

Experiential Exercise Outline- Alternate

The Child's Jungle

Source: Teaching Parenting: Positive Discipline for Parenting In Recovery,
Jane Nelson, Lynn Lott & Rikki Intner
Empowering People Press

Time: 50 min.

Materials: Four sturdy chairs, Flip Chart or white board and markers

Process:

1. (5 min) Ask participants, "What are common ways parents 'put their children off' when children ask for attention? List responses on white board or flip chart.
 - Don't bother me.
 - I'm on the phone.
 - Later!
 - Go play!
 - You're always bugging me!
 - Can't you see I'm busy?
 - Etc.
2. With minimal explanation, set up four sturdy chairs in an open space in the room. The chairs are set with their backs together and fronts facing out.
(It's wise to stand on each of the chairs yourself to be sure they're sturdy and stable.)
3. Invite four volunteers who are willing to stand on the chairs for 5-10 minutes. Ask them to choose one or more of the parental remarks on the list and be prepared to say them in a matter-of-fact or stern way to other participants who will take the role of children. For this part of the exercise, they aren't allowed to touch the people playing children or do anything else that's particularly comforting and friendly. Their goal is to avoid stopping what they're doing and get the "children" to let them alone.
4. Invite four volunteers to play the role of children. The "children" walk around in a circle, look up at each person standing a chair playing the parent and say only one line, "I'm only a child and I want to belong." Each "parent" responds with one of the "don't bother me" remarks.
5. It's helpful for the trainer to demonstrate this for one round before the "children" begin.
6. Ask the remainder of the participants who observing to watch closely and notice what they see happening.

7. When everyone is ready, ask them to begin. The “children” circle the “parents” on the chairs repeatedly for several minutes, perhaps 10 or 12 times. Both “parents” and “children” will experience some distress with this process. Trainer encourages them to keep going, reminding the “parents” not to relent at this point, although they may want to change their approach.
8. When it’s clear that the participants have experienced and observed the emotional response to being told “don’t bother me” in a variety of ways, help the “parents” to step down and ask everyone to take their seats.
9. Debrief:
 - Ask the four people who played “children” “How was that for you?” “What did you experience?” “What did you feel?” “What did you decide? etc.
 - Ask the four people who played “parents” the same questions.
 - Ask the observers what they saw, what they felt, etc. They may report seeing that the “children” began to avoid eye contact, began to mumble rather than speaking clearly or looked depressed.
 - People may share insights regarding the impact of addiction on this process saying things like, “I was more interested in getting high than paying attention to my children.”
10. Discuss times when the parent must tell a child to wait for attention: (Baby in the bathtub and can’t be left alone, spaghetti done cooking and must be drained, important phone call, must leave for work, child demands attention while parent is driving the car, etc.)

Recognize that it’s not just the words, but the style of communication that carries the message of dis-interest. Invite examples.

11. Ask the people to resume their positions as “parents” on the chairs and in the circle of “children”. This time, the “parents” can either stop what they’re doing and pay attention to the child, OR let the child know kindly that they have to finish what they’re doing, but will give the child attention in a short time. For instance, a parent on the phone could put her arm around a small child or give the child paper and pencils to draw while sitting nearby while the parent finishes a phone conversation. In this “positive example” parent can touch, hug and smile at children, promise an activity in the next 15 minutes, offer compliments and praise, acknowledge that it’s hard to wait, etc.
12. Allow the participants to proceed around in the circle for as long as it takes for everyone to feel better.