The Power of Distraction

Distraction can be a very useful tool. When I am already full and find myself tempted to eat a large quantity of additional chocolate, I try to get myself busy with something else. I also put the chocolate away. We can use the same principle with children.

Distraction is generally better than confrontation. Rather than yell at a child for playing with forbidden objects, we can provide them with safe and interesting alternative toys. And we can put the forbidden objects where they are not a temptation to children. Making their world safe and interesting for them is the heart of child proofing.

**For distraction to work well, the child must be drawn toward something interesting.** For example, if a child reaches for a sharp knife, dad might offer the child a spoon or rubber scraper or wire whip. As children get older they will be less easily distracted. There are times when a parent must say, “Not for touching.” Such limits will be most effective when offered with firmness but also with an invitation to other activities.

**Effective distraction often requires an investment of time.** It does not take much time to grab a rubber scraper and offer it to a child. But sometimes a child needs a new place to explore. Sometimes it may be necessary to take a walk or go to the park in order to give your child something new to do. Creativity can also help. If you are tired of your child banging the pans, you might get out some brightly colored play dough and cookie cutters. Your child is likely to be drawn to the new opportunity.

**Distraction works somewhat differently as children get older.** We hope that children will increasingly learn how to distract themselves, but they may need our help right into adulthood. For example, a school-age child may feel that a certain scooter (or shoes or CD) is essential to her happiness. She is not likely to be easily distracted. You might encourage the child to find a picture of the desired scooter in a catalogue. You might also encourage the child to consider other things that might be bought with the same amount of money. Pictures of those alternatives can be taped alongside a picture of the scooter. Encourage the child to set aside a final decision for a few days - or a week - or a month. Put the pictures in a drawer and wait a while. See if she feels the same after some time has passed. It may help the child to know that the choice is still there for her to make. (Older children and teens do not like their choices taken away from them!) When she returns to the decision, encourage her to think about whether the scooter will still be important to her in a year. The objective of this process is not to make the child crazy with delays but to help the child learn to make decisions with a bigger picture in mind. If at some point she determines that she must have the scooter and if she has the money, then she may make the purchase.
It can also be helpful to teach teens (and adults) to distract themselves from negative thinking. Some psychologists say that dwelling on bad experiences can make us sick. Especially at times when we are lonely or tired, we may need to know how to point ourselves toward better days and higher purposes in our lives. It may help us to recite favorite poems or sing favorite songs. We do well to know how to set troubles aside and to frame good experiences and hang them in the gallery of our minds.

Applications:

Are there things that you are always having to take away from your child? Is there some way to childproof your house so that you do not have to be at odds as often?

It is not the number of toys that determines a child’s enjoyment. In fact some parents may find that having a few toys available and keeping others in storage is better for their child as they rotate through the toys. The toys do not have to be expensive. Boxes or wood blocks may be a child’s favorite toys. Many good toys can be found at thrift stores.

What are some things your children love to do? Do they have opportunities to regularly do things that are enjoyable for them? Help them find ways to learn and grow.

Martin E. P. Seligman is a psychologist who has studied the way people think about their experiences. He found that people who dwell on the pessimistic view are more likely to be depressed. Those who emphasize the positive tend to be healthier. His book, ‘Learned Optimism,’ is a very insightful book. He has also written ‘The Optimistic Child’ which may be useful for you if you are interested in psychology.