

Unlocking Parental Intelligence

What's in it for me? Learn how to foster open dialogue and create close bonds with your children.

Parenting can often feel like a puzzle – especially when kids keep acting up. We may have been taught that to spare the rod is to spoil the child, but punishments aren't actually the most effective way of dealing with so-called misbehavior. Instead, try to think of that tantrum or poor choice simply as a behavior. Then you can start the intriguing and rewarding detective work of figuring out why children behave the way they do – and why you react the way you do. In these blinks, you'll discover how to understand children's behavior and respond in a way that strengthens rather than frays your relationship. Implementing the five steps of Parental Intelligence will steer you toward a more peaceful and enjoyable relationship with your children. In these blinks, you'll learn

that infants can feel and store grief; why a perfectly sensible teenager might suddenly flaunt a rebel persona; and how to seek clues to your children's actions in your own past.

Reflecting on the meaning behind your child's behavior will lead to rich rewards.

Imagine your daughter comes up to you one evening and wants to show you something she did. "Please don't be mad," she says. You tense up immediately, fearful of what her next words will be. In the case of 13-year-old Olivia, "something" turned out to be a regrettable lip ring. Learning that your teenager pierced her lip without your permission is the sort of situation for which a parent could be forgiven for losing her temper. But in this case, Olivia's mother, Delia, didn't lash out with anger and punishment. Instead, noticing how upset her daughter looked, Delia told Olivia not to worry. She could simply take out the ring and let nature do its job, and the hole would close up. Olivia's mother employed the tenets of Parental Intelligence. The key message here is: Reflecting on the meaning behind your child's behavior will lead to rich rewards. The major premise behind Parental Intelligence is that a child's behavior always has a meaning – often more than one. In situations where a child is acting in a way that's upsetting for parents, the best thing to do is step back and focus on the psychological reality of what's happening. What does this mean exactly? Instead of reacting with anger or frustration, you can instead think about what is prompting your child's behavior. This will calm you down and yield clues that might solve even bigger family problems. A more mellow response has another benefit: your child will feel more comfortable confiding in you. Creating this distance and keeping your child in mind is a key principle of Parental Intelligence. Learning how to practice this behavior is sort of like learning how to dance. When you learn choreography, you begin to move your body differently and teach yourself new patterns of movement. In the same way, you can learn how to maneuver alongside your child in a productive – even beautiful – way. Reflection helped Delia understand that Olivia didn't get a lip ring just to upset her; she did it because she was experimenting with her self-image and trying to be independent. Because Delia understood this motivation, she was able to stay calm. This gained Olivia's trust and confidence, which benefited both mother and daughter for years to come.

To break ineffective response patterns like punishment, approach behaviors with an open mind.

Is it easy to stay calm when our kids test our limits? Of course not! Delia could have easily reacted to her daughter's unauthorized body piercing with a sharp outburst. But just as our children's behaviors have meanings, so do ours. When Delia looked within her own history for clues about why she became so upset whenever Olivia dressed or socialized a certain way, she realized the roots of her protectiveness. When Delia was 13, she was raped. The police never caught the attacker, and her parents were unable to help her heal from the trauma. Delia didn't want anything like this to happen to Olivia, which was why she often punished her. These punishments led to a cycle of anger and distrust between the two. And it was only broken when Delia learned to step back, explore her motivations, and react with understanding. The key message here is: To break ineffective response patterns like punishment, approach behaviors with an open mind. Reflecting on your

childhood can help you understand your own actions, as well as why you respond to your children's behavior the way you do. You might parent a certain way because that's the way your parents did it. For example, if it was important in your family to eat dinner together every night, you might insist on the same with your children. Other times, the influence of childhood is less benign. Someone who grew up in a home where he was frequently criticized for weight gain might punish his children if he sees them eating too much dessert. In this case, he's lashing out not because he's angry with his kids, but because he's still hurt by his past. Regardless of motivation, punishment doesn't really teach children why they should or shouldn't do something. It just uses fear to dissuade them from experiencing the scary consequence of an angry parent. A punishment can also function as a payment of sorts. Your child might think that undergoing the punishment is enough of a response – but, really, what you want her to do is examine her choices. This is why an appeal to your child's conscience is more effective than a punishment. In the following blinks, we'll outline five steps that will help you respond to behaviors effectively and create lasting solutions.

