

### Maybe This Time?

There is a light-hearted saying that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, each time expecting different results. This came to mind last week when a mother was describing the way she was handling a specific challenging situation, how she handles that specific situation whenever it arises and how, no matter how often she handles it that way, it keeps happening. Why do we continue to use strategies that have not worked and show no sign of working any time soon?

Think about a challenge one of your children is presenting and how you are responding and ask yourself: “Is my strategy working?” If a 12-year-old speaks disrespectfully and the parent scolds harshly and the problem continues, does the parent think: “Maybe this time when I scold harshly my child will stop it once and for all?” If a child is unmotivated and falling behind in school and the parent nags and nags, does the parent think that suddenly the nagging will start helping? Why would parents expect different results from the same failed strategy?

This does not only happen in our lives as parents. There are times when we continue to use the same failed strategy in our lives outside the family. For example, many people describe themselves as perfectionists. They have unrealistic expectations even though there is no evidence that this is working for them. Could it be that they wonder if maybe this time, when they compare how they are doing with an impossible benchmark, they will suddenly achieve their desired goal and also feel relaxed, confident and have their lives in healthy balance? Even though this never worked before do they think maybe this time it will?

It is better to choose strategies based on data, both at work and at home. Twelve-year-olds should not speak disrespectfully, children should be motivated to work hard on their schoolwork, and we should all push ourselves to be successful in our careers. But often people need to be

reminded *to do no harm* while they are trying to accomplish their career objectives and while they are trying to help their children with behavioral and academic goals. Many of us have a hard time with this in our own lives and in our lives as parents. I think this may be due to confusion about *high standards, high expectations, and the difference between the two*.

It makes sense to have high standards for ourselves and for our children. But having high expectations is not the same thing. The difference is that the nature of the workplace does not always permit us to do our best work and the nature of childhood does not always permit children to do their best work, behave appropriately, use their potential in school, remember their manners, etc.

We serve ourselves best at work and our children best at home when we keep the standards high and the expectations realistic. There will be times when we do not do our best at work and times when our children are not able to do their best at home.

And at those times we are supposed to do no harm to ourselves and no harm to our children. While we are pursuing our career and while we are raising our children it is a better strategy to be kind to ourselves and to our children no matter what. At work when we do the best we can (given available resources and competing deadlines) we are supposed to be able to pat ourselves on our back. At home, when our children do the best they can (given the developmental realities of childhood and the limits of their age) we are supposed to be patient and forgiving and also take care of the important discipline work. We give a consequence, take away a privilege, and teach a value. And we do it all using our calm adult voice, the same voice we use with our neighbors and friends, coworkers and relatives. It just might be that how we handle our children at their weakest moments teaches us more about us than it teaches us about our children. Chances are good that the mistake they make today will not be the mistake they are still making a few years from now. We have to be kind, forgiving and patient with our children (and with ourselves), especially when they (and we) are not able to meet the high standards we set.

Dr. Steve Kahn is the author of *Insightful Parenting: Making Moments Count*. It is on sale for 40% off until Mother's Day, \$13.00 including sales tax. Free shipping.