

Supporting children in tracking their behavior and discovering what matters

In ACT, we call what matters most to us, what gives life meaning and joy, our values. Young children still have a developing sense of their values. You could say that they have **proto-values**. It is important to support children in discovering and experimenting with their proto-values so that a clear sense of values can emerge and consolidate in young adulthood. It is also important to support children in developing clear and accurate understandings of the real-world consequences of their behavior. That is, to support children in **learning to track the outcomes** of their behavior, including the long-term consequences, rather than teaching children to simply behave in a way that pleases us or wins our approval. If children are only behaving in certain ways to win our approval then that makes their positive patterns of behavior vulnerable. They might not keep it up when we aren't around and as they get older and want to win the approval of others they might be vulnerable to acting in harmful ways in order to do that.

It takes time for children to discover their proto-values and for these to consolidate into true values. It also takes time for children to learn to accurately track the outcomes of their behaviour rather than just seek approval. Parents can support children by:

- Accurately reflecting back to your child the **real world consequences of your child's behaviour** (rather than merely voicing your approval). For example, instead of saying, 'I'm proud of you for practising the piano this week' you could say 'you did your piano practice every day this week. And you know what I've noticed? That piece has improved massively. You are playing those tricky bars really well now.'
- Sharing your accurate understanding of the **possible consequences of behaviours**. It is tempting to try to dissuade children from certain actions with exaggerated accounts! For example, 'lying is always wrong so never lie' or 'drugs destroy your brain'. But giving children an accurate account instead that gives children a genuine understanding of the real consequences may be more effective. For example, explaining that a potential consequence of lying is that, if caught, people can stop trusting you or talking through accurate information on the potential side-effects of specific drugs with an adolescent.
- Accurately reflecting back to your child your **child's own interests and enjoyment** can help your child to develop proto-values. Again, it is important that this is accurate. For example, with a young child it could be as simple as observing, 'you really like animals, huh?' For older children and adolescents it might involve a conversation allowing the opportunity for self-reflection. For example, 'you seem to be happier now you are drawing in the evenings again. What do you like about drawing?'
- Accurately reflecting back to your child **their own moral choices** and behaviour can help your child to develop proto-values. It is important that this accurately tracks the moral thinking of your child. For example, 'I noticed that you shared your toy with Alice. That was a really kind thing to do. Alice seemed to really like that.'
- When safe, you can allow your child to experience the **natural consequences of their actions**. This may include allowing your child to experience the school-given consequences of behaviour at school, or to experience the natural consequences of their behaviour with their peers. A useful reflection for parents in knowing when to step in and when to allow the natural consequences to play out may be: are the naturally-occurring consequences safe? Are they going to teach them a useful track? Parents can then support tracking through reflection and discussion.
- It is often not safe to allow children to learn from the natural consequences of their actions. For example, the natural consequence of playing on the road might be getting hit by a car.

You can **supplement natural consequences with “logical” consequences**— consequences that mimic naturally occurring consequences or the kinds of societal consequences that certain actions have in adult life. As you deliberately create the consequence to match “real life” then your child still learns a useful track. For example, if your child has flooded the bathroom and made a mess, then the logical consequence might be that your child needs to clean up the mess. After all, in most situations within adult life, the consequence of making a mess is that you have to clean it up. Hence, your child is learning a useful track.