

## Behavior Management and Modification Strategies

Below are notes from a presentation by  
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Jim Kling, a behavior consultant, presented to more than 40 Fred members and others who attended our meeting Sunday in Oak Park. Jim's business, Alternative Teaching, offers positive strategies for parents to change their child's abusive and defiant behaviors. His model is called Fair but Firm.

The presentation was powerful. James asked a volunteer to act out the behavior of a defiant child who was asked to sit in a chair. The volunteer (my husband John) demanded to know why it had to be that particular chair. John paced, glared, yelled, swore, said he was always being told what to do and never understood. He turned the chair over, threatened to break the chair and finally, slumped down in the chair, arms crossed and hostile.

Another Fred mom asked "How did you get in my house?" Unfortunately, John's performance came from experience, an abusive way of life that too many of us have experienced.

Jim spoke for more than 2 hours. I will try to summarize. He said his strategies are less about trying to change kids than changing the way parents interact with them and thereby creating a new environment that kids must adapt to.

"The kids we work with are good kids, with good hearts and good souls, but they keep doing the wrong thing and they don't know why," he said.

Their families suffer from domestic violence. "It's child-on-family domestic violence. It's hard to understand how a 12-year-old or an 8-year-old or a 4-year-old could do this to a family. It is bursts of anger that come from nowhere. The whole family walks on eggshells, and they wonder every morning 'is this going to be a good day or a bad day?'

Victims—the parents—are often blamed because the rest of the world thinks they must be doing something wrong.

Jim broke John's performance into behaviors and emotions. Behaviors can be observed – like glaring, pacing, yelling, swearing. Emotions are harder to name. John appeared angry, but maybe he (or our children) was just pretending to be angry so that we don't ask them to do the dishes, or where they were last night. Anger can be used to manipulate parents and others. If a child blows up when he is asked to do something, it can just be easier to do it ourselves.

Jim said that some kids repeatedly make the wrong choices, and they can't explain why because they don't know. If we tell them to "stop it" we're asking the impossible—we must give them a direction, an alternative. Parents must teach children to manage themselves.

Often, outbursts arise from anxiety that a child tries to cover up with anger and then he explodes that anger at everyone else. Anxiety is the root cause. Kids don't do this intentionally, because they suffer the results—no one wants to alienate their family, have no friends, no privileges, go to a hospital or to a therapeutic school. If they could stop on their own, it's safe to guess that they would.

Behaviors have antecedents, which we may or may not be able to anticipate. If a kid is hungry, he is likely to be cranky. That's something we may be able to do something about. We can't really control our child's behavior. All we can control is the consequences.

Jim said the most important thing is not what a parent says or how you say it; it is when you say it. It has to be when your child is sober, rational, and able to hear what you say.

When a child is irrational, he can't hear us; he needs to get to rational first. Irrational is defined as defiance, arguing or yelling (Jim abbreviates this as DAY). These are all observable behaviors, not emotions we have to guess about. It takes irrational kids about 15 minutes to quiet themselves sufficiently to hear and make amends.

When we see any DAY signs, parents should tell their child they need to quiet themselves, in their rooms. The only rules are they have to be quiet (not talking on the phone, no loud music, stomping, etc.) and nothing destructive. The parents can talk to the child or others, but the parent should NOT interact with the child, answer questions, explain or anything until the child does the quiet time.

If the child refuses, the parent should go about whatever they were doing, but they should not respond to the child. Say "I can't talk to you until you do your time." Tell other family members not to interact. Don't allow the child to disrupt the home (this can be impossible!) It will take time.

These 15 minute breaks are not "consequences" – they are only intended to take the child from irrational to rational. Kids can't access self-regulation skills if they are irrational.

The consequences come later, and should be something a child actively does to make amends. It could be a job like dusting, vacuuming, whatever you don't want to do. And if the child does not do the consequence, he should lose something, like a phone, computer etc. He doesn't get the phone back until he does the consequence.

"Don't respond to the child, even if it's a simple question," Jim said. "They are looking for conflict and you can't engage constructively." Taking time out is their job in this situation—you can't do it, they have to. "

It is important to give a child something to do to make amends. It's only helpful to say a problem is their fault if you give them a way to fix it, he said. You can't bargain because "an abuser is going to be abusive. These kids are trying to control something, but they can't make you talk to them." Ultimately, they will have to conform and "fix it."

Once kids learn skills to regulate their emotions and return to rational, they can learn how to stop themselves and faster and faster. Escalation can stop.

Jim was asked his view of medications for treatment of ADHD. He said that when a child has ADHD, the medicine works almost instantly – and if it had no effect or a negative effect (mania or depression) the medicine is not the right treatment. Even if ADHD medicines help, a child need to learn skills to respond appropriately.

He offered a wise approach to therapy. He said parents should never sign up for open-ended therapy, because it loses a sense of urgency. Parents should ask the therapist:

- 1) what are you going to work on?
- 2) How will we know if therapy is working?
- 3) About how long will it take?

Parents must be actively involved so that they can evaluate. Therapy works when a child wants it, he said.

Jim offered a handout which listed “Signs of Burnout” among parents. Number one on the list was “no idea what normal is anymore.” That described my family at one time, and it’s no way to live!

Jim offers parents a 12-week intensive training program, in their homes, and his on-call assistance. You can reach Jim at Alternative Teaching, Inc., 847-289-8699 or [www.alternativeteaching.org](http://www.alternativeteaching.org). Jim has an MA in Special Education, and has worked in behavioral psychology for more than 20 years. He works with the most resistant children, and has provided training for organizations including DCFS and Counseling Centers of Chicago (C4) as well as school districts and local mental health providers.