The five steps of Parental Intelligence

Every behavior carries a meaning. Children don't simply act out to act out; they're looking for understanding and acceptance. However, the meanings are not just attached to children's behavior. Our reactions as parents also have root causes and meanings that we must interpret if we are to parent effectively. We can unlock these meanings with a five-step process. First, learn to step back. Rather than immediately reacting to a situation, hit the pause button on the incident as it's happening, and simply observe. Take time to rewind, working through all the actions that led up to this incident – sort of like playing a video tape of what came before. Step two is to self-reflect. Ask yourself why you reacted the way you did. Were you angry, sad, or hurt? Why? Seek out places in your history where you felt the same way as your child, and think about the impact of your parents' parenting style on you. Ask yourself if you're reacting because of a scenario from your personal history. Step three: Understand your child's mind. What you're thinking about is not the same thing as what your children are thinking about. The only way you can understand the reasons for their moods and reactions is by asking questions. Observe their body language and facial expressions for important clues. Each parent may view the situation differently, and that's OK. The observations can complement each other. Step four is to understand your child's development. Children develop in different stages and on different timelines. Sometimes, a child's actual age is different from her chronological age or the way she's acting. A very mature 14-year-old might behave in a very different manner than a more playful 18-year-old. Step five is to problem-solve. This step can occur over a long period of time and should include everything from the previous steps. Often, you'll go back and forth from step to step. The most important aspect of problem-solving is reciprocity. You and your child should work on this together. In the following blinks, we'll see how each of these steps plays out in real-life case studies.

“Misbehavior carries a message. It's not a solo act. It is an invitation for understanding.”

The first step in Parental Intelligence is to step back from an emotional situation and think.

When Mrs. Daver, a highly educated and successful woman, turned 39, she suddenly yearned for a child. Though her husband wasn't as enthusiastic about the prospect, the couple adopted Ted at birth. Ted took to his new mother, but he cried often and never seemed fully content. By the time Ted was eight months old, Mr. Daver had begun to feel that life with an infant was not what he had expected. He mentioned divorce. To make matters worse, the nanny, who Ted loved, resigned. That's when Ted's tantrums began. Mr. Daver reacted by putting Ted in ten-minute time-outs. When Mrs. Daver checked on Ted during these time-outs, she would find the two-year-old sitting immobile and terrified on his bed. The family was falling apart, and something needed to change. The key message here is: The first step in Parental Intelligence is to step back from an emotional situation and think. After taking a class on Parental Intelligence, the couple began to reflect on everything that had happened in Ted's life. They stepped back from the situation at hand, suspended judgment, and considered carefully before taking action. They recalled how his birth mother had asked to hold him before she gave him up. Had that interaction impacted him? They remembered how Mrs. Daver had cared for Ted when they came home from the hospital, while Mr. Daver kept his distance. Could Ted have picked up on his father's remoteness? They recalled how, when the nanny left, Ted had laid quietly awake on the sofa for long stretches of time. They wondered now if he had been reacting to her absence with sadness. One day, while arguing about Mr. Daver leaving, they had turned to see Ted watching them intently from the doorway. How much had he understood? Through these observations, Mr. and Mrs. Daver came to realize that when Ted threw a tantrum, he wasn't behaving badly to upset them – he was acting out his grief at his many losses. Being sent to his room as a punishment only hurt and scared him more. This understanding helped them get to know their son better. Mrs.

Daver asked Ted if he was sad that she was going to work. Simply acknowledging Ted's feelings helped him feel better. And Mr. Daver began interacting more with his son, which gave Ted more of a sense of security. The first step of Parental Intelligence helped the Davers begin healing their family. In the next blink, we'll examine step two of the process.

The second step in Parental Intelligence involves self-reflection.

