

About Deborah Hage:

Drawing on 50 years of experience, both as a parent of 14 foster and adopted children and as a reactive attachment disorder therapist, working with emotionally and behaviorally impacted children (resulting from early childhood abuse and neglect), Deborah specializes in coaching parents help their children adjust and heal from past traumas, overcome their fears, and effectively integrate into their new families and environments. As a lecturer, author, therapist and coach, Deborah has helped thousands of families overcome the impacts of past neglect, abuse and other traumas; providing the support and tools they need to create for themselves a happier and more connected life.

The ideas and interventions presented here have not been developed solely by Deborah. She has worked with numerous other therapists and parents over the years, notably Nancy Thomas, whose continued partnership and collaboration she appreciates.

To learn more about Deborah, her practice and her family, please visit deborahhage.com

Pushes, Pulls and Fix-Its

Deborah Hage, MSW

One of the most moving issues facing children with a variety of emotional and behavioral disturbances is their inability to give back to the family in any measure close to the emotional, time, energy and financial resources that they drain. Mothers are not bottomless pits of good humor and patience. Somehow, somewhere, sometime even the most indefatigable of women need their batteries recharged. In the early stages of therapy for the child numerous friends and relatives, particularly her husband and the father of the child, must step in and keep her filled up with good will and support. At some point, however, it becomes the task of the child, as he heals, to begin to find ways to give back to mom in equal measure to what he takes out. The more healthy a child is the more reciprocal and empathic he is.

Ken Frohock, LMHC, LRC of the Attachment Institute of New England, located in Worcester, Massachusetts, and his team of clinicians have found a way to promote reciprocity in children who have spent their lives pushing their mothers away. They teach children a very formal way to give back to the source of the love they receive every minute and every hour of every day. The process is loosely named, “Pushes, Pulls and Fix-its” for the process that is involved.

Rather than referring to the child’s repertoire of negative behaviors as demonstrations of lack of trust.....a concept a child often fails to recognize, acknowledge or understand.....the behaviors are reframed as “pushes”. This terminology is much easier for the child to understand. He knows intuitively that when he is uncooperative, destructive, violent, defiant, rude, sassy, argumentative, ad nauseum, he is making sure that a certain distance is maintained between himself and his mother. He wants it that way. He will not verbalize that he does not trust her, but he knows that he does not want her close and will even sabotage his own best interests in order to make sure that distance is maintained. In the past he was hurt by those closest to him and his impaired survival instincts tell him it is imperative that to protect himself he must keep all other would be primary care givers at a distance as well. Thus, he “pushes” his mother away by employing every tactic in the book to frustrate her efforts to be his mother.

During the early stages of treatment these “pushes” are necessary in order for a child to stay in his comfort zone and tolerate just living in the same home and sharing the same space as the most feared,

in his eyes, creature in the world....his MOTHER. As appropriate, attachment based therapy progresses and the child begins to heal there comes a time for the child to be given small opportunities to engage his mother in positive ways and stop pushing her away. Further experienced therapy will get the child to the point where he is not always pushing his mother away and is beginning to develop an empathic relationship with her so the beginnings of reciprocity can be seen.

At the point in time when the child is beginning to desire reciprocity the concept of “Pushes, Pulls and Fix-its” can be introduced. To introduce this process too soon is to put the child in the position where he will fail and his failure then is interpreted by the mom as just another form of “pushing away.” They both become even more overwhelmed by discouragement then they were before. Timing is everything!

When the child is expressing some words of remorse for the way he treats his mother and is demonstrating some measure of compliance and cooperation it is appropriate to teach him this process as a means of reinforcing his growing sense that he is ready to work towards become the child he wants to be.

Step 1 – Apologize

The first thing a child must do is acknowledge that he has done something to push his mother away. Whatever that is must be clearly stated in concrete terms in reference to a specific event. “I am sorry, mom, for not washing the dishes this morning the way I was supposed to.” Not.....”I am sorry, mom, that I don’t do a good job on the dishes.” The first is an acknowledgement of a single event that can be readily corrected. The second is a meaningless catch-all of guilt and a reflection that the child is overall bad. The first is useful. The second one is not. For most children the second statement is much easier to say so care must be taken with the child to get him to reference a specific event at a specific time and a specific place.

It is sometimes useful for a child to finish the statement of apology with the question, “Do you still love me?” The obvious answer from the mother must, of course, be “Yes” or there is no point in proceeding as the goal of the process is to heal the relationship. If there is no relationship to heal then there is no point in asking the question or in making amends as a therapeutic tool.

Step 2 – Acknowledge what was going on inside the child at the time.

There are always two things that are going on at the same time. What the child is demonstrating and saying on the external level is one thing. More importantly there is a message going on inside the child’s head that is driving the behavior. What the parent is seeing and hearing is a smoke screen for the child’s inner processes. There is often grief and/or fear hidden deep within, masked as anger, that works to prevent the child’s ability to cooperate. Naming that inner process is important as stating the emotional truth is critical to healing. It sometimes has two parts. Examples for the second sentence:

- *When you told me to clean up my room I became very frightened that you were going to boss me around.*
- *When you told me to wash out my soiled underwear before putting it in the washing machine I was very embarrassed and wanted it to look like it was your job, not mine, to clean up my mess.*
- *It was more important to me to make you angry then to let you know I am glad to be living here.*
- *It was more important to me to pretend I am not a member of this family then to do what I was told.*
- *It was more important to me to make you look bad in front of your friends then to let everyone know that you are a good mom.*
- *It was more important to me to ruin the family time then to accept that I am a member of this family.*

- *It was more important to me to be disrespectful than to act like your daughter/son.*

Step 3 – “Is there a way I can fix it?”

