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Why the Parenting Books Aren't Helping – ep 26

Dr. Kimberly Bell: [00:00:00] Have you ever had that feeling in your stomach that you were worried about something, but you can't quite figure out what? Young children get that feeling all the time. They feel all the same big emotions that grownups feel, anger, fear, frustration, but they don't have the experience to name the feeling or figure out where it came from, much less manage it on their own.

So they tell us how they feel through the way they behave. In other words, behavior is the way young children communicate. Our job as grownups is to figure out what their behavior is saying and help them learn to handle the difficult moments that are part of life.

Welcome to The Hidden Language of Children, a podcast devoted to helping grownups decode the meaning behind children's behavior.

I'm your host, Dr. Kimberly Bell, chief of clinical practice, training, and innovation at Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in Shaker Heights, Ohio. At Hanna Perkins, we understand a child's behavior is communication, and we work with adults to understand it too, [00:01:00] so they can enjoy parenting more while helping their children grow into resilient, caring, and confident people.

I'm here with our producer, Bob Rosenbaum. What's our topic for today, Bob?

Bob Rosenbaum: Hi, Kim. This one is one of your hot buttons.

You mentioned in a recent episode that you often hear parents describing frustration that they've picked up some strategies or tools from a parenting book or a blog, and they'll try it, and sometimes they'll try it over and over, and it doesn't work. You say that's not necessarily because the advice is wrong, so today we're going to dig into that by addressing a simple question: Why don't the parenting tips work with my child? How do you want to start that one, Kim?

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Sure.

The Problem with Fast-Food Parenting



Dr. Kimberly Bell: I it's a question that we get asked a lot, and the reason why it is a hot button for me is because we often in our world want [00:02:00] fast food, fast answers, fast delivery fast. And so people get marketed that way, so there are books out there that promise you these amazing results in your parenting if you just do one, two, three, A, B, C, here's a tool, there's a tool.

And if you notice lately on social media, there are catchphrases, and they use these catchphrases because research has shown that we tend to click on them. So they'll say things like, "The one thing nobody has told you," or, "The reason why this, the one reason why this isn't working." And you're like, "Oh, look, I get the one thing. I get the *IT* from it." But then you try this technique, counting from one to three, as an example, and it doesn't work for your child. Your child looks at you and just goes, "What?" Like they just, it doesn't seem to be the [00:03:00] motivation for your child. And so what ends up happening when I talk to, quite frankly, parents and teachers young therapists, is nobody told them that these tools might not work.

And sometimes even professionals in the community have blamed the parents. If it doesn't work, you're not doing it right." Or, I heard this just yesterday, "your child failed out of that program." That there's this program and it works for a lot of people, but your child failed or you as a parent failed to do it right, and that is my hot button right there.

It's the way that's presented that is my hot button. And I think one of the ways that we think about things here at Hanna Perkins cuts through the fog of that. In its simplest terms, if you are trying to arbitrarily apply a tool without understanding the personality [00:04:00] of your child, where they are developmentally, and what is going on that is causing the behavior, then that you may be choosing tool after tool that isn't the right one.

The reason there are so many books that can show you parenting from so many different perspectives isn't because one person is more correct than the person who wrote a book 10 years ago. It's that somebody ran into a child or a situation where that tool wasn't working, developed something that worked for a particular situation or a particular group of type of children, and so they wrote a book about that.

And I think that parents and teachers and childcare givers of all kinds have gotten caught in that that conflict. And so today, I just want to cut through all of that and talk about individuality.

Bob Rosenbaum: Yeah. So it's like we got [00:05:00] fast food, we have fast parenting, and maybe it's got the same nutritional value as fast food.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Yes

Bob Rosenbaum: Yeah. And we're not saying that the books are bad or the books are wrong.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: No



Bob Rosenbaum: There's pl- some are obviously better than others, but there's plenty of good books out there that give real m- meaningful and effective advice if you know how to use it and if you know why to use it.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Right. Yeah. But I think, yeah, parents are often left just feeling inadequate as parents. Or teachers are left feeling like they aren't doing the right thing or they're, have lost control of their classroom or whatever that might be.

