

Timing is Everything

Ever notice that sometimes your child is astonishingly open to your ideas and input? You speak, they hear. And other times (read that as: most of the time) they're less receptive? You speak, they ignore.

Most parenting advice focused on *what to say* to our children, but not *when to say it*. Having the right words can be useful, but timing is one of the most overlooked considerations in our communication with our kids. And also one of the most potent.

Think about how you respond differently depending on what's going on in your life. Sometimes, you're open, engaged, curious, and actually *want* input from the people around you. And other times, you shut down. You don't want to hear from them, and you don't care about their opinions, advice, or preferences.

Why? What's the difference?

Simple. The brain's receptivity fluctuates. Under sustained stress or low mood, attention narrows and new learning doesn't penetrate. If you're hungry, emotional, or tired (or lonely or sick) it's not usually a good time for a deep conversation.

However, a temporary positive shift (perhaps after hard exercise, having a small win, or a moment of real connection) and we see a short window of opportunity open, where the same person who was closed to conversation previously is now open to new perspectives and conversations.

Psychologists describe this process as part of the *Broaden and Build* theory of positive emotions. It works like this:

Negative emotional states cause us to be narrow, serious, and focused on the challenge right in front of us. We become defensive, protective, and we shut down. Positive emotional states cause us to broaden our thinking, be open to ideas, possibilities, and opportunities, and we build resources like relationships.

My shorthand for all of the psycho-babble is this: high emotions = low intelligence. And the reverse is also true. Low emotions = high intelligence.

And if it's true for us, it's doubly true for a three-year-old, whose brain's braking system won't be fully installed for another two decades. Little kids have bigger storms and shorter windows - but the windows come around more often.

How does this apply to parenting? Simple.

The wrong-coloured cup. Your two-year-old is on the floor howling because you gave her the blue cup instead of the yellow one. The well-intended instinct is to explain, mid-meltdown, that it's just a cup, that we don't scream about cups, that screaming won't get her the cup. Don't. Nothing you say in the next three minutes will penetrate. Stay close, stay calm, and wait for the storm to pass. Later, when she's settled on your lap, a simple statement like "That was big feelings, wasn't it? Next time you can say 'yellow cup please'" will actually go in. Same lesson. Different brain. Completely different outcome.

The playground scuffle. Your three-year-old grabs a truck from another child and clobbers him with it. Yes, step in immediately. Safety can't wait. But keep it brief and firm: "No hitting. Hitting hurts. We use soft hands" Save the teaching for later. That night in the bath, or the next morning over toast, replay it with teddies: "Teddy really wanted the truck. What could teddy do instead of hitting?" Play is how little brains learn, and play only happens in a calm brain.

Bedtime battles. Your four-year-old has decided that bedtime is a human rights violation. Every night ends in tears. The worst possible time to solve bedtime is at bedtime, when she's exhausted and you're done. Instead, on a lazy Sunday afternoon when you're both relaxed, get her involved: "Let's make a bedtime chart together. You choose the order: bath, books, cuddle, song?" Now you have a plan she owns, made in a calm moment. And, every single time, it will beat a rule you impose when everyone is cranky.

The big one. The preschool calls. Your four-year-old has bitten another child for the third time this month and you're mortified, embarrassed, and angry. Every part of you wants to deliver a stern lecture at pick-up. But he'll be dysregulated, you'll be seething, and a car-seat interrogation will teach him precisely nothing other than when mum or dad arrives, things get scary. High emotions, low intelligence; for both of you. Get him home. Get a snack into him. Get outside and burn some energy together. Later, cuddled up before dinner: "Biting hurt your friend today. When you feel cross, what could you do instead?" Keep it short, keep it warm, and expect to have the conversation more than once. That's how little people learn.

None of this means we let things slide or avoid the hard moments. It means we pick our moment so the teaching actually works. With littlies, the conversations are shorter and the words are simpler, but the rule is exactly the same. The words matter. The window matters more. Wait for it, and you'll find that even your smallest people were capable of listening all along.



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