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Family Focus Handling Your Child's Complaints

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think that if they let him focus on his frustrations he will become even more negative. They worry that he will reach a level of despair that will alienate him from others. So they try to boost him up instead of giving attention to his many complaints. Or they tell him he complains too much and has to stop.

I encouraged Nathan's parents to have him evaluated for depression and other conditions that could be responsible for his unhappiness. It is always crucial to rule out serious physical or psychological problems. When Nathan got a clean bill of health, I worked with his parents on ways to help him.

We practiced a sympathetic approach:

Nathan: "I hate doing homework. I never have enough time to play."

Parent: "It's hard having homework and not getting to play as much as you'd like."

Nathan: "It's not fair."

Parent: "I know. I didn't like homework either. If you start now and get it over with, at least you'll have an hour before bed to play."

If he's complaining about you, it may be more difficult to remain calm, but the same approach applies:

Nathan: "You're mean. I always get punished when it's not my fault."

Parent: "I see that you're upset and don't think I'm being fair. And you think your brothers get off while you get blamed too often."

Nathan: "Yeah, how come I always get blamed and they never do?"

Parent: "I'm glad you told me this. I'll try to watch more closely from now on since I love you and I don't want you to have to feel this way."

It's important to delay addressing the inflammatory words Nathan used - "mean," "always," and "never" until after you have acknowledged his message. If a parent first scolds and demands respect, a power struggle can develop, causing a child to become even angrier because his initial message wasn't acknowledged and now, on top of that, he is being disciplined.

You don't have to agree with your child's complaint in order to be compassionate and understanding right

I personally believe we developed language because of our deep inner need to complain. ~Jane Wagner

It is often difficult for parents to listen to a child's complaints. Sometimes it can get overwhelming, especially if you are trying hard to please this very child. If you are on a special family vacation and your child continually grouses about the heat or too much sand in his swimsuit, it can be hard to be sympathetic. You want your child to appreciate all that he has and not focus on life's minor irritants. And, of course, you'd like to have fun together and enjoy each other's company.

If a child complains and finds fault excessively, his parents may worry that he could be depressed or have low self-esteem. It is understandable that parents with a chronically dissatisfied child will become concerned and frustrated.

Here is an example of the scenario I sometimes witness: Two loving parents brought in Nathan, age nine and the oldest of three boys, for counseling. Nathan is bright, energetic, and articulate. Unfortunately, much of his communication centers on his dissatisfactions and resentments toward his parents, siblings, teacher, and some students at his school.

Nathan's parents are hard-working and conscientious. They give their time, resources, and love to their boys. Therefore, it is quite a shock to experience this level of negativity from Nathan. His parents have tried talking to him and showing him positive ways to approach people and situations that trigger him. They have asked him what they can do better in order to please him. They have pointed out how some people have it much worse than he does. They have tried to emphasize how proud they are of him and his talents.

The only thing they haven't given to Nathan is simple listening, understanding, and acceptance. Nathan's parents

away. Later on, when he is calm and more receptive, you can help him think through how he used insulting words and a mean tone of voice when he complained to you. Then suggest some ways to re-state his message for next time and have him practice. And you can also encourage him to examine whether or not his complaint and its intensity were justified.

Sometimes a child complains out of habit or to get attention. Or he may derive the payoff of being able to frustrate his parents. You can take control by setting a limit on complaints to one per day. He will become more aware of his tendency to complain, and he will learn to prioritize his complaints and perhaps put things in better perspective.

One huge benefit of showing your child compassion and understanding when he complains is that you allow him to be "real" with you. You will be able to have a more genuine relationship if he feels that he can be himself and still receive acceptance and approval from his parents.

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