Bob Rosenbaum: And what you said that you use the expression that a child's failing out of a program or a thing doesn't work, the negative perception of that is yeah, your child is different and unique, but [00:06:00] that's where Hanna Perkins comes in on everything. Every child is different and unique, and if you don't understand why they're having an issue, you could pick any tool you want to, and it'll just be pure luck whether it works or not.

The 1-2-3 Counting Example

Dr. Kimberly Bell: So let's talk about the way that tools impact a, a child. and I don't mean to pick on this one, but it's one of the ones that's been around for a really long time, and it's such a simple example. Everybody has tried it either intuitively or because they read it somewhere is this idea of, let's say, "I need you to tie your shoes. We're leaving the house. If I count to three there's going to be a consequence. And you're like, "One, two, two and a half," "Two and three-quarters, and then three." And then, you have to implement. And the idea that the child will [00:07:00] eventually, after a certain number of consequences, understand that, A) you're serious, B) there are consequences to not complying. And C) that they can just do the thing and avoid, right? It's very behavioral.

But there are so many children who will just take the consequence, and parents are like, "Why? Why doesn't it work?" They will just take the consequence. And that particular child we could look at and we could say yeah, but your child is invested in control, in independence, in self-assertion.

That's where the conflict comes in the first place, and what you're trying to do is not work with that temperament. You're trying to overpower it and now you're in a power struggle.

People that are a little bit on the spectrum have something that, that is being investigated right now called pathological demand avoidance, [00:08:00] which is, if you're on your way upstairs to clean your room and your parent says to you, "You better be on your way upstairs to clean that room," there is this inside pressure to be like I was, but I'm not now, because that wasn't my idea," right?

"Now you've taken ownership away from me." So we can look at that on the spectrum and say that's a symptom," but it exists in many different types of personalities. And so that's going to be an ineffective tool. And here's the best part. You could have Child 1 where that worked beautifully.



Simple, easy, the temperament was there, everything clicked, and just unconsciously you chose the right thing, and they responded to it, and now you try it with Child 2 and it fails miserably. And you ask yourself, "But it worked before, right? Why isn't it working now?"

But [00:09:00] if you can just understand that if you're having a struggle in an area of your parenting, you may have to stop and think about, what is unique about my child?

What is their personality like? What age are they? "1-2-3" may not work for a 2-year-old, but work for a 6-year-old, because developmentally and intellectually, they're in a very different place to process what you're saying. And so I guess the biggest message is stop, listen, think, pay attention, and get to know the inner life of your child, and that will make you choose more effective tools.

You will be much more confident in letting go of a tool that's not working for you without questioning yourself so much, and finding and trying things out until you find the one that, that does work for you, and that includes teachers in the [00:10:00] classroom too.

Bob Rosenbaum: It's not just trial and error though. You know – my child's not going to sleep at bedtime or bedtimes are difficult and stressful – it's not about lining up 100 tools and then just knocking them off the list until you find the one that works. It's about talking with your child. And sometimes kids don't have the words. Digging the answers out of your child in some way to figure out why or she is not going to sleep.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: One of the things that I find myself saying when I'm teaching is that a lot of the things that we talk about at Hanna Perkins about the inner life of the child, - they're hard to see sometimes until something isn't going quite right, and then it really shows itself, and so sometimes if you're a parent or you're a teacher and you're talking to somebody and you're saying, "Oh, this, this child is so difficult," or some language like that they'll say I don't know why [00:11:00] you're having such a hard time. It's easy." Again, we get these assaults on our feelings of being effective, and that really sucks the joy right out of working with kids, raising kids.

That feeling of not knowing what you're doing will sap your joy and burn you out. And so I think that's why I don't know that I would go to other parents necessarily all the time for advice unless you resonate with that advice and resonate with the kind of child they have. You know what I'm saying?

