Stack the Deck So Everyone Wins (Kelly Pelzel)

HOST: Today we have Dr. Kelly Pelzel, a Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Iowa with us.  She is a licensed psychologist who received her Bachelor of Science from the University of Northern Iowa and her PhD from the University of Utah.  Dr. Pelzel has interests in early childhood mental health and in parent led behavioral changes for young children.  She is currently the clinical coordinator for the UISFCH Autism Center, the psychology consultant for the CHSC Regional Autism Assistance Program, and the past-president of the Iowa Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health.  Dr. Pelzel first trained in IoWA-PCIT in 2012.  She is also certified in Improving Parents as Communication Teachers (ImPACT).

Thank you for joining us. When we asked you about joining us today, you mentioned that you wanted to call your segment “Stack the Deck so Everyone Wins.” So, what do you mean by stacking the deck?

 KELLY:

Sometimes we get so focused on what to do after bad behavior happens that we forget about what we can do before it happens: that is; what we can do to make it more likely that a child will be able to tell others what they need without acting out, and also to follow directions when they need to. Today I will be talking about three things that you can use to stack the deck in your favor -- and in your child’s favor -- when it comes to your child’s behavior. The three things I will talk about are: using child-led play, setting things up so it’s easier for your child to do what they are told, and giving directions effectively.

HOST: Let’s start by talking about child-led play. From what I understand that’s a practice that is used in Parent Child Interactive Training or PCIT.

KELLY:

How great would it be to have five or ten minutes each day with someone you love -- and to hear from that person everything you were doing right? Not only would it feel great, but it could be a powerful tool for learning about your behavior and make your relationship stronger. That’s what child led play time is about. We think about using child led play with younger children, like children under 8, but it can also be used with older children. The play activities might look a little different, but we can follow an older child’s lead as well. If you are not already doing so, I would encourage you to spend five minutes daily just following your child’s lead in play. If you can make it a part of your daily routine, that’s great! And it should happen even if your child has misbehaved earlier in the day.

HOST: Ok, but how does someone actually do child-led play?

KELLY:

Before you start child-led play, turn off all electronics, including cell phones, and go to a non-distracting place in your home or yard with 2 or 3 toy sets. Things like blocks, dolls, and play sets work well. Let your child choose which of the toys to play with and how to play with it. Your job is just to follow their lead, so long as they are playing appropriately with the toys. The skills you should use to follow their lead while playing can be remembered with the acronym “PRIDE.” The “P” stands for praise. This means say what you like about your child’s actions. You might say something nice like “Thanks for sharing your toys with me!” The “R” stands for reflect. This just means repeating back what they say to you as they play. So, if your child says “Look, a big tower” when they are building with blocks, you can say back “Yes, that is a big tower.” The “I” stands for imitate. Imitating is copying what the child does with the toys. It doesn’t need to be an exact copy, but you want to be playing with the same toys in the same type of way as your child during child-led play. The “D” stands for “description” or describe. This one is a little weird because, unless you are a play therapist, you probably haven’t done this much before while you are playing with a child. All you do is describe what they are doing as they do it. Kind of like how a sports announcer on the radio would describe the action on the field or court. For example, if your child placed a hat on his Mr. Potato Head, you could say “You put on a hat on Mr. Potato Head.” It lets your child know you are interested in what they are doing and really watching them. Lastly, the “E” stands for enjoyment. You should show that you are having fun while playing with your child and that you are delighted by good things that they are doing.

HOST: Is there anything you should stay away from during child-led play?

KELLY:

Yes, there are three things to avoid during child-led play. First, you should not be giving any directions or commands. Giving directions is the opposite of following someone’s lead and we want this time to be all about your child and her ideas, not yours. Second, you should not ask questions. This is hard because asking questions is a normal part of regular talking.

Host: I ask questions all the time. I think I would have a real hard time with this part.

