

"My Kid Will Never Change." When You've Hit a Wall with Your Child's Behavior

By James Lehman, MSW



Have you ever listened to parenting advice, all the while thinking, “That won’t work with my child—nothing does. He’s too difficult; no one can get through to him.” If you’ve ever felt this way, stop what you’re doing and read this article. We sat down and talked to James Lehman, who explains how to get through to “hard case” kids—and how to manage their behavior effectively. (The good news? There is hope—and room to make some real changes that work.)

Q: James, what is your response to parents who say, “My child is really tough. He’ll never change.”

James: I understand that parents get frustrated and exhausted trying to deal with kids who can be really resistant and difficult. But I know from experience that that doesn't have to be the case—there are other ways of solving the problems of acting out, defiance, attitude, and lack of motivation in children. I think when a parent says, “My child will never change,” one of the things they’re saying is, “My parenting style will never change; I don’t think there’s anything new I can teach my child. And because I’m stuck where I am, he’s going to stay stuck where he is.”

If your parenting style isn't working and you don't change it, it's probably going to continue *not* working. That's just a given. But if your parenting style develops and you learn different ways to coach, teach and set limits on your child, I believe that eventually you *will* see change.

Let me be clear: kids don't behave because they like their parents; kids behave because it's in their best interests to behave.

Q: So is there any one thing a parent should be doing to help their child change?

James: In my opinion, people change for a variety of reasons, some of which can be hard to understand. The idea that it takes a certain amount of input, or that there's one thing you should do in order for your child to change, is not really a logical one. It's not like you can just wave a magic wand a certain way and get your child to behave. The truth is, different kids need different amounts of support. I think that it's important for parents to understand the concept that knowledge is cumulative in kids. In other words, one bit of knowledge doesn't create one bit of change. Rather, it takes a lot of bits of knowledge to create one bit of change. Really, the idea that kids won't change is out of context with how they learn. If the approach you've been using isn't working, try another one—trust me, you *can* learn more effective ways to solve the problem of inappropriate behavior. That's something I've helped parents do my entire career—and I have seen true change happen over and over again.

Q: James, the first step for many parents is getting their child to listen to them. How do you go about doing that when you have a “hard case” kid who never listens to anyone—and especially not to his or her parents?

James: I think that this is another instance where parents have to look at their own skill base—and not at their kid's. Understand that your child's capacity to listen will be influenced by his age, his peer group, the setting in which you are having a conversation with him, and the issue at hand. And if your child is really angry and frustrated about something and you're trying to reason with him, he's not going to listen, plain and simple. Just accept that going into it.

I often ask parents to envision what might have to happen in order for their child to listen to them. What would be an ideal place for a talk? Most parents can describe the setting: it's quiet, there are no distractions, everyone is calm, and they have a chance to really share their ideas with their child. I think all of these elements have to be in play in order to have any kind of discussion with your child.

Here's another crucial thing to remember: kids will listen to something—and comply—when it's in their best interests to do so. Let me be clear: kids don't behave because they like their parents; kids behave because it's in their best interests to behave. So parents who compromise about household rules in order to get their kids to do what they want are missing the point. Instead of

trying to get your child to like you in order to behave, what you have to do is get your child to like his life, his privileges, his friends, and his independence. Because all those things that matter to us, also matter to our kids—and are incentives for them to try harder.

Instead of giving in to your child and trying to be his friend, communicate that it's his responsibility to listen to you—and that he'll be held accountable if he doesn't. The relationship between responsibility, accountability and consequences can't be stressed enough here. The message should always be: "You're responsible and I'm going to hold you accountable." And let him know there are going to be consequences if he doesn't comply with the rules.

I also believe that parents have to say something worth listening to. Kids don't listen to preaching. Kids don't listen to labeling. And they don't listen to name calling or blaming, either. I think it's helpful to talk to your child in a direct, matter-of-fact way. Don't personalize what is happening; just stick to the facts. Try to define the problem in a way that is solvable. "It's your responsibility to take out the garbage. If you don't, there will be consequences." And let him know he'll be rewarded if he is able to meet his responsibilities consistently. This is how you hold your child accountable.

Q: What are some tips for getting through to your child, especially if that child is a hard case?

James: Again, I think if your child sees it's in his best interests to respond to you, hard case or not, he's going to find a way to respond. To give you an example, we often see kids with behavior problems really getting along with teachers who are highly structured. That's because the structure the teacher has set up makes it clear that it's in the child's best interests to behave. Sometimes that's because the teacher doesn't take any playing around and sets limits right away; sometimes it's because the teacher gives consequences and rewards that the child finds meaningful. *Remember, there always has to be interplay between structure that's clear, and rewards that are meaningful.* And if you find the right combination, your child will respond to you—whether or not he's a hard case.