Bob Rosenbaum: Yeah, that, that other parents who think they have the answers for their child.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Yeah. Yeah

Bob Rosenbaum: And some of them may have stumbled on those answers by accident or happenstance. Some of them may have read it in a book or a blog and it worked. Some of them probably banged their head against the wall until they actually figured it out.



Dr. Kimberly Bell: So let's give another example, right? So maybe one child pick an age, Bob, any age.

Bob Rosenbaum: Four.

The Shoe-Tying Dilemma

Dr. Kimberly Bell: [00:12:00] OK.

What we know about a 4-year-old is that they are in a transition year. They are able to stay away from their parents for longer periods of time. They're able to keep their parents and their parents' expectations in mind for a longer period of time. They're on the precipice of kindergarten, right?

So they're on the precipice of learning, and they still are working on emotional regulation. So one child who's closer to 5, or more like a 5-year-old, if you will, may respond to the "1-2-3" get this job done because they have the cognitive capacity to say, "Oh, I want to avoid this consequence. And the value of me being in control of when I put my shoes on that's a power struggle I don't need to have," right? They may be just on the precipice of [00:13:00] that, but I would say the majority of 4-year-olds are still in the power struggle of, "I am-- Why am I not putting my shoes on?"

A 6-year-old may not be putting their shoes on because they want to finish watching the 15 minutes of TV that you've given them before it's time to leave for drop-off in the morning. But the 4-year-old may be in a phase of, "I want to do it for myself. I'm frustrated at my capacity to put my shoes on without help. I'm trying to do it by myself, but I need you to stand there with me. I don't know how to tell you that I need your supervision or that I need this to be a "*doing with*" thing instead of an independent thing," right? There's all of these feelings that are involved. Putting on my shoes to leave for the morning, maybe I want to be with you today.

Maybe I don't want to go, and that's why I'm not putting my shoes on. And so there are a [00:14:00] myriad of whys underneath, "For gosh sakes, put your shoes on. We're late for drop-off." And if you know your child is very attached to you or emotionally sensitive, this is the time to understand that. And so what do you do instead?

Shameless plug for Hanna Perkins real quickly. We are less about tools and more about language. And so what we always recommend is to validate the feeling, right? And maybe that is a tool in and of itself, to be able to say, "OK, we're having a hard morning. Let's pause. Being late for where we're going is not the end of the world."

"What is happening right now? You seem to be having a big feeling around getting your shoes on to get out the door today. Would it help today if I did it with you? Let's do it together. How about you, you get the shoes, bring them to me?" [00:15:00] Th- those kinds of things. And now I can only recommend that kind of language because what I'm really saying is, you know your



child best, and if you stop and you breathe in the moment, instead of getting compliance, you're getting buy-in.

One is from the outside, one comes from the inside.

Bob Rosenbaum: There's a third alternative in that situation, and that is helping the child sit down and put the shoes on for them. That'll get you out the door on time, but that's not addressing the why.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: No. No, it's not. I think I used that as an example in a previous podcast.

are some times where you're like, "How about if I help you zip your coat?" To the child, that can feel very disempowering.

I guess that's the nicest word I can come up with. Like they have failed somehow. So again, it's not always in the language that [00:16:00] you use, right? We want to use validating language, we want to use emotionally based language, but it's also in the tone, right? So if you say, "You seem to be having a really rough time today. We are running late. How about I just do it for you?" OK, that's condescending.

But if you can emotionally regulate, say it in a validating tone and say, "You know what? We're both having a really rough morning this morning, aren't we? How about today I help you with this. We do this together, or I'll do this for you, and we can try again tomorrow. There's always tomorrow."

Do you see the difference? One inspires empowerment, validation, recognition of the opportunity to try again.

Bob Rosenbaum: it's funny. We're, we, here we

are talking about you have to understand why the parenting tool *would* work in order to apply it correctly. But what it sounds like we're saying is, in all circumstances, the single best and first [00:17:00] tool is get down on the child's level and work with the child to understand what's going on in a kind and gentle way.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: I've been asked this question before too. I'm trying to do gentle parenting, and am I supposed to just let my child sit in my lap and hit me in the face? And my response was no, you put that child down."

