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Family Matters: Positive Solutions for Families

By Chloe Learey

The upcoming episode of Family Matters, the talk show on Brattleboro Community Television where we discuss topics of interest to families with young children, features Brandy Levesque, an Early Childhood Educator who has worked in the field for many years, and currently works as an Inclusion Facilitator and in Children's Integrated Services (CIS). Brandy provides consultation and education to early care and education providers. One of the programs she has developed over the past few years is a parenting class with Janice Stockman (Early Childhood Coordinator, WSESU) called "Positive Solutions for Families." This framework outlines the foundations and strategies for supporting your child's social emotional development with a positive approach.

Two of the questions that arise are (1) What is social emotional development? and (2) Why is it so important? We have learned a tremendous amount about how our brains develop and how much brain development occurs up to age 5 (90%!). Social, emotional development refers to the skills we have around building relationships, managing our emotions including being able to identify them and regulate them, and recognizing, understanding and being able to empathize with other people's emotions. It turns out that these skills are the foundation for school readiness and research shows that this is more predictive of future success than intellectual skills. While reading, writing and arithmetic are obviously important, it is difficult to be available for learning those skills when you are not able to regulate your emotions or interact with others in a healthy way. Therefore, families should also be working on emotional literacy.

Having a solid relationship is the foundation to supporting children's social emotional development. This means having lots of different types of interactions that help develop trust and attachment, including lots of playing. This is how children learn. It is surprising how many of us either never learned to play or forgot how to do it as adults. Spending time with your child, following their lead, and simply enjoying being with them establishes that sense of "I like who you are and what you are doing, I value you." This is filling up a bucket with positive experiences so that when there are challenging times it can be easier to move through it and get back to a stable place.

Challenging behavior is what often brings families to a parenting class like "Positive Solutions." Brandy shares some approaches and strategies for shifting how we view behavior and help kids learn how to understand what they are feeling, express their needs, and find ways to address those in a healthy way. One strategy for families is to look for the positive side of a behavior and act from that lens in responding. For instance, if you child is nagging and bugging you about something they want to do, and you have already told them 10 times "We are not doing that right now", it can be very frustrating to stay calm and regulated as a parent. A positive lens at that point might be that we want our children to be resilient and persistent in achieving their goals, and "nagging" can be viewed as being persistent. Expressing understanding ("I know you really want to do that") and value ("and I appreciate your desire not to give up on something"), along with a boundary ("but we are not going to do that right now") can keep a situation from escalating. The next strategy might be re-direction ("How about we go do this instead"), and moving on.

Another strategy we discuss is the importance of providing structure, and being consistent and predictable. Kids are looking for the boundaries of what is okay, and feel more secure when they understand what is expected of them. Having household rules helps provide that structure particularly for situations where the stakes are higher. The rules should cover broad ground, for example "Be safe", so that they can be applied as needed. And, there should be no more than three to five rules. You do not want to have to try to keep track of much more than that when you are trying to be consistent! When rules come up in class then questions about consequences and punishment also come up. We touch briefly on natural and logical consequences and the ineffectiveness of punishment in this episode.

Chloe Learey is the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Childhood Development in Brattleboro. You can watch episodes of Family Matters by visiting <http://winstonprouty.org/>.

http://www.reformer.com/opinion/ci_29932711/family-matters:-positive-solutions-for-families