

choosing your battles

By Sally Burgess*

Do you feel like you're constantly nagging? Are you focusing too much on minor everyday issues and letting the more serious ones go by unnoticed? Look at the bigger picture and learn to choose your battles for a more peaceful and disciplined household.

I stretch and sigh. I hear the birds singing and the cicadas chirping. The sun filters lazily through the half-closed blinds onto my brightly-coloured quilt. If only I could just stay in this cozy, peaceful bubble called 'my bed', life would be bliss. Then reality strikes. Beyond my bedroom door is a group of people with different personalities, needs, wants and ways of expressing themselves. They are called a family, and they don't always want to cooperate.

ages and stages case study

"Molly! How many times have I told you to empty the dishwasher before you watch TV?" Molly rolls her eyes. "And," I add, raising my voice to at least 95 decibels, "I have asked you repeatedly not to drop your bike at the front steps where everyone can fall over it." Molly sighs. Little brother Noah climbs onto the couch. Molly kicks him off and Noah lands upside-down on the floor. He starts crying loudly. "Now see what you have done," I yell, feeling my blood pressure rising to steaming point as I run to Noah's rescue. "You have hurt your brother. Now go to your room!" Molly slides belligerently off the couch, scattering cushions in her wake as she stomps down the hallway. "You never tell me I do anything right!" shouts Molly, as she slams the door.

sound familiar?

It seems reasonable to assume that training our kids means telling them what to do and what not to do all the time. After all, it started from the time they were tiny, remember? "Don't touch the heater!" "Don't play with the knobs!" "Don't squeeze the cat!" How else do they learn? Don't they say that life is just one long teaching opportunity? Yes, it is true, but our methods sometimes sound more like one long barrage of commands and when the kids don't respond on the first call, we tend to fall into 'nag mode' and then things turn to custard. It doesn't take long for kids to learn the length of your last nerve. And they don't move until then!

Commanding, browbeating, begging and pleading by parents do not produce a happy, peaceful home environment. Neither does it promote the obedience expected. What should be done to make a positive change?



choose your battles

Choosing your battles is a selection process of corrective action. Rather than tackling a myriad of issues all at once, parents must concentrate on one major issue at a time, while temporarily turning a blind eye to the lesser issues.

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Andrew, aged 15 years, likes his hair long and his father is constantly onto him about it, but Andrew has been found to be lying about his whereabouts last Saturday night. Dad is not so angry about this because he used to do the same when he was young. The parents of **Sarah, aged 12 years**, are annoyed because she has not been keeping her room tidy. However, Sarah has been skipping school and for some reason, her parents have taken no action about that. His mother is ready to issue a consequence when **Jason, aged 5 years**, does not make his bed before school, but she does not take his teacher seriously when told that Jason is hitting other children in the class.

All of these issues are important to deal with, but it is better to deal first with those that most compromise the family core values, rather than personal hobbyhorses. The parents in the case studies above did tackle issues, but they were not necessarily tackling the issues that most affected their family's key values.

identify the issues

Stand back and take a really good look at what is going on with communication in your family. Include yourselves in your reality check. Are you a nagger? Is one person in particular setting a negative tone for the rest of the household? Are you both in agreement with the disciplinary methods used?

Many parents have never identified the key values they want to follow and be known for (for example: respect, honesty, obedience, commitment, loyalty, integrity, trust, caring about others, and taking responsibility for our own actions). You should discuss and decide your family's key values and, by looking through the problem areas within your family, you can more easily see which of these values are being compromised and, consequently, decide those that need correcting immediately and those that can wait.

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Averting battles: Hunter is a 2-year-old who loves to play with plastic bottles of milk from the fridge. Instead of just taking the bottle away from him and causing Hunter to have a meltdown, his Mum has found a way to make them both happy. She lets Hunter screw the cap back on the bottle and asks him to help her by putting the bottle back in the fridge. Hunter thinks it is a fabulous idea and complies immediately. This is a win/win scenario.

Create a plan of action

Having identified the issues, ask yourself these important questions before you begin:

- Does this issue go against the values or standards we hold for our family?
- Does this really matter?
- Are we making 'mountains out of molehills'?
- Is this issue going to make a difference in one, five or 10 years?
- Does it need the full treatment or just a tweak?
- Is our approach to the issue going to be family-wide or handled individually?

explain your plan of action to the family

Gather the family together over pizza and talk about your plan. For example:

"We want our home to be a happy, fun, and exciting place to live. We know you want that, too. For that to happen, we have to work together. This month, we are going to work on being respectful to each other. This means we are going to speak kindly to family members. We are not going to get mad and shout at each other. Instead, we are going to stop and think before we say something. We are also going to respect our belongings. This means we are going to put our clothes and toys away and keep our rooms tidy. If we can all do that, we will see how much better it is to live here. In a month from now, we will reward ourselves with a special event if we make good progress."

Praise the efforts your children make, not just the result. There may be a need to create consequences for non-compliance, but you will get far more positive action from your kids by making your expectations clear in the first place and encouraging them to accomplish the goals.

It is important to explain the approach you are taking to your children. Choosing your battles may look to them like you are not being fair or consistent. Your kids need to know that you are teaching them one lesson at a time to make sure they get it right. Choose one family-wide issue at a time and you will often find the individual issues dissolve as well.

Take heart. You can develop a peaceful family environment when you choose your battles carefully.

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