That's what I mean, like I get frustrated with these tools because you find yourself in a situation where you're no longer trusting your own internal instinct about your child, right? So I don't want to be rejecting, and so my child is hitting me in the face, and I- it's like no.



Safety & Boundaries

Dr. Kimberly Bell: There are times for everything. If a child is hitting you and I don't know if this will help as a concept for people in those moments, but if a child is going to throw something, if they're touching something hot, if they're running out into the street, if they're hitting you in the face, these are all what we sometimes call one-trial learning.

Bob Rosenbaum: You may have to use very few words, right? One of my [00:18:00] favorites is to go, "This isn't safe." And the "safe" word I've already set up ahead of time. I've done this in classrooms, in therapy, in places, right? Where I say the only rule is that we're safe. So I don't have to waste a lot of words if a child is doing something that is unsafe by saying, "you're not allowed to hit me. You're not allowed to climb on the bookshelf." I can say, "That's not safe." And you may have to then physically adjust what's going on. You may have to take that child off your lap. You may have to grab them by the hand from touching the hot stove, right?

Dr. Kimberly Bell: And then sometimes parents go, "Oh my God, that was a bad parenting moment." Nope, that was just a moment where safety overrode this thing you're trying to do, your safety or their safety. But one of the things I will say to a child who's hitting and that has to be stopped by the outside is "Oh, that's not safe. If you can't be the boss of your body, I'm going to have to be the stopper for you," and then I'm physically involved in the [00:19:00] situation, right?

And then afterwards I say, "I'm so sorry that I needed to be your outside stopper. What can we do for next time so you can be your own stopper?" This is the kind of conversation, but the situation's been handled. I'm not standing on a curb, saying to a child, "Oh, let's try to be our own stopper," right? And so I think sometimes my problem with tools is that they're taken so literally.

So what is the spirit of "1-2-3"? The spirit of it is that you're giving your child a chance to make an inside decision. And so instead of saying, "1, 2, 3," why not, if your child's not responding to 1-2-3 why not say, "We need to leave in five minutes.

"I'm going to set this egg timer," for the younger ones, right? "I'm going to set this egg timer. Would you like my help putting on your shoes [00:20:00] or do you feel like today you can do this on your own?" And then you have a time limit, and then what happens at that five minutes is between you and the child, right?

Which I also like to have ahead of time. Parents often over-exaggerate consequences if they make them in the moment, so I prefer that we prepare ahead of time for sort of the potential consequences. if we can't get out of the door on time I don't know, we're not going to be able to stop for X, Y, or Z on our way there or on our way home, or tomorrow we're not going to be able to have X amount of screen time before we leave for school because it's taken you t- twice as long to get your shoes on, right? Think about not punishment but consequence. Discipline is about consequence, so what is the consequence of not being able to put your shoes on in 10 minutes?



the consequence is you obviously need [00:21:00] 15, right? Where you're... I hear you laughing.

Bob Rosenbaum: You're getting really close to my hot button, and you've heard my rant on the timeout that people call it a minor punishment. And in sports a timeout is not a punishment. A timeout is teamwork. The coach calls a timeout, brings the team together, calms them down, makes a plan, and they work together on it. It's like the parenting tools, the way we're talking about them, when people pick them up from a book and just apply, it's as if parenting is something you do to a child or do for a child. And what you're saying is parenting is something we do with a child. It's teamwork, and the very first thing you have to do is align yourselves on the same team. And that takes a certain kind of language and a certain kind of [00:22:00] time that maybe in the morning when we're running late is really hard to muster.

But if you can align yourself with the child and be on the same team, things make more sense.

Patience & Big Feelings

Dr. Kimberly Bell: I spent about a week at a children's camp this summer being a mental health professional on site, and the feedback that I got from the counselors was interesting to me. Whenever I'm working with younger people or students or teachers or whomever, I never know what I'm going to do or say that is going to resonate with them.

