

The parenting control agenda

As a parent, it is easy to fall into the trap of attempting to control your child's internal experiences: their thoughts and feelings. It is a very easy trap to fall into because we usually think of our child's behavior as *caused by* their thoughts and feelings. Once we think in that way, changing our child's thoughts and feelings makes sense. After all, if your child isn't playing with the other children at kindy because they are feeling shy then it makes sense *to try to stop your child from feeling shy*. If your child didn't study for their maths test because they have low self-esteem then it makes sense *to fix your child's low self-esteem*. If your child is having lots of tantrums because they are cranky, and their tantrums are making your days miserable, then it makes sense *to try to stop your child from feeling so cranky*.

We call this the **parenting control agenda**. It makes a lot of sense. But it **just doesn't work**. After all, are you able to stop your child from feeling shy? Or to fix your child's low self-esteem? Or to ensure that they don't feel cranky? Children don't come with emotional settings buttons on the back of their heads!

We humans aren't very good at controlling **our own** thoughts and feelings let alone controlling those of our children!

The parenting control agenda also tends to make parenting very stressful and unpleasant. When caught in the parenting control agenda, we often feel like we need to **win** interactions with our child, forcing our child through willpower, cleverness or getting tough, to change how they think and feel and **right now** do exactly as we know is best. Interactions can feel like battles. Is that familiar to you?

All of this focus on changing our child's internal experiences, their thoughts and feelings, is a big distraction from what we can change. As parents, we cannot make our children think or feel anything in particular, and we certainly cannot make them change their minds about something right now just because we can see what's best. But we do have a lot of control **over our children's environment, including how we behave**. We can use this to **shape our child's behavior** with time. We can ensure that we reinforce our child's adaptive behavior with attention and praise. We can ensure that we don't reinforce our child's problematic behaviors.

Instead of a control agenda, we can choose to take a **shaping agenda**.

From a shaping agenda, interactions are not battles to be won. With a shaping agenda, you can look past the present interaction and ask: how can I **influence** my child, so that an adaptive behavior is more likely next time and the time after that? Success isn't about winning an interaction. Instead, it is about seeing your child's behavior grow and develop with time. With a shaping agenda, it is okay to make a mistake. There's no ground to be lost in owning up to it. It is okay to recognise when you've miscalculated, to re-think a situation and begin again tomorrow. With a shaping agenda, we can focus on influencing what we can control: our children's environment, including how we behave as parents.