



by John Joseph

Growing concepts rather than giving advice or managing behaviour

What's this about?



Welcome to Part 3 of 6 articles that provide an overview of how the concepts children hold affect their lives at home and at school. In this article, we examine why it is better to ask questions of children as opposed to telling or giving advice. We examine a model for growing healthy concepts.

Advice is what we ask for when we already know the answer but wish we didn't. Erica Jong

Whoops!

My parents often gave me 'advice.' Mostly, it was meant to motivate, to inspire! The advice usually began with the words, 'Back in my day...' or, 'If you don't stop that I'll...!' I always accepted my parent's advice, providing of course that it didn't interfere with what I intended to do anyway! Parents tend to give advice to kids to stop them from doing annoying things or to stop them from wasting their potential. Often the advice is in the form of 'telling' and driven by our fears of what our kids might become rather than from the greatness they might achieve.

Growing healthy concepts is a better way of giving advice, than 'telling' and threats. I have developed a model that you may use when talking with your children about concepts (see over page). As you use the model try to explain and seek your children's views rather than simply telling them about it.

Key Points



Telling is almost a surefire way to shut down your children to listening.

I based the model on current understandings about how information enters the brain for processing. We examine how brains learn in later articles, but it is wise to note that neuroscience (the study of how brains function) is still in its infancy and many of the currently held notions are tentative. You don't

have to know about how brains work to help kids grow healthier concepts. However, in my work with thousands of kids, I have seen how they love learning about brain function. Kids are highly motivated to make their brains work better. Learning how to learn helps kids to develop healthy concepts and builds their independence as learners.

Here's How



How do I show my child the associations between concepts and learning?

Do you remember sitting in a classroom tuned out to the teacher? Have you noticed that you only 'hear' traffic noise when you are tuned into it? These situations are managed by a part of the brain called the Reticular Activating System (RAS) and more specifically, the perceptual register. The perceptual register enables the brain to map a stimulus against our emotions in order to appraise its importance. If the stimulus is associated with an Emotionally Powerful Concept (EPC) by virtue of individual experiences, there is no need for the brain to analyse the causative stimuli consciously and an habitual response is most likely to follow.

According to Antonio Damasio, Distinguished Professor and Head of Neurology at University of Iowa, emotions provide the natural means for the brain and mind to evaluate the external and internal worlds we inhabit, and respond accordingly and adaptively. In other words, we perceive our worlds through the dual lenses of emotion and thoughts. Concepts (opinions based on experience) grow from the interconnected world of emotions and thoughts. Feelings follow emotions, accompanied by thoughts of the type that usually can cause, and then accompany, the emotions. Damasio calls this the appraisal-evaluation phase beginning with the detection of, and association with, an EPC.

The whole process probably happens in the somatosensory cortex of the brain, which is

like a mixing room where the brain maps incoming information against memory, and associated concepts. When a parent asks a child to, say, "Start your homework" the brain maps the incoming information; "Start your homework," to the concepts the child has about homework. An EPC will color the decision making process. Remember the 'concepts' research? People feel most comfortable when the concepts (the interplay between thoughts and emotion) they hold match their environment. Of course, not all concepts are emotionally powerful. They range from powerful to neutral.

If your child holds concepts that she is a good learner, and that learning is important for her future, she is likely to feel associated emotions of enjoyment, fulfillment or satisfaction with the homework task. The perception of new information, mapped against associated healthy concepts and emotions, fires up the imagination. Imagination is the future, but only separated from the past (concepts) by a few moments in time. A child who knows he is a good learner is confident that learning new things will not be overly difficult and gets to feel healthy emotions. Thus, the concepts lead to behaviour associated with learning rather than avoidance.

What happens when the concepts are unhealthy?

If your child holds concepts that she is a poor learner or sees little purpose for learning, she is likely to feel associated emotions such as boredom or frustration with the homework task. The perception of new information, mapped against associated unhealthy concepts and emotions, fires up the imagination which now works on how to avoid the homework task. Thus the perception leads to behaviour associated with avoidance and parents begin the inevitable behaviour management strategies designed to combat the anti-homework behaviour. Unfortunately, this often results in children being sent to their bedrooms or missing out on something special, further limiting the growth of healthy concepts. Eventually, the behaviour associated with avoidance of learning becomes a habit associated with low motivation and low confidence.

Sometimes, the friction caused between parents and their kids becomes so great, that both parties 'give up.'

Managing behaviour is power-based and leads to inevitable breakdowns in relationships between parents and their kids, whereas growing healthy concepts leads to the strengthening of such relationships. We explain the steps to accomplish this over the entire series of articles. It's not simply a matter of wishing things would change. Then again, nor is it overly difficult. Growing healthy concepts comes about from learning a particular set of skills. And anyone can learn these skills.