When Lidia, a maternity nurse, stepped into Claudia and Cole's home, she found the place in disarray. Laundry and dishes were piled up everywhere. The teen couple had recently become parents to a baby girl called Lara, and Claudia was exhausted. In the first few months of parenthood, Claudia and Cole had struggled with their new roles. Claudia found it hard to soothe and feed Lara. She constantly worried that she was a bad mother with a difficult baby. Lidia immediately noticed that Claudia was overwhelmed. She realized that her first job was to help Claudia step back from her worries – and then to help her understand why she was having trouble. The key message here is: The second step in Parental Intelligence involves self-reflection. Lidia saw that Claudia carried Lara everywhere. But when the baby fussed or cried, Claudia immediately tried to feed her instead of calming her. If Lara wouldn't drink, Claudia felt as though she wasn't doing a good job of caring for her child. If Lara held a toy for too long and refused to put it down when asked, Claudia worried her daughter would grow up to be a troublemaker. Lidia encouraged Claudia to observe herself with her daughter. She pointed out how Lara would turn her head to seek her mother's voice – a sound she was familiar with from the womb. Claudia was awed by this. Lidia also encouraged Claudia to reflect on her past and think about what might be influencing her relationship with Lara. Claudia began to share details of her childhood with a mother who suffered from anxiety. Her mother would shout at Claudia to leave the room when she was having a panic attack, and the only thing that would calm Claudia down was being held by her housekeepers. But dealing with her mother's issues was too much for them, so the housekeepers kept leaving. Claudia felt that she was the problem – the troublemaker who caused her mother's attacks and made the housekeepers leave. This reflection helped Claudia realize that she was projecting her fears about being difficult onto her daughter. Claudia was so anxious about being a good mother that Lara was becoming tense as well. Once Claudia realized this, she worked on adjusting her methods and learning how to enjoy her baby.

The third step of parental intelligence is to understand the child's mind.

Leslie had been an organized, tidy child – until she turned 15. As a teenager, she became increasingly sullen and spent hours sleeping in her messy room. At first, her mother, Ceci, reacted with frustration and punishments. But she began to wonder whether Leslie's behavior had something to do with missing her absent father, who had disappointed her by promising to attend events and then not showing up. When Leslie confirmed that this was the case, Ceci promised to speak with Leslie's father and encourage him to be more present. In the same way, you can sit down and reflect on what's happening in your child's mind to cause her behavior. The key message here is: The third step of parental intelligence is to understand the child's mind. Take the example of Carl, Isabel, and their three sons: Vic, Wade, and Lee. When Lee was around four years old, his older brothers began to complain that Lee didn't listen when they spoke. He was obsessed with lining up his cars and didn't seem to enjoy interactions. Soon after, Lee was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. One day, shortly after the diagnosis, Lee fell in love with a song on a music video. He sang it over and over again – while he brushed his teeth, while he showered, and in bed. Exasperated, Isabel yelled at him to shut up and told him he couldn't have a snack, which upset Lee and reduced him to tears. The incident shook the whole family. Carl and Isabel realized that they had to learn to understand Lee's mind and his reactions. When they took the time to reflect, they noticed that Lee avoided eye contact because people's expressions were too much for him to handle. Loud environments and bright lights bothered him. He heard and saw everything at the same intensity, which was extremely overwhelming. Once they understood Lee better, Carl and Isabel were able to explain his behavior to his brothers. They got it. Vic got a little car to add to Lee's collection, and the two older brothers played without upsetting his car organization. Understanding a child's mind can yield valuable clues about why he behaves the way he does. But a child's mind is not a static thing. In the next blink, we'll learn about how to understand a child's development.

Deciphering your child's current stage of development will yield clues about his behavior.

