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No Such Thing as a Bad Kid, Part II

Charlie Appelstein, a renowned youth care specialist and president of Appelstein Training Resources, LLC (ATR), is the author of a number of widely cited youth care books. This is Part 2 of a synopsis of his workshop, *No Such Thing as a Bad Kid: Understanding and Responding to Kids with Emotional & Behavioral Challenges Using a Positive, Strength-Based Approach*.

One of the areas Appelstein spent time on was developmental needs. When children's developmental needs get thrown off track, especially during the 'terrible twos' period, the child tends to fall back on a defense mechanism referred to as 'splitting'. It's also known as 'black-and-white thinking' or 'all-or-nothing thinking'. When children reach the age of two, they begin to separate from their parental figures and recognize themselves as individuals. This means they don't like to be told 'no'. When they are, inevitably, told they aren't allowed to do the thing they want to, children have a tendency to 'split' their parents. The mother or father that is being 'mean' becomes a separate entity from 'nice' mom and dad. However, if parents can remain balanced when disciplining and rewarding their children, they will grow up with a strong sense of self and an understanding that mom and dad can be bad or good, but they are still one cohesive unit, and that they are too.

Older children that engage in splitting do so because they never fully mastered this crucial developmental stage, so they fall back on it in times of stress. According to Appelstein, splitting in these cases is a bit more nuanced. In other words, the child tries to get the adults in their life at odds with one another. Schools often have a great deal of inter-personal and departmental splitting. According to Appelstein, it's paramount for staff members to remember this: "I'm not as good as I think and they're not as bad. Stress and a number of other factors are causing me to polarize (i.e. See things in black-and-white terms). Stop it. Find the middle ground. Communicate more. Don't be played like a puppet. Stay professional." Every school and social service setting should be a 'no-splitting zone'.

Appelstein's axiom for dealing with any kind of problem behavior, including splitting, is to respond instead of react.

Desired behavior should be constantly practiced and reinforced. Behavior experts suggest that students should hear four positive comments for every one negative. Positive reinforcement is far more effective than punishment in promoting positive behavioral changes. Use consequences instead of punishment because whereas a consequence is related to an inappropriate behavior, a punishment is not. Remember, the most important factor, other than safety, when issuing consequences, is the sanctity of the adult-youth relationship. Caretakers, teachers, residential staff should establish a limit setting progression. In other words, Hammurabi's code: everyone should know exactly what happens if someone refuses to accept a limit.

Limit setting progresses in five clearly defined stages: Supportive Intervention, Logical Consequences, Physical Intervention, Processing, and Reintegration. Supportive Interventions include verbal prompts, such as reminders and warnings (e.g. have youth recite the rule that might be compromised or broken), redirection, or vicarious reinforcement (praise another youth for the behavior you want the youth in question to display). In general, if two or three supportive interventions don't work in a relatively short time period, a logical consequence should follow. For example, kids who have trouble meeting expectations, such as walking quietly to lunch, not running in the hallways, talking inappropriately, etc., can be asked to re-do the specific task. Levels of supervision can also be intensified when kids behave inappropriately, but sometimes, the best way to deal with a negative behavior is to simply remove your attention. Following a logical consequence or a physical intervention, kids should be allowed to process what occurred by being asked to do the following: 1) give their view of what happened 2) come up with better choices that could have been made from both parties 3) make a plan to correct/change issues that may have contributed to the difficulties. Adults should be open to admitting mistakes and taking some ownership for what transpired. Finally, the steps for reintegrating back into the setting should be reviewed.