



home & school REPORT



TEACH YOUR CHILD TO THINK And Make Parenting Fun Again

by Dr. Richard A. Shade & Patti Garrett

Your child is arguing with you again. You pause for a moment, consult your child owner's manual you always keep nearby on the coffee table, and quickly solve the . . . What! You awake from this dream and realize there is no owner's manual! You never received one! As a parent, are you both thankful and frustrated with the high abilities of your child? Have you often wondered how others deal with intensity, perfection, and verbal, verbal, verbal children? If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. Parenting is a tough job.

How you react to your child's problems is important. How you respond to and interact in general with your child is your parenting style. There is nothing "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong" with a parenting style. It's just that – a style. Which style might you use in the following scenario?

You just arrived at work when you receive a phone call from your elementary school-aged daughter. She states she left her book bag at home this morning. It contains her homework and her permission slip for the field trip. She asks you to bring it to her right now.

How might you respond?

- A. You drop everything and take the bag to her.
- B. You get mad. Your blood pressure rises and you lecture her about the importance of planning and organizational skills. You then get the bag and take it to her.
- C. You say, "Too bad. Maybe you'll learn a good lesson now."

Perhaps you may have a different response. In any case, now ask yourself, "How is this approach working for me?" Has this approach been very effective over time? Are you often frustrated as you deal with your children's problems? Are you tired because it sometimes seems as if you do everything for them? At other times does it seem as if you have to tell them how to do everything—and more than once? In the above scenario, if you chose response A or B, you basically did the thinking for her,

solved the problem for her, and put yourself in an energy-draining situation. Response C has the potential to appear sarcastic, and that is rarely effective or productive.

What if we could use a different approach in this scenario? What if the approach could help us take better care of ourselves, while teaching our children both thinking and responsibility at the same time?

Helping Children Think, Make Choices, and Solve Problems

As parents we want our children to grow up and be able to think, make choices, and solve problems. These skills can be achieved through practice related to daily decisions. Eventually they may have an impact on your child's professional, career, and personal choices.

Have you ever been faced with these scenarios? Think of the previous possible responses (A, B, or C). Now, try the different response we suggested below:

"Mom, I need poster board tonight. We need to go to the store!" (*Would you like to use something else or go to the store in the morning?*)

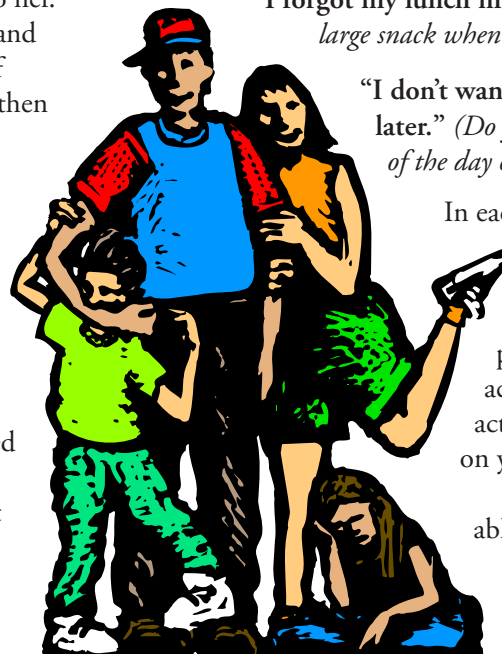
"I forgot my lunch money." (*Well, do you want a medium or large snack when you get home from school?*)

"I don't want to clean my room now. I'll do it later." (*Do you think you can have it done by the end of the day on Thursday or Friday?*)

In each case, the response places the problem back on the child. These responses allow the child to do the thinking, make the decision, and solve the problem. This will ultimately lead to accepting more responsibility for his actions, and will be less energy draining on you.

Our children need to learn to be able to make good decisions as soon as possible in their lives. In reality, they do make some decisions beginning at

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a very early age. What kinds of decisions do our children make from birth through adulthood? At what age are they making decisions? As early as age 6 months, children are deciding if they want to eat their peas or spit them out. By age two, they are deciding if they want to be potty-trained or not. At age five they may decide to be a doctor, and at age six, a ballerina. Later they will need to use their skills to make very important life decisions.