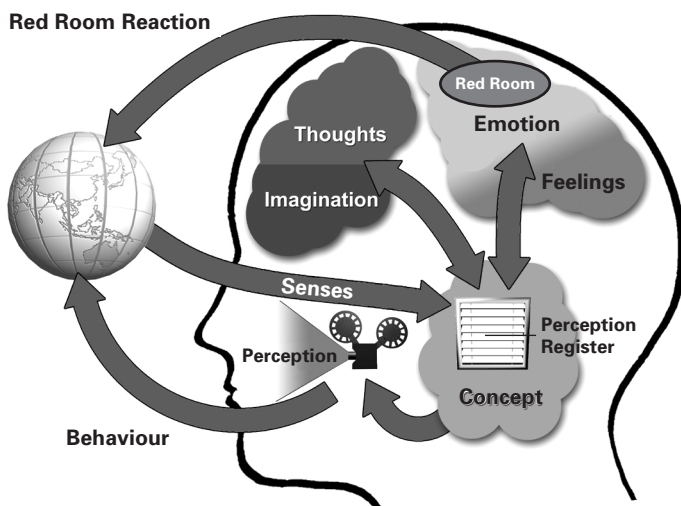
Definitions

What are habits and can one change them?

I define 'habits' as **things we do or ways we think about things without consciously knowing what we're doing.**

Kids typically express habits as actions, such as sucking thumbs or biting nails. Thoughts switch on habits, although we may not be aware of it. Habits are memory-based. Emotionally Powerful Concepts eventually become habits expressed through behaviour. It's not so easy to break habits (just ask anyone who is trying to quit smoking!). However, it is possible, particularly if you have a process to work with (we'll take you through that later). It is extremely empowering to change a habit.

We have developed a model that shows how concepts develop. Take your children through this model and explain how experiences form the webs in our minds that we call memory.



We all see the World differently because our senses are influenced by the unique combination of thoughts and imagination, mixed with feelings and emotions, which construct the concepts that we hold. As a result, individuals who have witnessed the same event may well behave and respond quite differently to one another. Concepts drive behaviour.

How does the model work?

Information we perceive from the world passes through the perceptual register, which operates like a set of venetian blinds (it filters). The brain uses mapping mechanisms to link the incoming with the existing. Emotional appraisal begins first. Emotions occur on a continuum, from weak feelings (virtually neutral) through to strong emotions (that can instantly incite pleasure or rage, for example).

Because emotions and thoughts blend almost seamlessly (we only separate them to discuss each one) the emotional responses to perceptions influence how we think about what is happening. Thoughts can be logical, analytic, judgmental and so on, (based on the past) or imaginative and creative (based on the future). Concepts are the unique combination of emotions and thoughts associated with experience, and the imagination of what is about to happen.

Concepts influence perception (what happens in us as a result of what happens to us or in us) and perception stimulates concepts. When the stimulus is emotionally powerful, the emotional aspects of the concept drives behaviour before the more thought-oriented aspects of the intellect appraise the situation. Eventually the combination of perception and behaviour creates habitual filters at the perceptual register level which influence how we interact with the world.

To grow healthy concepts, one needs to use imagination to generate different emotions to the ones that habitually present. Questions stimulate imagination.

Here's How



How could I enhance my child's concepts?

Many parents become frustrated when their children won't clean up their mess, help with household chores or complete their homework. Instead of fighting or telling them what they must do, ask simple questions such as:

- "When can we start cleaning your room?"
- "How can I help with your homework?"
- "How can we make cleaning dishes more enjoyable?"
- "What would you enjoy reading together?"

It is the state of one's concepts that determines the nature of one's actions.

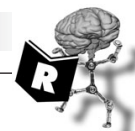
Summary



The least I need to know

Parents usually give their kids advice, in the form of telling. It's based on our fears of what our kids might become. There is a better way. Growing healthy EPCs enables kids to perceive their world in a better light. One of the ways to grow healthy EPCs is to understand how concepts grow into habits, and therefore how to change habits. Imagination and emotions enable kids to grow healthier concepts. However, it requires a particular set of skills.

References



(Items marked * are available from Mind Webs). Log on to www.mindwebs.com.au or call Cathy Joseph for a catalogue (08) 8358 6993.

Brainy Parents, Brainy Kids,
John Joseph*.
Looking for Spinoza,
Antonio Damasio*.

**Next Issue - part four:
Using imagination to manage perception.**