

Your teacher says with increasing irritation, "Mark, should you have all the bears? What should you be doing with the bears? What is our rule about sharing in this classroom?" Since you are well aware of the rule, you respond with "take turns." Of course, knowing the answer to the question and giving up the bears are two different issues, so you put the bucket in your lap for safekeeping.

Completely frustrated, the teacher exclaims, "Mark, give me the bucket." You ignore her. She becomes even more agitated and shouts, "Mark do you want your name on the board? Do you want to sit by yourself?" You don't care where you go as long as the bears go with you! So you walk off with the bucket. Your teacher grabs the counting bears from your arms. You try to hold on and end up hitting her in the struggle. The next thing you know, you are at the principal's office and your mother is coming to get you. A sense of doom prevails.

In this story, the teacher began each attempt to persuade Mark to share by unconsciously assuming his intent was negative. When we attribute negative intent to others, we subtly attack them. We create a feeling of danger every time we try to make others feel bad, wrong or responsible for our upset. The other person often becomes defensive in response to the danger, creating conflict. The conflict mounts if we advance our agenda without inspiring the other person to cooperate. When we learn to attribute positive motives to others, we transform opposition into cooperation by evoking willingness.

Assigning negative intent to children's behavior does three things:

- It defines the core of the child and his behavior as bad.
- It throws us into the lower centers of the brain where blame and punishment are our only options.
- It defines the child as bad in the eyes of classmates and fellow teachers.

Assigning positive intent to children's behavior also does three things:

- It defines the core of the child as good enough and the child's behavior as needing to change.
- It keeps us in the higher centers of the brain where solutions and change are possible, and we can wisely discern which executive skills the child is missing to begin the teaching process.
- It defines the child as one who makes mistakes and is willing to learn in the eyes of classmates and fellow teachers.

Children will oppose us. Their ongoing development dictates that they will violate the rules and limits at certain times and in certain situations. Children need to say "no" to test limits and social rules. Passive and aggressive adults unconsciously invite children to test limits more often than those who are assertive. At each stage of life through adulthood, people resist and oppose to clarify who they are and what they believe.

Our response to challenging behaviors is critical. Many teachers assume children's motives are negative. Negative intent always encourages children to be more oppositional, as shown in our example. Mark's teacher unconsciously encouraged him to fight instead of cooperate by assuming he had selfish motives. Our first task is to inspire children to cooperate so we can teach them how to behave within acceptable limits.