

***Negative intent always encourages children to be more oppositional.***

When Mark's teacher first realized she had a problem, she said, "Mark, the counting bears are for all the children. How would you feel if someone had all the bears and wouldn't give you any? Don't you want to share with your friends?" Her statement tells Mark his perspective is wrong. The bears are not his. They are for everyone. The teacher also implies that Mark is selfish; a kind child would willingly share. Mark faces two choices: He can submit to her attack by admitting he is wrong and give up the counting bears, or he can defend his honor by resisting. Whether Mark submits or resists depends on his temperament, age and mood. One day he might have submitted by grumpily pushing the bucket towards the middle of the table. Another day he might have submitted by relinquishing the tub and refusing to participate. In either case, his joy in the learning process would be diminished or lost. In our example, Mark chose to resist the perceived attack by holding his bucket of bears tightly.

***Even if we refrain from a direct verbal attack on a child, our nonverbal communication (implication and tone) can hurt him deeply.***

Even if Mark didn't hear his teacher's initial attack message, he felt it. When her first attempts to influence Mark fail, the teacher steps up her unconscious attack. She says, "Mark, should you have all the bears? What should you be doing with the bears? What is our rule about sharing in this classroom?" Her negative messages have become more direct. On a deep level, Mark hears, "What's wrong with you? Are you a stupid kid? Don't you know anything?" Again, Mark is left with two choices: submit or defend. If Mark submits, he unconsciously accepts the hurtful labels (wrong, bad, stupid) and incorporates them into his self-concept. Mark again defends his position.

The teacher, now very frustrated, shouts threats, "Mark do you want your name on the board?" Her message is, "You are guilty and deserve punishment." She has upped her negative intentions to a punitive stance. You may be thinking, "But the punishment will teach him a lesson!" You may be thinking, "Doesn't he need to know his behavior was wrong?" Yes, he does need to adjust his behaviors. However, our goal is to communicate this information in a manner the child can hear and to create an environment he can maintain his dignity in while choosing to cooperate. If Mark hears repeatedly that he just wants things for himself and doesn't care about others, he will come to view himself as selfish. He will act in a way that confirms this self-image. This is called a self-fulfilling prophecy. Remember, what we focus on, we get more of. I would suggest that Mark is five years old, still learning how to share. He is trying to influence others and make the world go his way in the best way he can at the moment. If we believe our job is to equip Mark with the executive skills to do it differently next time, then a punishing approach will not serve our goal. Punishment will merely stall him in the lower brain states where learning is impossible and his skill set is limited. Rather than punish him, we need to assist Mark in regaining an executive state so he can learn that life won't always go his way, that he can handle that fact and that there are skills he can use to do it differently next time. He does not need the message that he is a bad, selfish, disrespectful little boy.

***When the attack-defend process gets rolling, communication and connection break down.***