This third step puts the child in the position of asking permission to do something nice for the parent as a means of making things right. No one can live very long in the lands of guilt and consequences. There must be a way to put the relationship back on track. When the child asks permission to fix what he has broken in the relationship he is taking back his power to create good as well as pain. It is far more powerful for a child to take responsibility for both what he has done and what he is going to do than to be told by the parent what his consequence is for the behavior. When the consequence is imposed by the parent it is not as welcomed and not as effective as when the child imposes it on himself. The first leads to resentment and often very poor reciprocity. The chore/task that is assigned in order for the child to make restitution is often very poorly done. However, when the child imposes his own need to make it right he is going to be much more likely to do it right and without resentment as he has imposed it on himself. When a driver is caught speeding he will often argue with the officer and pay the fine resentfully. All the while his inner voice is telling him how unfair the officer or the law is. However, when an individual does something hurtful and is remorseful then repairing what he has done is more readily accepted. No one likes their faults pointed out to them. Far better to be driven by an inner conscience to make amends than to have it imposed from without. It is extremely powerful to be able to take control of making amends. Since control is a driving force for many children giving them control to make amends is showing them how to become very powerful in their own lives and in the lives of others. This is one area that if a child wants control the parent wants to give it to him!

A question that must be avoided by the child and not accepted by the mother is, “Is there a way I can make you feel better?” It is not the child’s responsibility to “make the mother feel better.” How she feels is entirely up to her and the responsibility for her mood must not be laid on her child’s shoulders. No matter what the child does mother must model taking responsibility for her own moods and behaviors and not abdicating control over them to her child.

Step 4 – Acceptance or rejection of offer by the parent (or whoever was hurt)

It is now the injured party’s turn to communicate. Just because the child is remorseful does not mean that the parent must be immediately over her anger or frustration and ready to reconcile. After all, it is quite likely that the child committed the grievance, was sent to his room, went to school, or was somehow apart from the mother for a time. During the separation he has had time to become remorseful and thoughtful about how to make amends. Meanwhile the mother is still stewing about how she has been wronged and is not automatically ready to accept a peace branch held out by her child just because the child is ready to offer it. Since emotional honesty is critical the mother is free to say any one of a number of things:

- *No, I am still too hurt by what you did. I will let you know when I am ready to discuss it with you.*
- *No. Please go to your room while I have some peace and quiet.*
- *No. I am going to the grocery store right now. I will get back with you when I return.*

Only when the mother is in a frame of mind to accept an apology should she proceed. If emotional honesty is required of the child it must be modeled by the mother! If mother is ready to accept the child’s apology then she can simply respond, “Yes, you may.”

Step 5 – Suggesting ways to “Fix it”

By suggesting a variety of things the child can do to repair the relationship the child is demonstrating empathy and the ability to take control of the situation in a good way. Three suggestions is sufficient.

- *Would you like me to rub your feet, wash the dishes or do something else that you choose?*

- *Would it fix it if I vacuumed under the chair cushions, organized the silverware drawer or cleaned out under the kitchen sink?*
- *Would you like me to organize the linen closet, refolding all of the sheets and towels and stack them neatly?*

The goal is for the chore to be something that needs to be done but is not among the child's usual set of tasks. Another requirement for some children, due to their high need for supervision, is the task must be doable in the presence of the mother. It must be something that can be done in the room she is in while she is in it. Therefore, for example, asking to go outside and vacuum the inside of mom's car would be inappropriate for some children.

An example of the entire process:

Child – *Mom, I am sorry that I refused to take out the trash when you told me to do it yesterday. Do you still love me?*

Mom – *Yes, honey, I still love you.*

Child - *It was more important to me to go outside and play with my friends then it was to act like your son. Is there a way for me to fix that?*

Mom – *Yes.*

Child – *Would you like me to give you a 5 minute back rub, clean the mud off your shoes or something else that would be helpful to you?*

Mom – *Yes. I would love it if you would clean the mud off my shoes. Thank you.*

Therapeutic Intervention

This process is best taught in therapy where both the child and the mother can practice appropriate responses. While it is not a difficult process for those who are automatically empathic and remorseful when they do something wrong, it is an extremely difficult process to master for a child who seldom feels remorse and has never taken any responsibility for anything! Having the child go through the process numerous times during therapy is generally helpful. Another helpful tool is for the child to begin to journal things he has done to push his mom away and things he has done to pull her close. There is a good possibility that if the child is not willing to do the journaling and has extraordinary difficulty following through on the “fix-it” process that he is not in a place in his relationship with his mother where it is appropriate. For a child to continually flub the “fix-it” process whether deliberately or inability is to set the mother up to be pushed away in yet another way. Her frustration mounts as she realizes that this is just another thing her child cannot do. It sets up both of them for another failure in their relationship. To ask a child to follow through on this process before he is ready is to just create another situation in which mom feels pushed away.

After the process has been introduced, time during sessions can be devoted to recapping how the process worked for both mother and child and helping them tweak it in such a way that it becomes a useful tool in the development of their relationship.

Success has been achieved in the relationship when the child is engaging in so many pulls that mother never even notices on those few occasions when she is pushed.

Deborah Hage, MSW
www.deborahhage.com