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### Disadvantages of a short-term focus

Even though we are all “crazy busy,” and have genuine reasons for parenting with a short-term focus, that does not make it helpful. When children do something wrong, or when they have to deal with a disappointment, a short-term focus in parenting can lead to a simplistic approach, one that can prevent children from learning all they could from what they are experiencing. Here are a few examples:

- Getting out of the house on time in the morning.
- Rudeness, backtalk or disrespect.
- A report card that has a low grade or a teacher comment about insufficient effort.
- Times when friendships are complicated and stressful.

The examples vary with the age of the child but the theme is the same: Parents with a short-term focus react to their children’s mistakes by getting tense themselves and acting as if children should never make mistakes and certainly never repeat them. Similarly, when children are uncomfortable, sad or upset in any way, these parents react as if it is their responsibility as the parent to ensure that their children feel better as soon as possible.

At first glance, this seems logical and hard to criticize. None of us want the morning to start off with children dragging their feet or losing track of time. It is embarrassing to bring a child late to school and we can get into trouble at work if we are late. Certainly, there is no justification for children speaking disrespectfully to parents. Report cards matter. No parent wants their children to feel lonely.

However, parents with a short-term focus often make things worse rather than better by their actions. They might start off with one problem (the problem of the day) and handle it in a way that causes additional problems. Or they might miss opportunities to teach their children important lessons. When their children make the usual mistakes of childhood, they can become angry and critical. Instead of disciplining in a reassuring way, they come across in a harsh and disapproving way. This does not play out well over time. When their children are hurt by the usual life events of childhood they may become overly emotional, over-help, and their children end up weaker rather than stronger by the momentary discomfort.

I think the most important lessons our children need to learn are best taught and easiest to learn at the times of momentary discomfort. This is a major theme of my book, *Insightful Parenting: Making Moments Count*. It is up to us as parents to find ways to celebrate the mistakes and disappointments of childhood, find the teaching opportunities, protect the parent-child relationship from their mistakes, and find ways to strengthen our children from the discouraging (but normal) life events.

Sometimes teenagers who are in therapy for emotional or behavioral problems seem to be there more for how their parents reacted to the ordinary mistakes and disappointments of childhood, rather than for “genuine” mental health problems. That is, at least in my experience, some children develop unnecessary and avoidable problems in adolescence as a direct result of a parent’s short-term focus during the pre-adolescent years. This is why the most important parts of therapy “with” children occur when the children are in the waiting room and the parents are the ones in the office.

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