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Time and time again

With the recent transition to school, I've been working on helping my kids resume the sense of structure that the classroom inevitably brings to our home life. Now that half of their waking time is spent with school-related rituals, the other half is feeling squeezed. And it's not just children's perception of "less time"; autumn brings with it notably shorter daylight time for us all. What occurred to me is that I find myself using the same kinds of parenting tricks that I did when my children were younger (some since preschool days) and they still work! So I thought I'd share a couple of them to see if they resonate with you.

The timer

For us, setting the timer goes back to potty training days. Now, it's primarily used to time the length of music practice or to limit the amount of screen time each child gets. What I marvel about is that somehow the timer reduces the "argument factor". If I rely on checking my watch or ask the children to time it themselves, we inevitably end up going back and forth on whether the activity was properly timed. Taking it to a neutral third party without any agenda (i.e., the microwave timer) takes the authority out of any situation by making it about just the facts. The timer doesn't lie or cheat. In fact, my kids have gotten into the habit of saying "pause time" whenever they need to get up from the piano to, say, answer the phone or get a drink from the fridge. Interestingly, it works for toothbrushing as well, now that braces have entered my household. The big difference now is that the kids set the timers themselves, often as a fairness check to make sure one or the other of them does his "full time". I can stay out of it, essentially, and let them handle it pretty much on their own.

Counting to three

This tactic goes all the way back to toddler days, and virtually every parent has experienced its usefulness as a disciplinary tool. Frankly, it's been surprising to me how long this one has lasted in our family. Back in the day, when we used it on an hourly basis, I remember wondering why it didn't lose its effectiveness. Basically, if young children believe that you will deliver on consequences, the 1-2-3 count gives them a chance to hold up their end of the bargain and do what you ask, perhaps just a bit slower than parents would like.

What I've found is that even as kids get older, this same principle holds true. They still like to have some advance notice when being asked to shift gears. Only now, because they can make last minute decisions and move faster, they sometimes like to push the envelope in the return-to-toddlerhood mentality of challenging parenting limits. I don't use this method in public, because it might embarrass them in front of peers, but I do use it at least weekly at home. And it still works. Why? I don't use it unless I'm serious.

And I choose a consequence that truly matters to my boys at age 11 -- losing time on video games, or los-

ing instant messaging privileges.

Here's a typical scenario after a long day. I'll say "If you guys aren't upstairs getting ready for bed by the count of 10, there's no movie tomorrow." This is usually followed by a quick glance to make sure I'm talking to them. (Who else I would be talking to like this escapes me, but that's a different story.) Then there's what I call the "readiness phase" where they clear obstacles to maximize the fastest possible exit from the room. They've already calculated that they really only need, say, 7 seconds to reach the upstairs landing, and thus wait until 3 until they dash. Finally, there's the push-each-other-out-of-the-way stage to see who gets to the top of the steps first. By this time, of course, it's way past 10, but I don't care, because they've done what they've been asked to do.

Some parents may think by the age of 9 or 10, kids shouldn't need such concrete reminders. I disagree. Middle childhood (roughly ages 7-12) is a stage where parents and children begin to get into turf battles around independence and autonomy that are only going to get stronger. So I think tools such as counting or timers or other "non-negotiable" boundaries are a helpful way to make the shift. As with any tools, they can be overused, and rest assured, they WILL lose their usefulness if applied to every situation. But I bet if you try these tactics judiciously and let your children know that you mean business, there'll be fewer arguments about the daily tasks we need to squeeze in as the days grow shorter.

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