

Understanding Montessori

The Kids Talk Way



Three Ways to Change Behavior

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"Lisa is so different from Grace. Grace never broke anything when she was this age. Lisa breaks something every day," Meg told me at our playgroup with our one-year olds.

Meg, a long-time friend, was over 30 when she had her first child. Five-year-old Grace lived up to her name. Grace was gentle and content to look at Meg's extensive collection of family crystal and European figurines. Lisa, on the other hand, banged glass-topped tables and pulled expensive porcelain off shelves from the time she could crawl.

Meg and Dave's antique-filled home was being assaulted and devalued daily by Lisa's antics. Meg perceived it as misbehavior and was becoming increasingly short-tempered with Lisa. Grace had not touched things. What was Lisa's problem?

From information gleaned at a recent parenting class, I shared with Meg the idea of changing our children's behavior using three maxims: Change our rules, change our environment and change our attitude.

First, we can change the rules to change behavior. In Meg's case, her rule was, "Don't touch Mommy's things." Meg might have changed the rule to: "Only touch objects with permission." Meg could have given lessons on how to handle a fragile object or how to look at an object using one's eyes only and with one's hands clasped firmly behind one's back.

Secondly, we can change the environment to change behavior. To most of us, it might be obvious that Meg needed to move her collectibles safely out of reach and to either get rid of her glass-topped tables or to put pads on them. Meg hadn't thought of that solution since she had grown up with her mother's extensive collection, and her older daughter hadn't bothered items.

Thirdly, we can change our attitude about the behavior. Meg had perhaps an unrealistic perception of children and home decor. Meg could decide that some precious objects are going to get broken by children and that she would not get upset about it. Or change her attitude to reflect Lisa's behavior as normally curious. Meg might also change her attitude about how a house should look. With small children, we might have to forgo our vision of *House Beautiful*.

In hopes of giving her a few ideas, I invited Meg over to my house to see our child-friendly changes. Photos and unbreakable art objects were on the lower shelves of our bookcases and end tables. Our glass-topped tables had been removed.

Meg used a combination of these three maxims to change Lisa's behavior. Meg changed the rules by taking time with Lisa and showing her how to handle a delicate object as well as how to only look at an object. Instead of "Don't touch," Meg said, "Look."

Meg changed the environment by putting objects out of Lisa's climb and reach zones. Meg moved furniture. She added child-friendly accessories of baskets, woodcarvings and quilts, so Lisa could practice her skill at handling objects carefully.

Meg also changed her attitude. She realized that Lisa was very different from her and needed more exploration, movement and training in order to be comfortable in the house. Meg realized that her relationship with her daughter was more important than her collections, and she packed most pieces away.

When Meg changed her rules, her environment and her attitude, Meg and Dave's home became peaceful, and Meg enjoyed her time with Lisa and Grace.

Next week: Santa Claus: Making the Invisible Visible