "Of course, I understand that you would tell them to stop doing that because the rocks belonged in the play area, as part of the property". I asked her if they stopped when told to. She told me, yes, they stopped.

It is my belief and it has been confirmed throughout my whole life the children are intelligent and sensitive. They are in tune with how other people are perceiving them. In other words, it is quite easy for an adult to give a look or to say, which she did sometimes say, "You know who deserves a sticker and who doesn't."

I then asked the teacher some more questions. “So, you are expecting a four-year-old to review his whole day and decide what moment out of the day, according to you, deserves a sticker or not? What about the rest of his day? Did Eric share something with another child? Was he nice to anybody? Did he help pick up toys at the end of playtime in the classroom? Eric was a very mild-mannered, kind child and I knew that the answer to those questions would be yes.

“Why should a four-year-old feel guilty for playful activity and for obeying his teacher when told to stop that activity? Why should that four-year-old define his whole day by that one moment? Why should he not feel good for learning something and obeying his teacher? Why should he not feel good about all the good things he did that day?”

We all deserve to be credited for our acts of kindness. What we deserve should not be questioned, as it goes directly to the core of that person and it puts in question their value as a person.

The word “earned” is completely different, however, and is an acceptable concept to teach a four-year-old. For instance, when asking children to pick up and put away books and toys, that is the time to say, “Thank you so much for helping. Here is a sticker.” Not only could the child make the connection between the work and the reward, the timing is so important. He earned that sticker right then (not four hours later) and he knows how he earned it.

I knew the practice needed to change but it took almost the whole school year to accomplish it. I was getting nowhere at the team meetings, which the teacher never attended. After months of these team meetings I was told that the solution to my concerns would be I should continue to pick up Eric a little early so that he did not witness the teacher’s routine.

The woman in charge of these team meetings was working on her PhD in psychology and suggested that I also should read up on Kagan. That was funny because I had his books at home, from my undergraduate studies. I was on the other side of a fence; they were in power, and I was not empowered in this situation. I drove home that day terribly upset and decided that I needed to speak to her boss, the one we met at the beginning of the school year. He would not discuss the matter with me, insisting that he knew all about this situation from his employee.

My next statement to him was an unforeseen game changer. Unbeknownst to me, the phrase “child advocate” is a powerful tool for a parent. I said to this top psychologist, “I feel that I have no choice then, but to hire a child advocate, for not only is no one speaking up for Eric, the other parents don't even know about this practice and no one is speaking up for those other children either.”

Suddenly, the psychologist did a 180° and wanted to know what could be done to avoid that. I explained to the psychologist the difference between deserve and earn, and what do you know, he agreed with me!

I thought of the story recently for two reasons. Injustices need to be addressed and corrected and people need to be treated in an equitable manner. Also, at the end of the day, instead of worrying, griping or complaining, maybe we can reframe our view of the day and recognize the good things, the kind acts, and appreciate them, with a smile and a good feeling. It helps the soul while we deal with the struggles.

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