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No Such Thing as a Bad Kid

Charlie Appelstein is a renowned youth care specialist and president of Appelstein Training Resources, LLC (ATR). Appelstein is regarded as one of the best youth care trainers in America and is the author of three widely cited youth care books including *No Such Thing as a Bad Kid: Understanding and Responding to Kids with Emotional & Behavioral Challenges Using a Positive, Strength-Based Approach* and *The Gus Chronicles: Reflections from an Abused Kid*. His strength-based approach using the power of positive thinking is massively successful in guiding parents and professionals alike who work with youth that struggle with emotional and behavioral issues.

According to Appelstein, the 'power of positive' begins with the belief that all young people have or can develop strengths and utilize past successes to mitigate problem behavior and enhance social and academic functioning. Research has consistently shown that students have a far greater chance of success by having even one adult that believes in them. Therefore, a student's potential can be maximized by employing the 'strength-based' approach, which can be summarized in two words: attitude and action. If educators and caregivers can convey the attitude that they truly believe in the student and follow up on these words with actions that demonstrate their veracity, the student likely will live up to those beliefs and succeed. Young brains are resilient and designed to cope with and overcome challenges, but they also require support from others to do so.

"Life isn't what you see, it's what you perceive" is an important lesson Appelstein touts in his seminar. A child who engages in problem behaviors is telling you far more than you realize if you learn to look past what they are doing and see why they are doing it. Behavior always has a deeper message that needs to be decoded. The pejorative labels we slap on children with problematic behavior do more harm than good. Instead of accusing a child of being manipulative, first wonder why the child has come to rely on that particular behavior in the first place. Maybe they come from a background that required they

learn to rely on deception to avoid being beaten or to get their basic needs met. If you can reframe the way you look at the behavior, you can change the way you perceive the child as well. Being 'obnoxious' just means they are good at pushing people away. Being 'lazy' or appearing un-invested is just a tactic to prevent further hurts or failures. Being stubborn or defiant becomes standing up for oneself. Falling back on pejorative labels just creates self-defeating stereotypes the child will internalize.

Appelstein has had much success in changing problematic behaviors through the use of cues. Cues are a phrase that the child can repeat to themselves to correct their own behavior. The cue's success is built on the phrase's rhythm, repetition, rhyming, and humor. Cueing helps to 'rewire' the brain. This phenomenon is called neuroplasticity- or the brain's ability to form and reorganize synaptic connections, especially in response to learning or experience. By repeating a fun cue over and over, the brain internalizes it, which results in changes in behavior. Appelstein has a plethora of success stories using cues on his website (Appelstein Training Resources). For example, the cue "there's no excuse for abuse" was effective in helping a young man learn to control his temper. Another, "say what's true, fibs are through" helped a second grader kick a habit of 'creative-storytelling' to his peers. Getting the child involved in the creation of the cue can also be a fun activity.

Appelstein also recognizes the importance of growth vs fixed mindsets. Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset* and one of the world's leading researchers in the field of motivation, wrote, "For twenty years, my research has shown that the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects that way you lead your life." Having a fixed self-perception doesn't allow room for growth or exploration. If a child only thinks of themselves in one way, it'll be difficult for them to break out of that mold. It's necessary to normalize making mistakes and experiencing failure so children can develop a balanced view of who they are.