

## Dealing with Annoying Behaviors

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by Bill Corbett

I was standing in line at a small town general store this afternoon, behind a young mom who had her preteen daughter with her and a little boy who appeared to be about two years of age. He was eye level with a wall full of candy boxes and kept picking up pieces packaged in the shiniest wrappers. Each time he picked one up he just wanted to touch it and look at it sparkling and crinkling with his touch. And each time his mom would turn around from her transaction at the register and snap at him not to touch. She took the candy from his hand and put it back and then snapped the word “No!” at him. In response, he whimpered and then picked up another piece of candy from a different box and the same routine would play out; mom would yell at him and take it from his hand. She finally lost her cool, picked him up to her eye level and shouted at him, “No! We do not touch!” As she put him back down on the floor he started to cry and immediately went to another display just out of her reach and picked something else up from the shelf. She looked at me briefly in embarrassment. I spoke up and with a smile, said to her, “*They just want to touch everything, don’t they? I’ve found that if you give them something to hold that you’re ok with, they’re easier to manage in a store with so many things to touch.*” She smiled back and reached into her purse, pulling out a handful of keys and key chains all connected together and handed it to him. His whimpering stopped as he suddenly became fascinated with the keys, mumbling to himself in sort of a satisfied way. She thanked me and scurried out of the store with her arms full of groceries, ushering her two children in front of her. On the way out the door the little boy was still mesmerized with the pile of shiny metal in his little hands.

This classic scenario is one of the many behaviors I call normal and yet difficult to deal with. Whether we like it or not, our children are wired to touch, poke, and play with everything around them. That’s how they learn and develop, through exploration and discovery. And how frustrated I feel for the adult and the child when I see the parent snapping, yelling, and sometimes worse, spanking a child to punish him for what he is harmlessly motivated to do.

Let’s not blame the parent in my scenario so quickly. It was somewhere in the neighborhood of 4pm when I saw her in the general store and she probably had a lot on her mind. Dinner may have been late, she was out for items she needed for the meal, she was probably tired and short on patience, and it appeared that her preteen daughter may have been talking her ear off while standing in line at the register. And why did she snap at her little son and eventually shout at him? Perhaps she was feeling a combination of feelings; frustrated that her son was not standing cooperatively by her side, overwhelmed with all that was on her mind, annoyed that her son was getting into things, and embarrassed that she may have appeared as a bad parent to others waiting line behind us.

Hind sight is 20/20 as they say and it was easy for me to point out my suggestion to her to help, but when we learn to recognize normal behaviors in our children and are prepared to deal with them when they occur, our lives can be less stressful. A child behaves because she has needs. Once we learn to recognize those needs when they appear and we know how to help her get her needs met on our terms, life is better.

As in the scenario I related above, the little boy’s need was to touch and explore. Had his mother been prepared to recognize this and ready to provide him with something he could touch and play with, the harsh encounter she had with him would not have occurred. We all feel bad when we yell at our children or spank

them. It tarnishes the unconditional love we want them to feel from us and causes us to feel guilt for our actions and our words. We do it because we don't know what else to do at that moment to stop the behavior.

When my granddaughter was a toddler, she loved catching me off guard at shopping malls until I learned to be more prepared. Being just out of arms reach of me and having a mischievous look in her eye, she would run away from me while looking back to be sure that I was in pursuit. And of course, I wasn't chasing her to have fun, instead I was imagining awful things like someone snatching her or me losing her in the crowd. She loved the game of the chase. Her need was to play with me and to get me to chase her. So knowing what her needs were, I developed what I called my shopping at the mall with my granddaughter strategy. As soon as I took her from her car seat, I got to her eye level and told her that we would play in the play area and to get there, she could choose to hold my hand or ride on my shoulders. Recognizing her needs ahead of time and setting up the safety boundary in advance of going into the mall increased her cooperation and made my mall excursions with her more successful.

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