Think about the developmental ages and stages of your child's decision-making process. Remember when they first made a decision concerning the following situations? Some happen only once, while others may occur or reoccur over time:

- whether or not to do their chores?
- to do what it takes to get good grades?
- whether or not to do their homework?
- what to wear?
- whether or not to speed?
- what college to attend?
- what career to pursue?

We must make many choices in life. How many choices did you have today? Were some easy and some more difficult to make? Did you use any process tools to help you make decisions? We can teach our children tools to assist them in thinking as they make choices and experience the resulting consequences. However, the beauty of choices is each comes complete with a set of natural consequences. These consequences can become the real teacher in each situation. As you will see, approaching our children with concern and teaching our children to think has numerous benefits for them and us! And therein lies the power – and the fun!

In many instances at home and school children are given scenarios to discuss, problems to solve, and choices to make. However, they are not given the accompanying necessary tools to do so! For example, “Just say ‘No’” is not a tool! Do our children grow up with these tools? Or do they reinvent the wheel based on the past experience of themselves or others? Do we want them to use “trial by fire” to make decisions or to solve problems with a deliberate practiced approach using tools and training?

Intelligence Is Not The Same As Thinking

Over the years we have seen a number of positive and negative traits and characteristics attributed to children with high abilities. However, as high-ability children strive to reach their goals, behaviors such as dominance, aggressiveness and assertiveness, competitiveness, and independence may either support or interfere with effective thinking. Additional variables such as perfectionism, fear of

failure or success, undue expectations, and intense sensitivity may also play a role. Children with strengths and talents in a specific area may even hide various abilities to better achieve social acceptance. This statement can be supported from several positions including looking at additional behaviors often attributed to the child with high abilities:

1. High-ability children may be very good at constructing an argument and then defending their position (young lawyers). This, however, does not lead to the exploration of ideas! Also, to prove someone else “wrong” usually gives one some immediate satisfaction and may lead to an attitude of superiority.
2. Many high-ability children are highly verbal. They are both prolific and speedy talkers. This trait should not be confused with good thinking just because they come up with an answer quickly. Have you ever tried to follow their logic or line of reasoning? The quick mind often jumps to conclusions after receiving only a few bits of stimuli or information.
3. Sometimes a child's self-image, self-confidence, and self-esteem are tied in to exhibiting (or showing off) intelligence. Therefore, these children must always be right and/or sometimes see their role as the traditional teacher-pleaser. Children concerned with this behavior are often not risk taking or creative in their thinking, but instead rather conventional and often trying to come up with the right answer.
4. Sometimes highly intelligent minds tend to prefer reactive thinking. So, it is easier for the high-ability child to react to your actions and emotions rather than be given a real-world choice to make or problem to solve. To allow oneself to be told what to do or spend time arguing against it is easier than approaching the task with proactive exploratory thinking tools, making a decision, solving a problem, and then dealing with the resulting real-world consequences.

They may be described as gifted, intelligent, or high achieving; however, it is a fallacy to believe all intelligent children are good thinkers! Regardless of how your child might have been formerly identified or the types of programming he/she is currently receiving in school, tools and skills are necessary for everyone for real life success.

Thinking Tools and when to Apply Them

A carpenter or a plumber will reach for a toolbox when beginning to solve a problem. A wrench, a saw, and a hammer are specific tools. Each has an explicit function. When used properly, each tool can achieve a desired effect. These tools also take many months or even years of practice to use with confidence and success. We are suggesting you present a thinking toolbox for your child. Once learned, your child can use tools from the toolbox at any time when beginning to solve a problem or make a decision. With practice, like the carpenter or plumber, children can use the tools with confidence and success.