I also think that with hard cases, you have to be very clear about who you are. I don't think you have to be hard yourself, but you have to be able to clearly define what you expect from your child. And let them know that you're going to hold them accountable. I think kids who are hard cases often don't see what's in it for them. They might think, "So what's in it for me if I clean my

room? What's in it for me if I do my homework?" I think the answer is to have a structure where you can show them what the consequences and rewards are. So they *know* what's going to happen if they don't finish their assignment or mow the lawn. It's clear to them what they'll get as a reward—and what might be taken away as a consequence.

I also believe there is a lot of legitimacy in giving kids more independence when they do things more independently. So you can say things like, "You can stay up half an hour later because you've shown me that you can be responsible with your reading homework." That actually motivates your child to act more independently. And when I say independently, I don't mean defiantly—I just mean independently. In other words, they're able to meet their responsibilities without a lot of prodding or threatening or following up from you.

Q: What if you have a child who doesn't seem to respond to consequences?

James: If your child doesn't respond to consequences, then you simply haven't discovered things that are consequential to him. Don't forget, a consequence can be a reward, too. Too many parents use the term "consequences" when they mean punishments. Many kids become very resistant to the idea because of what they think it means. Instead, parents have to learn to use the carrot and the stick—not just the stick.

So again, once a child sees it's in his best interests, a lot of things will change. Here's a great example: Let's say you have a kid who hasn't worked hard in school, isn't really committed to anything and is kind of lazy around the house, perhaps a little mouthy sometimes. And then one day he wants to get his driver's permit. Oh man, do things change! All of a sudden, that same child is apologetic when he makes a mistake. He's interested in doing the things you want him to do—and he's willing to do his chores and homework. All because he wants to drive that car.

You might not have a car to use as a reward with your child, but there are other things that might work. In my opinion, parents have to develop a motivational system—a "motivational package," if you will. That means that you should always have a menu of rewards on hand. And I think that list should come from your child. When times are good, I recommend that you sit down and say, "Hey, I'm making a menu of things we could do that you might enjoy. Can you help me out?" And by the way, you should also have a menu of

consequences. It's a mistake to have only one consequence that you use all the time. Instead, have a consequence *system* that allows you to have choices. So it's not the same old, "Go to your room." If you have a list of consequences, you can give your child and yourself a little more elbow room. Remember, consequences that are task-oriented are the most effective because they promote learning and change.

Q: What about parents who say, "I don't know how to motivate my child—he doesn't care about anything?"

James: I think parents should set goals with their children to motivate them. So a goal might be, "If you can clean your room for three days, then you get an extra half hour of computer time." Now your child is working toward something reachable. But remember, the incentive has to be something your child wants. Things that tend to work with kids these days are cell phones, computers, video games, and television. These are all "carrots" we can use to give our kids the incentive to behave and be responsible.

By the way, I think for many kids with motivational problems, the right approach is, "We will give you half an hour on the computer; that's our gift to you. Every member of the family gets it. And if you want more, then we need to see you trying harder and keeping up with your responsibilities." I tell parents to limit time on the computer because I think a great opportunity is being missed here: you are squandering your chance to offer it as a reward. By limiting your child's computer time, he has to put forth some effort to earn more. Be sure to clearly define what a child must do—and for how long—in order to earn that extra time.

And incidentally, it's also been my observation that if you can't motivate your child, something will someday. What I mean by that is that it's important to know that there are other catalysts in your child's life besides you—and that's a good thing. I've seen teens who are slob clean up their act when they get a girlfriend. Certainly kids go back and get their GED's when they find out they need a high school diploma to get anywhere in life. So you are not the only change agent in your child's life—but you are the most influential one.

Q: James, what would you say to parents who feel like their child is hopeless—and that nothing will work for them?

James: I would say that I understand—I think there are children who certainly make you feel hopeless when you're trying to parent them. Believe me, I've

worked with some entrenched, out-of-control kids over the years. But by using that system of responsibility, accountability and consequences, I saw many, many of those kids turn their lives around and go on to become successful adults. So in my mind, there's always hope—but you have to be willing to work at it to create real change.

About James Lehman, MSW



James Lehman, MSW was a renowned child behavioral therapist who worked with struggling teens and children for three decades. He created the Total Transformation Program to help people parent more effectively. James' foremost goal was to help kids and to "empower parents."