It's always something different, right? And in this case, the feedback I got consistently was, "How do you have so much patience with kids?" And I thought, "Wow, I wouldn't have said I was demonstrating that," right? I was demonstrating certain language. I was, intervening with children in a way that I, that we do here, [00:23:00] and what the feedback I got was this, this patience piece of it, and I think that's what you're speaking to, Bob, 'cause I've been thinking about what does that look like?

And it was the fact that when a child was having a rough moment, I wasn't in a hurry to fix, handle, or change it, right? So if there was a child who was on the floor having a tantrum I, I sat and made sure the child was safe and said, "OK, if you need my help with this, you can let me know." I used my words very slowly, very contained, but I wasn't in a hurry to make that behavior stop.

I wasn't looking for compliance. I was looking for the child to communicate with me what they needed from me in this moment for them to recover from being this dysregulated, right?

Bob Rosenbaum: You're putting yourself on their [00:24:00] team.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Yes. And was not trying to push my own agenda. And I think the way they experienced it and were able to speak it back to me was that it was a demonstration of patience in the face of big feelings.



And I think if there is anything that will help you implement a tool, it's administering it with a sense of, patience, and not having this need to get compliance or I'm going to feel like I failed.

There is the opportunity to just remind yourself that these behaviors that children have are just a part of life. When, and maybe that's part of it too, is when I see a child who's rolling around on the floor, having a big old feeling, I, there are times where I can be like, "Same, dude, same."

There, we don't do that because we're older and we don't express through our [00:25:00] bodies. But sometimes you can look at a behavior like that and be like, "I understand what you're feeling."

My goodness, there's a meme on social media that's super popular right now that's "Does anybody want to go for a walk in the woods with me and scream into the abyss?" That is the same feeling that a child has. We just joke about it.

We find ways to manage it. But you're dealing with a child who has that same feeling, and the only thing they can do right now is roll around on the floor. And is it fun if that happens in the middle of a classroom, or is it fun and appropriate if it happens in the middle of a store? Nope.

We don't love it. But it's a part of life, and it's better to be able to sit down and say, "Oh, I'm so sorry that you're having this big feeling in such a public

place."

Bob Rosenbaum: As we're talking about this,

Book Recommendation

Bob Rosenbaum: I would not be doing my job if I didn't mention that Hanna Perkins has its own parenting book.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Yes, we do.[00:26:00]

Bob Rosenbaum: It's called "Timeless Advice for Parents of Young Children," and it unlocks the mysteries of what's going on in your child's mind. It's written by a group of Hanna Perkins early childhood development experts, and it's organized into short chapters, each of which explores a common parenting situation from a developmental perspective. The book isn't a miracle solution any more than any other book, but it's different because it always begins with a developmental perspective to help you discover and understand what's going on right now at this age with your child. Then it provides thoughts on, once you understand the behavior, how might you address it? It's easy reading that offers understanding first, and then the gentle and loving strategies for so many of the challenges that parents face every day. So we're going to show a QR code which you can scan to find on Amazon for less than 20 bucks. If you're hearing this on the



[00:27:00] audio version of the podcast, just visit Amazon and search for the book: Timeless Advice for Parents of Young Children. Makes a great gift, plus every purchase supports nonprofit Hanna Perkins Center. So Kim, back to you. One of the things that I just want to say to wrap up is th- that Hanna Perkins has a different approach, and I think that our approach has a built-in flexibility that allows you to modify and find the language of your child.

If you have any specific questions about parenting or child development, we are happy to answer them. You can send questions by email to hiddenlanguageofchildren@gmail.com.

Outro

Bob Rosenbaum: The Hidden Language of Children podcast is a production of the nonprofit Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in beautiful Shaker Heights, Ohio. Our producer is Bob Rosenbaum, and Dan Ratner is our consulting producer. If you like this [00:28:00] podcast, please subscribe to hear future episodes and share it with friends and family.

We welcome your comments and your questions. Again, you can contact us at hiddenlanguageofchildren@gmail.com. For more links and information about our approach to healthy child development, visit hannaperkins.org. I am Dr. Kimberly Bell, and we