

Gifts We Can Give Our Children: Empathy

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As we begin 2019, I would like to offer a series of article about gifts that we can give our children. For some of these gifts, you will see immediate evidence in your relationship with your child. For other gifts, the impact may not show up until far into the future.

Empathy opens our children's mind to learning. When we emphasize with the challenge or mistake that our child is facing, we create a supportive connection. Sincere empathy expressing our sadness and sorrow works wonders. It allows the parent to remain the "good guy" and the poor choice the child made to be the "bad guy."

If we respond to our child's mistakes with anger, lectures, warnings or sarcasm, it creates a fight-or-flight response. There are two parts to the human brain: frontal cortex where thinking, reasoning and impulse-control happen and the brain stem which is responsible for our basic survival and the "fight-or-flight" response.

When we deliver consequences with anger, children's brains go into "survival" mode rather than "learning" mode. "Fight or flight" response exists in all of us and is a basic part of our survival. Children in flight mode are thinking more about how to escape or maybe how to get revenge. Anger backfires every time and short-circuits learning.

Therefore, responding with empathy prevents fight or flight and allows children to learn from their mistakes. The child has a harder time blaming their parent for the problem and is forced to look inside to learn from the consequence of his poor choice. When we use empathy, we allow our child's reasoning brain to turn on. It promotes the development of a healthy voice or conscience that can ask, "How will this decision impact my life? Which choice is wiser?"

As parents, we can give our child the gift of empathy by turning mistakes or misbehavior into a learning opportunity. By giving a strong dose of sadness or empathy before delivering a consequence, we allow our child to gain wisdom from the consequence instead of having a meltdown of anger, frustration or resentment. Empathy maintains lifelong loving relationships