Remember that sweet preschooler who sat on your lap, willingly did errands, and snuggled up to watch cartoons with you? It probably came as a shock when, all of a sudden, he transformed into someone who muttered monosyllables and spent most of his time in his room. We're all familiar with the stereotypes that hover around the notorious teenager – but every age comes with its own set of challenges. The key message here is: Deciphering your child's current stage of development will yield clues about his behavior. Let's visit the home of the Richards family. Clive and Ari are six-year-old twins. Ari is bold and outgoing, and he loves shooting hoops with his father. Clive is more sensitive and enjoys cuddling with his mother and watching movies. So when the twins' teacher called to tell them that Clive had started hitting Ari in school, the Richards were shocked. The behavior usually occurred just after Ari had been chosen for a game, or to answer a question in class. At home, his retaliation typically occurred right after Mr. Richards had been paying attention to Ari. Once the Richards paused and reflected, they realized that Mrs. Richards had worried about Clive from the time he was in utero and not thriving. Meanwhile, her husband was more comfortable with Ari because he was so open and easy to play with. As a result, Mr. Richards attached himself more to Ari, which made Clive feel left out. When Mr. Richards did some research, he learned that six-year-old boys gravitate toward their fathers at that age. They watch their fathers closely to see if they can identify with them, and they crave their attention and affection. Mr. Richards had always felt that the boys were more attached to their mother – and he didn't realize that they'd reached a different stage in their growth and needed his attention too. Once he understood this, Mr. Richards began to make extra efforts to connect with Clive. He sat with Clive while he painted and asked how he felt about his frequent business trips. Clive admitted that he missed him when he was gone, and together, the family came up with a schedule for evening Facetime conversations. Understanding their child's stage of development brought the Richards family a long way toward problem resolution – which we'll explore more in the last blink.

Once you've stepped back, self-reflected, and understood your child, it's time to problem-solve.

Eight-year-old Cathie couldn't seem to sit still or get to the school bus on time. Lia and Dale, her firm but loving parents, were at their wits' end. But when Cathie was diagnosed with ADHD, the family came up with solutions like playdates and a dance class to help with Cathie's self-esteem and socializing. To accommodate her restlessness, they set a ten-minute alarm on a clock that allowed their daughter breaks from sitting still and doing homework. The key message here is: Once you've stepped back, self-reflected, and understood your child, it's time to problem-solve. Meanwhile, another parent, Ward, was furious. His 17-year-old daughter Eva had broken her curfew and tried a beer at a party. Eva tried to reason with him – it wasn't her fault that her friend's mother had been half an hour late to pick them up – but Ward grounded her for two weeks, no discussion. Eva's reaction? "That's the last time I tell him the truth." Eva was an excellent student and well-behaved girl, so it didn't take long for Ward to feel uncomfortable with his reaction. But it was Eva who confronted him and boldly declared that she would be going to a concert in New York City that weekend and riding the train with friends. She also demanded more open dinnertime conversation from her reticent parents. Having reflected on everything that had happened since he'd grounded Eva, Ward responded differently than Eva expected. He explained that he was worried about the concert but suggested a solution. One day before the concert, he would come home early from work and take her to Penn Station on the train so she could understand how to handle the ride by herself. Then when she went on the weekend, she wouldn't be completely lost. In the grips of emotion – sadness, guilt, anger – we often react quickly and without thinking. When Ward used the steps of Parental Intelligence to analyze his reactions and Eva's actions and thoughts, he was able to resolve a situation and improve his relationship with his daughter. When practiced properly, Parental Intelligence can improve the future. At a time when there's more diversity of minds than ever before, children who learn to respect multiple meanings behind behavior will be better equipped to understand those who think differently. The result? A better world for everybody.

"Each member of the household understood the family's reality through a particular prism."

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: When you react to your child's behavior with anger or a punishment, you're incorporating the weight of your own histories and interactions. The best thing to do is to press the pause button on the interaction, rewind, and observe the events as they unfold. By reflecting on your motivations and your child's mindset, you can come to an effective, lasting solution. Actionable advice: Meet your child at her level – literally. Body language can be just as important as verbal dialogue. Say your child becomes upset and reacts by hiding under the table. Rather than shouting at her to come out, join her on the floor. From her level, you may find it easier to have a conversation that helps you come to the root of her behavior. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Unlocking Parental

Intelligence as the subject line and share your thoughts!