Positive Intent: Seeing The Best in Others For Optimal Problem Solving

The classic phrase, “he just sees the best in everyone” is sometimes used to describe people in our lives. Seeing the best is not just an admirable personality trait; the act of seeing the best in others frees us up to offer assistance to our children and other adults in our lives. When we let go of trying to figure out whether a child’s actions are the result of negative ulterior motives, we can then use that energy to teach a new skill. This practice is also beneficial because we can learn to override negative emotional self-talk when we make mistakes! This does not mean that our children are free from the consequences of their actions, but it does allow us to focus on the child’s goal, and teach them how to get their needs met safely and effectively.

In order to practice positive intent, it is helpful to be aware of what triggers our own negative emotions. The negative self-talk that often takes place during these difficult moments can be overridden so that we can pivot and move toward a place of problem solving. If we want to move toward a place of problem solving, we must let go of pinning negative judgements to our children’s motives. Young children’s actions are a form of communication; they are either using skills in loving and helpful ways, or they are calling out for help. Our impact on our children becomes more healthy when we send the message that they are worthy of our love and guidance even when their actions are hurtful or fall short of meeting their intended goal. Let’s take a look at positive intent in the scenario below:

\*Four year-old David has just dumped a glass of water on the kitchen floor after spilling his lunch.

**Without positive intent:**

Mom: “You just spilled your lunch on the floor and then dumped your water! I just swept and mopped the floor yesterday! You are being very disrespectful! Don’t you know better than to dump your food and drink on the floor?”

**With positive intent:**

Mom takes a deep breath before addressing David so she can gain access to her pre-frontal lobes and offer David empathy and guidance.

Mom: “David, you were hoping to clean up the crumbs on the floor, so you dumped your water on them.”

 David: “Yeah, you put water in the bucket when you mop the floor.”

Mom: “You didn’t know how to clean the floor, so you dumped your cup of water. When you need help cleaning up a mess, we will get the broom and dustpan. Dumping water on the floor isn’t safe.”

Mom can follow up by asking David where they should keep the broom and dustpan so that David can access it when needed.

Which example do you think will motivate David and help him to learn a new skill? The second example is more likely to help David as he has the chance to explain his rationale without feeling like he needs to go into fight or flight mode. More importantly, Mom #2 is teaching David that when people make mistakes, they are inherently good in nature; however, they might need some help! Think about how this skill would easily translate into a situation where someone cuts you off in traffic, or forgets to use their turn signal. We could choose to spend a few minutes feeling very aggravated at that person, or we could wish them well and be on our way. The latter choice again frees up our mind so that we can focus on something that needs our attention rather than feeling angry at someone we aren’t likely to meet ever again!

If we don’t know our child’s intentions, we can always guess. This approach requires us to notice what we see. Let’s take a look in the example below:

\*Three year-old Marnie has just kicked over a block tower that her older brother had been building. The block set is part of a specialty house-building set that Marnie got for her birthday.

Mom: “You scrunched your face up like this and kicked Brandon’s blocks over.” *Imitate the child’s actions so they look at you; they will because they want to make sure that you’ve gotten it right!*

Once the child makes eye contact you can offer empathy and download calm before moving on to problem solving.

Mom: “Your face is telling me that you might be feeling angry now?”

Marnie: “Brandon took my blocks and it’s my turn!”

Mom: “Let me see if I got this, you wanted to tell Brandon that it was your turn with the blocks, but you didn’t know the words to use. When you are using something, say, ‘It’s my turn now.’ Let’s practice.”

At this moment, Marnie’s mom can coach the child as she tells her older brother that it is her turn with the house blocks. Afterwards, it is equally as important to notice Marnie’s assertiveness by following up. A simple “You did it!” will suffice. A high five can also sweeten the success!

When time is of the essence, it is helpful to avoid talking too much. If safety is an issue, the more we talk, the more frustrating it can be for the child. Additionally, when our children are in fight or flight mode, they will not likely hear us! The formula for quick action coaching, or ACT, is as follows:

**A** (Acknowledge): Acknowledge what the child wanted

“You wanted .”

**C** (Clarify): Clarify what skills to use.

“When you want then say (or do) .”

**T** (Take time to practice):

“Say (or do) it now so we can practice.”

Practicing positive intent is beneficial for our children as well as ourselves. When we let go of the notion that when people make mistakes there is a malicious ulterior motive, we free ourselves and our children up to teach and learn new skills. Furthermore, we teach children loving and assertive ways to handle situations when life doesn’t go their way! The benefits of positive intent can have a huge impact on our communities as our children feel safe in the knowledge that they are inherently enough, and that they have a safe environment to practice the skills needed to navigate life.