

Why Children Laugh, Evade, or Get Angry When Being Corrected (No, your child is not a sociopath)

This morning I very calmly and gently explained to Martin that when he places a cup down on our glass coffee table, he needs to be gentle. His response: "It's not fragile! DON'T EVER SAY THAT TO ME AGAIN! Do you understand? DO YOU UNDERSTAND? This reaction is not atypical—he explodes like this on a regular basis, whenever we need to correct him or set a limit, or when he can't do something perfectly right away. When we try to reason with him, he shuts down. He'll often just cover his ears or run away. We are at a loss as to why he is so hyper-sensitive and how we are supposed to set limits with him.

When we admonish Malaika not to grab toys from the baby, or not to knock her friends' block towers down, she laughs and runs away. It's like she doesn't care that she's doing something wrong or hurtful. We're worried she has no empathy—that she can't put herself in other people's shoes.

Children laughing, refusing to make eye contact, running away, covering their ears, or getting hostile and angry when you are trying to talk to them about their “mis”behavior is a phenomenon that is understandably confusing and disturbing. If you are like many parents I work with, you may be both mortified and worried, wondering how you could be raising a child who does not appear to feel bad about hurting others, or worse, who gains pleasure from it. Herein lies one of the most challenging aspects of childrearing: we adults tend to interpret children's behavior through the lens of logic.

A child laughing or acting as if he doesn't care when he has done or said something hurtful means he has no empathy (and may be a budding sociopath, worry some parents). But we can't ascribe adult logic to children's behavior. While their actions may seem irrational and concerning at face value, when you look at it from the child's perspective, the meaning of these behaviors becomes clear and makes sense.

These evasive responses don't mean that your child lacks empathy or compassion for others. In fact, it often signals that your child is [highly sensitive](#) (HS) and has an abundance of empathy. She, in fact, feels very deeply for others. Because of how tuned in she is (often reading the most subtle facial expressions and gestures) she gets flooded with shame when she acts out in hurtful ways, which is then compounded by the distress and shame she experiences when confronted with your anger at and disappointment with her.

These highly sensitive children may also experience and react to seemingly benign corrections (i.e., not to pull a dog's tail) or directions (how to hold scissors correctly) as personal indictments, not as objective rules you are setting or helpful guidance you are offering. They are triggered quickly into feeling ashamed that they have not "performed" correctly and act out to make these uncomfortable feelings go away.

Shame is a very overwhelming and uncomfortable emotion that is hard to sit with and tolerate (for kids and adults), Laughing, turning or running away, and covering their ears are all coping mechanisms that provide protection and relief from a flood of difficult emotions—to stop you from saying things that make them uncomfortable. Facing your anger or disappointment about their behavior can be very overwhelming for HS children. Cognitively, they know they have done something unacceptable but they don't have the skills yet to stop themselves from acting on their impulses. They engage in all sorts of evasion to distract from the stress and discomfort of these encounters. They are just trying to cope with feelings they are having a hard time understanding and managing.

Because this behavior is so triggering, it can result in reacting harshly and punitively in these moments—blurting out shaming responses along the lines of, "What is wrong with you? Do you think hurting your friends is funny?" The problem is that these kinds of responses amplify your child's feelings of shame and sends her

further spiraling out of control. When children's brains are flooded with emotion, they can't think clearly, so no amount of correcting can be effective in that moment.

Instead, consider the following strategies that are not just sensitive but often much more effective in helping HS children ultimately reflect on and learn to take responsibility for their actions.

What you can do:

- **Make a mindshift.** Move from seeing your child as being purposefully hurtful or unwilling to take responsibility for his actions to seeing that your child is having a hard time managing feelings of shame. He needs your support to learn to manage these big emotions.
- **If your child laughs, sticks out his tongue or covers his ears, ignore it.** Telling him to stop or asking him why he is doing this only reinforces these responses. Plus, kids don't know why they are reacting in this way. If your child is turning away, don't try to force him to make eye contact. You can't actually make him look you in the eye, so this can turn into a power struggle and divert attention away from the incident at hand. Hold him securely and lovingly and say something along these lines: "I know, you don't like when mommy/daddy needs to help you think about your behavior."
- **Discuss the incident when your child is calm.** Our natural impulse as adults is to use logic to teach our kids a lesson in these maddening moments. But when children are overwhelmed emotionally, they don't have access to the part of the brain that enables them to think and reason. Wait until your child has calmed down to engage in any reflecting and teaching.
- **Retell the story:** "Mommy asked you to be gentle when you put your cup down on the glass table because it is fragile and can break. I meant this to be helpful — just like when your teachers give you a direction at school — but you got very upset." Pause to allow your child to respond. You might ask if he thought you were angry or were criticizing him. Explain that sometimes people hear things in a way that the other person doesn't mean. Or, "You were mad that Maisie wouldn't give you the magna tile you wanted. You were frustrated and knocked her structure down. You lost control. It feels hard to think and talk about it. I understand that feeling." Recounting the incident matter-of-factly without judgment or shaming reduces defensiveness,

making it more likely your child will feel safe to look at his feelings and reactions—the critical first step to his ultimately being able to take responsibility for his behavior and make positive changes.

- **What about making kids say “sorry”?** I am not a fan of trying to force kids to do this for several reasons: 1) It falls into the category of things you cannot actually make your child do, so it can lead to a protracted power struggle when your child resists saying a mea culpa; and, 2) Children often comply with the adult's direction to say "sorry" but it is devoid of meaning. Instead, once the incident is over, talk with your child about how his actions affect others—without shaming or judgment—to limit the chance he will shut down. Explain that being unkind with his words or actions is not just hurtful to the other child, it's not good for him because it makes others have negative or uncomfortable feelings about him. That's why you are going to help him find other ways to express his feelings. (When we just focus on the aggrieved child it can lead to more defensiveness and shutting down.) Then give him choices: he can say "sorry," he can take action to make it better—for example by helping to rebuild the tower that he knocked down; he can offer a comforting gesture; or, he can dictate a note or draw a picture to give to the child. Choices reduce defiance.

Approaching these incidents calmly and dispassionately, without shaming and indicting the child, makes it less likely that she will rely on avoidance and evasion and more likely that she will learn to express her emotions in acceptable ways. After all, that is the ultimate goal.