We are suggesting you create your “thinking toolbox” with five tools. The PMI (Plus, Minus, Interesting), FIP (First Important Priorities), and OPV (Other People’s Viewpoints) tools described below are included in the Direct Attention Thinking Tools (DAT) program created by Edward de Bono. The Brainstorming with Post-Its and Brainwriting tools come from the work of Don Treffinger, Scott Isaksen, and Brian Dorval in the Creative Problem Solving (CPS) approach.

PMI The PMI is a very simple yet powerful thinking tool. It is an “attention-directing” tool. Similar to the common practice of listing the pros and cons, this technique is more deliberate and disciplined. In three minutes, you direct your attention to all of the “Plus” points of the idea you can generate, then the “Minus” points, and finally the “Interesting” ones. Also, the Interesting comments are often very creative. Although this process is quite easy to implement, it is not as easy to intentionally direct attention in one direction after another when your preconceived ideas have already decided for you how you should feel about an idea. It is the desire to look in a direction that is important.

Let’s say your son has decided to take Spanish instead of Latin as a foreign language class at school next year. You might conduct a PMI to help him look more closely at how this decision might affect him. The results might be similar to the following:

Plus:

- Many people speak Spanish
- Spanish is easier
- Most of my friends are taking the class
- The Spanish Club is very active

Minus:

- My girlfriend is taking Latin, so she won’t be in my class
- The Spanish teacher gives a lot of homework

Interesting:

- What if I could take a semester of each language?
- Could I take Latin next year if I didn’t like Spanish?

Notice, as we continue to explore this idea of taking Spanish or Latin, we often ask additional questions that require further explanation. Each statement generated could also have a PMI performed on it! Additional examples of use of the PMI include:

- Choosing to play soccer or football (the seasons often overlap)
- Deciding whether or not to break up with someone
- Deciding whether to go to a movie or rent a video
- Deciding to take honors math or regular math
- Choosing a partner for the debate team

The PMI tool is very popular with children and young adults because it is simple and effective. It is most effective in real-life situations when decisions lead to real-life consequences. Wouldn’t you like to have this discussion with your 13-year-old (instead of the usual argument?) “Mom, I know you are against this, but let’s do a PMI”

or the parent might say, “I know this seems like the best way, but let’s do a PMI.” When both parent and child use this tool regularly in daily, real-life situations, it soon becomes a habit of thinking and the results are beneficial.

FIP The FIP stands for “First Important Priorities.” An FIP is performed to select the most important ideas, consequences, factors, objectives, or solutions. This tool may especially assist the student who is a procrastinator. Your son or daughter may use the FIP when deciding such things as:

- career choices
- studying for a test
- organizing a presentation or product
- doing homework
- organizing a social week or event

Ultimately, the FIP is conducted to make choices. In other words to get people thinking about, What are the most important things? There are no right answers, as the FIP involves personal judgment. Each individual uses this tool to create and then prioritize a list of things that must be taken into account as they think about an idea or make a decision. Sometimes the FIP can be structured according to chronology, degree of difficulty, time investment, personal values and opinions, or interest.

For example, when choosing a college to attend, your family generated the following list of factors:

- cost
- number of students
- distance from home
- entrance requirements
- size of campus

As you reread the list, what are your top three priorities? Now look at each college on your list and rate them using your priorities. Remember, what you are really asking in an FIP is, “What’s the most important thing?” We must prioritize when making decisions and not let natural consequences

take the place of purposeful thinking. Early introduction of the FIP to children allows them to practice on the little things when the cost of the consequences is small so that later in life they will have success. So start list making with priorities with your children tomorrow and experience the rewards.

OPV The OPV stands for “Other People’s Views.” When using this tool, we must first identify those individuals who are part of a situation. We then walk in their shoes and try to get into their thinking



so as to discover, explore, and acknowledge their side. With the OPV, we are attempting to look at the world from that point of view. In other words, we try to put ourselves in the other person's place (or shoes, or moccasins) and see the situation from their point of view.

