

3 Reasons Traditional Parenting Doesn't Work With Kids From Trauma

by Mike Berry

If you've parented a child from a traumatic past for any length of time, you already know that traditional parenting techniques do not work. But, have you ever stopped to consider why, or what you could do differently?



Kristin and I both grew up in traditional households, with parents who used traditional techniques in raising us both. There were rules and restrictions, guidelines and boundaries. And if said rules, restrictions, guidelines and boundaries were crossed, BAM, consequences were enforced. No questions asked. From all accounts, these techniques worked. We both grew up to be responsible adults who knew the difference between right and wrong. But, we also never endured significant trauma as children.

And that was the game-changer. When we first became parents, 15 years ago, we thought we had a healthy understanding of how to parent. We thought we knew how to discipline, how to enforce consequences, and even how to get our point across. In 2004 a little girl and boy came to live with us through foster care and, soon after, became a permanent part of our family. When the little girl turned 7 I caught her in a straight up lie. When I asked her why she lied, she just stared at me. So, logically, I continued to question her...and question her...and question her. This caused her eyes to start darting around the room. She wouldn't look at me. Only a worried look on her face.

She would open her mouth to speak but nothing came out. I'd love to tell you my heart gave way and I stopped. Not the case. I became more frustrated. Finally, I'd had enough and marched her off to her room. The night was over for her. In my mind, she was content with

her “bad behavior,” and thus, needed a stiff consequence: time away from others to “think” about it. For several more years I parented this way. If you screwed up, BAM, consequences! It’s how I was raised...so you better believe it was how my children would be raised.

But, mind you, my childhood was different. I was never starving. I never bounced from foster home to foster home before finding permanency. I never witnessed domestic violence. I never grew up in an orphanage or group home. My mom and dad always took care of me, more importantly, were always there for me. All of the ways children bond with their parents from the get-go, were missing for my children early in their development. And the result was deep cavernous wounds in their minds. Truth is, they’re often the very things we gloss over when we are attempting to enforce a consequence or get our point across when our child has screwed up. When I finally realized this, it changed the way I approached my children, and reacted to what I thought was just bad behavior.

I’ve discovered that traditional parenting, the way I was parented, just doesn’t work with our kiddos. Here are 3 reasons (out of many) why this is the case...

1. **Trauma changes the brain.** If your child was drug and alcohol exposed in utero, subject to abuse of any form before coming into your care, malnourished, neglected, or in and out of foster homes before arriving into your care (just to name a few), their brain has been altered by this trauma. They don’t see the world around them the same way a child who has not been through significant trauma does. Nor do they behave the same (more on this in a minute). They are thinking, behaving, reacting, and surviving out of loss, most of which has occurred in their mind. That’s why you cannot look at your child and ask, “What were you thinking?” Chances are, they don’t know. And if you continue to demand an answer, or lecture, you will continue to get less answers, or simply, blank stares.
2. **Their behavior is a voice.** For years I thought my son’s choices, reactions, and attitude, were coming from a bad kid who behaved badly. I disciplined him according to this belief. And then one December night, I stood indignantly in my upstairs bathroom while he threw the mother of all tantrums and attempted to tip over a solid steel claw-foot bathtub. I was furious. I wanted to ground him for life. He was traumatizing my other children and causing me to miss out on a relaxing family movie night. But then suddenly, in that moment, like a lightning bolt striking a tree, a thought struck my mind. While he was behaving badly, it wasn’t due to him being a bad kid. His behavior was a voice from his traumatic past. It was an outcry. He was in a fight...not against me, but against an intense situation that he could not process. When I realized his behavior was actually a voice, I started disciplining and enforcing consequences differently.
3. **Fight, flight, or freeze.** Inevitably you’ve heard of this survival mode, whether you’re parenting a child from trauma or not. This is used to explain how every human being reacts to major traumatic, terrifying, dangerous, or intense situations. We see a fight break out on an airplane, we respond in one of these three ways. We experience something devastating or deeply traumatic, we respond in one of these three ways. Someone yells “bomb” or “fire” and we shift into survival mode. While these are very

common human reactions when the heat is on, they also help us understand a child who's come from trauma. This is how our kiddos respond to intense situations (i.e.- when they're caught in the act of doing something they shouldn't do). If you're a lecturer (like we are), you've probably noticed it doesn't work. But, you've probably also noticed these three reactions on display. In their mind, when we are lecturing (for example) a series of alarms are going off in their mind, telling them to either fight back, run away, or shut down. It was their defense mechanism when they were in the midst of their highly traumatic past (i.e. abuse, neglect, or witness to something dangerous). In the case of me lecturing my daughter, all those years ago, after she was caught lying, she shut down (or froze). It's not because she wasn't smart, or incapable of speaking. She was in survival mode.

I could write a book on all of the many reasons we can't parent our kiddos with traditional parenting techniques. I've heard from hundreds of thousands of readers who have realized this truth but struggle to help their parents, grandparents, coaches or youth leaders understand the same thing (simple because of the way they grew up, or the generation they've come from). However, when you can grasp the reality that traditional discipline, lecturing, time-outs, restrictions, boundaries, and consequences just don't work, you open up a entirely new horizon for yourself and your children.

You may be asking yourself, "Well, then what should I do when my child blows it, or makes a bad choice? If traditional discipline doesn't work, what does?"

Great question! Before I attempt to answer, I am going to default to the best resources I know, that are available today...

[The links provided in the article were no longer available. At Fostering Kids NZ we recommend the following:

Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) A Framework for Therapeutic Intervention and Parenting; Geraldine Casswell, Kim S. Golding, Edwina Grant, Julie Hudson & Pam Tower; <https://ddpnetwork.org/library/dyadic-developmental-practice-ddp-framework-therapeutic-intervention-parenting/>

PACE – Communicating in an emotionally meaningful way with young children.

Article by: Sean Larsen, MA, Child and Youth Mental Health Clinician, Ministry of Child and Family Development, Trail, BC; <http://familyactionnetwork.ca/fan-blog/pace-communicating-in-an-emotionally-meaningful-way-with-young-children/>