



Behavioral Pediatric & Family Therapy Program

Cognitive Development In Early Childhood As It Relates To Discipline

Children who are seven years of age or younger are at the “pre-abstract level of cognitive development,” which means that they are unable to deal with abstractions, such as reasoning. If a parent tells her three-year-old daughter, Jennifer, not to go into the street because there are cars and she might get hit and be hurt, Jennifer may be perfectly capable of repeating such an instruction back to her mom or dad, but that is where her ability ends. It is extremely unlikely that she will be able to actually do what her parent instructs her to do because of her limited understanding of the “consequences.”

Because reasoning with young children does not work, it usually results in a parent repeating instructions over and over again, which usually escalates to using threats, such as, “If I have to tell you one more time,” or “If I have told you once, I have told you a hundred times.” When a parent has to repeat the instruction continually, he or she may begin to believe that their child is openly defiant, and that frustrates parents. Because the child is unable to comply with the parental instructions, due to her level of cognitive development, the child begins to feel that mom or dad does not like her because they repeatedly yell at her. Over time, repeated attempts to reason with a child will only weaken the parent’s confidence and promote a poor self-image for the child.

Children learn best through repetition. They must have the opportunity to practice the same thing over and over again. If your child needs to be taught not to go into the street, he or she must be shown this lesson over and over again. Every time your child goes near the street, he or she needs to be disciplined in an unemotional way. Every time your child moves toward the street, but stops short of going into the street, he or she needs to be praised. The contrast of discipline and praise combined with the experience of 20 to 30 trips towards the street will best teach your child to play in the yard and stay out of the street.

Parents should never *expect* small children to always do what they ask of them. Parents need to understand that learning in early childhood requires many repetitions with the child experiencing the contrast between doing something the right way and doing it the wrong way before significant behavior change can occur. Rather than becoming frustrated because learning takes place over a long period of time, parents should understand that they are in the process of teaching their child an important life skill. Remember, the more repetitions children have, the quicker and more thoroughly they will learn the life skills we are teaching them.