For example, your child may come home and tell you she has no friends. This is not your problem. You have friends! You may wish to perform an OPV in this situation. Have your child select three classmates she might like to be friends with. Then, from the classmate's point of view, have your child describe herself. Perhaps the other students have different interests, sit at a different table, are involved in after-school activities, are into boys, etc. This exercise may help your child see the situation from another viewpoint and either accept it or change her own behavior or expectations to cope with the situation.

Other examples of use for students might be to:

- see the teacher's point of view when he gives homework
- see a parent's point of view on chores
- see the viewpoint of another country's world leader
- see the principal's view on playground equipment purchases
- see the cafeteria worker's view on lunch menus.

Brainstorming with Post-Its® Brainstorming with Post-Its® involves having a number of people use Post-It® notes to write down ideas related to a problem. A facilitator can take the notes and place them on a wall or flip chart.

Let's say everyone wants to shower in the morning. The problem is we always run out of hot water. Each family member has a Post-It® notepad and begins to generate ideas. Write one idea per note, and a facilitator collects them for display. This generally happens for three to five minutes.

The pluses of this tool include speed and anonymity. The minuses are no piggybacking of ideas. Remember to follow the basic rules of brainstorming—defer judgement, seek quantity, consider all ideas, and piggyback on the ideas of others. This tool may be particularly effective for solving family problems or school-related conflicts.

Brainwriting Brainwriting is a tool using a paper to record ideas. Each family member takes a piece of paper and writes down an idea. The papers are then put in the center of the table and another selected (exchanged). This allows for anonymity and provides some element of "piggybacking" to occur. Both Brainstorming with Post-its® and Brainwriting are variations of the traditional brainstorming tool and are used to generate options.

Let's say Great Grandma is celebrating her 95th birthday. She lives in a very small apartment. We want to buy her a gift, but her apartment is very small. Each person writes down an idea, tosses the paper into the center, then takes another. Let's say you write down a "fruit basket" and put your paper in the center. You take another paper that has the idea of "gift certificate" on it. You piggyback from this idea and write

"long distance phone card." Notice this is similar to a gift certificate. The idea of "phone card" might not have been generated if not for the piggybacking from "gift certificate." Also, brainwriting often encourages those less verbal children to participate equally in idea generating and decision making.

If you find your current approach to parenting energy draining, consider the fact that with all your good intentions and hard work, you may in fact actually be limiting your child's ability to make choices and decisions, solve problems, and think! When we continue to do things for our children that we know they can do themselves, we steal from them opportunities to improve their skills and build their self-esteem.

We presented some responses designed to help you refrain from solving your child's problems and provided five simple and effective tools designed to help your child think, make choices and decisions, and solve problems.

It is said we only have 18 years to raise our children. In reality, we only have 18 years to raise adults. As parents, we give choices beginning at an early age in the hopes our children will create their own choices later in life. Children are actually practicing for adulthood. At an early age the decisions made by a child are relatively simple. As they grow older, their choices and decisions become more complex. We must allow them time to practice in their home, a reasonably safe environment. Remember, every time you do something for your child that he could do for himself, you limit him in the long run. We must allow children the chance to truly learn from their mistakes. Wouldn't it be great if your 15-year-old asked you to help her generate alternatives and options for a problem she was facing? At what age will your child "begin the world" as Charles Dickens put it?

So bite your tongue, lock your jaw, and let your children begin early making choices and living the consequences—the earlier the better! Then give them tools, practice the tools with them and use the tools yourself. Parenting with this approach will become more creative and fun and effective! 🐘

Recommended for Further Reading

de Bono, E. (1985). *de Bono's Thinking Course*. New York: Facts on File.

Fay, J., & Funk, D. (1995). *Teaching With Love and Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom*. Golden, CO: The Love and Logic Press, Inc.

Treffinger, D., Isaksen, S., & Dorval, K. (2000). *Creative Problem Solving: An Introduction*. 3rd Ed. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Dr. Richard A. Shade is a faculty member at Ball State University, in Muncie, Indiana. Patti Garrett is the Program Manager, Gifted/Talented Unit, Indiana Department of Education. Please go to www.raspo.com to visit Dr. Shade's website.