Kelly: There are a few reasons we avoid questions. Questions are sometimes directions in disguise. Questions sometimes suggest that you weren’t really listening or watching. Also, questions are sometimes too much like pop quizzes. And questions can sometimes lead to arguments. Finally, you should avoid negative words like “don’t,” “no,” “stop,” and “quit.”

HOST: I could easily imagine that would lead to the child getting mad or misbehaving. But then what can you do if your child misbehaves during child-led play?

KELLY:

Without those words and without directions, you will need to do something different if your child does something annoying during child-led play. If they do something that you do not like, but it is not dangerous or destructive, you can ignore that behavior and focus on your own play with the toys until they do something that you can praise, describe, reflect, or imitate. If they do something unsafe or destructive you can end the play for the day. For example, you could say “Our play time is over because you threw a toy car and that’s not safe.”

HOST: Now we have a sense of what to do if kids misbehave. How would we set things up so kids are more likely to behave so we don’t wait until things go wrong?

KELLY:

Ok, so I think about setting up space and picking toys that match with children’s needs, based on their age, their development, their strengths, their weaknesses, and their personality. So, it’s hard for me to give a lot of specific advice because all children are different. That said, most children will benefit from having their toys organized and rotated to avoid distraction and to prevent too much stimulation. Most children also benefit from having a clear sense of where they are expected to be while completing an activity. Parents of very active children will want to think about how to keep their children safe and their breakables out of the way. Parents of children working on following directions might think about keeping containers close by for when it’s time to pick up so that a child can easily transition to clean up.

HOST: Transitions like that are hard for a lot of kids, though, right?

KELLY:
Yes, leaving something fun to do for something not fun is hard – and not just for kids – but for most of us! Using cues, or signals, can help children with accepting transitions. Probably the most common type of cue is telling a child how many minutes they have left of something, like “2 more minutes and then we are leaving.” Some kids also benefit from something visual to show how much time is left. Like a sand timer or a timer on a smart phone that shows when time is up. You can also get creative with it – like singing a certain song when it is time to move on to the next activity. The Clean Up Song is a good example of that.

HOST: Ok, lastly you wanted to talk about giving good directions.

KELLY:

Yes, there are better and worse ways to give directions. Giving a direction effectively will increase the chance that your child will follow it. I have another acronym to help remember what makes a good direction. The acronym is “PRACTICE,” and I will break down what each letter stands for. The “P” is for “positively stating the direction”; we always want to be telling children what to do rather than what not to do. This makes it easy for children to focus on positive behavior and gives us more chances to praise their ability to comply. The “R” is for “reason before direction or after”; children sometimes comply better if they know why it is important for them to do what they are asked. However, giving the reason after the command but before they comply can lead to stalling and possible even an argument. The “A” is for “age appropriate direction”; we want to make sure our directions can be understood. If they are not understood, they cannot be followed. “C” stands for “Calm & Courteous direction”; parents should be polite but firm when they give a direction. Modeling calmness for a child is a wonderful thing even though it is sometimes challenging to do. “T” is an important one – when a direction is given a parent should “tell, not ask.” This makes it clear that the direction is not optional. A good way to remember this is to start your direction with the word “please”. “Please” is polite and it is also hard to make a question when you start a sentence with the word “please.” So, “please pick up your toys” rather than “Will you pick up your toys?” “I” is for “individual direction.” When a parent is working hard to help their child learn how to behave, it’s best to start with one-step directions rather than multi-step directions. “C” is for “clear direction,” meaning it should be easy to judge if they direction is followed or not. No matter what type of system you use for consequences, you’ll need to be able to judge compliance. Finally, the “E” stands for “enough directions”; in general, parents should just use directions when needed. And, remember, when it is okay for an activity to be child-led, then directions are typically not needed.

Host: Thank you so much for joining us today Dr. Pelzel. You have shared several helpful tips I am hopeful parents will find useful. We reviewed what child-led play means, how it can be helpful, and ways to give direct commands that set both parent and child up for success.