

Parenting Q&A

Advice by Paul Sweetow, LCSW

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My son's six-year-old friend was telling my son about how "cool" *Mission Impossible* (the movie) is. My son only watches cartoons and animated films at this point. What is the appropriate age to start introducing these more adult movies to my children? —Movie Dad

Dear Movie Dad:

I personally relate very well to your question. When Jacob, my son, was about six-years-old I took him to a James Bond movie. I felt it was a father/son rite of passage and a fun diversion for me as I was overdosing on animated films! It was a mistake. Although Jacob has turned out just fine and I don't believe any lasting psychological damage was done, the truth is that the movie was too violent and had too many mature themes. *Mission Impossible* is probably quite similar.

As parents we guide on a continuum with one side being permissive and the other side being firm and setting limits. Most of us do this naturally, for example, when it comes to letting our children play outside. We are dynamically moving from strict limits – *stay in the backyard for playtime* – to more permissiveness – *drive by yourself to sports practice* – as our children age.

Think of movies, and all media and screens in much the same way. Nowadays, I err towards setting firmer limits and moving slower towards permissiveness, especially when it comes to media and screens. The content is more violent and sexual than it was when we were children. It's also easily accessible to our children on the variety of the devices with which they are surrounded.

Please consider at what age your son will begin to understand the meaning of killing and death, which is exactly what he'll see on the screen. As his abstract thinking develops at approximately

8 – 11 years old, he'll have greater depth of understanding what that all means.

Let your son know why you want him to wait; be honest about how violent these movies are and that people getting killed is not cool. You can also let him know that he'll have plenty of opportunities to watch these movies in the future. In all my years, I've never had teens complain that they weren't exposed to violence early enough. Your son may feel upset because his peer got to do something he has not, but he'll learn to tolerate that pain and be the better for it. It's another teaching opportunity. He will share many experiences with his friends, but not all of them, and that's okay.

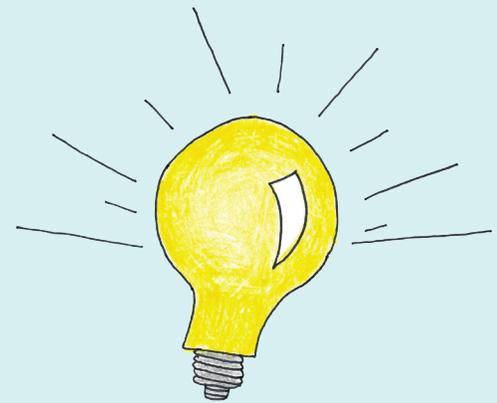
My daughter is consistently losing and forgetting things. I worry about how this will translate when she is older and in elementary school and has more responsibility. How can I help her create systems and order so she is equipped? —Wondering in Northfield

Dear Wondering in Northfield:

Great news, you essentially answered your own question. Yes, creating systems is critical to your daughter's success and will greatly reduce her stress and increase her happiness. Systems are created using predictable and consistent routines. We often label these issues as *executive functioning*. I call it: know where your stuff is and what you need to do – *Logistics*.

Do you know where your car keys are? Of course you do. You have the same consistent place where you keep them in your home and thus, they are easily retrieved. When your daughter can easily retrieve the things that she needs within about 30 seconds or less, she is then on her way to having great executive functioning.

Start with walking your talk. Don't ask your daughter to do anything that you aren't doing. Next, pick one item that she needs on a daily basis; perhaps her shoes would be a great start. Find a consistent place in your home where she always leaves her shoes. Then build from there, adding more items with each one having a consistent location.



"A lighting bug has wings and a light bulb on his back, right?"

—Simon, age 3

I love the T.R.A.F. system for organization and have taught this for over two decades and it's never failed. Every item in her room should be either T = Thrown in the garbage, R = Referred out for someone to work on (for children this may be a permission slip that needs your signature), A = Act on it, (such as homework or a puzzle to be completed), F = File it, (put the paper in a subject folder or a toy in the toy box).

The T.R.A.F. system is great for both children and adults. Again, don't underestimate how important your

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modeling behaviors are. Children learn far more from what their parents do rather than what they say.

Forgetting things is a bit different than losing things but still is under the umbrella of executive functioning. We forget things when our focus is on the final step rather than all of the incremental ones. Children get excited about step #4 and thus forget steps #2 and #3. To help children with this, I teach them to *connect the dots* that lead to the place they want to be.

For example, there may be several steps to get ready to go swimming.



Me: **"I love you, buddy!"**

Five: **"I love 'ta party, too!"**

It's either time for a hearing check for Philip or a vocabulary lesson!

—1.5-year-old

You ask your daughter, "Want to go swimming?" She runs to find her swim suit and is out the door in a flash. But wait, what about her goggles, pool toys, and floatation arm bands? Review the steps and items she needs to remember and use the phrase, "connect the dots." With enough repetition over many scenarios she will start to connect the dots on her own, forget less often, retrieve what she needs, and voilà life is good!

How can I spend my last year with my child in three-hour kindergarten? He has the rest of his life to take organized classes. What amazing local two-hour adventures can we take together before full-day first grade? —Adventurer

Dear Adventurer:

I love your thoughts about spending quality time with your child! It highlights the difference between a parenting attitude of "I got to" and "I get to" spend time with my child. What a difference one vowel can make! Adventures of all kinds have one thing in common: curiosity. And that is the virtue that you will instill in your child – what a gift you will be giving him.

So the answer to your question about what "amazing local two-hour adventure can we take..." is mostly that everything can be an adventure if we are curious. Tell your son that when you go on an adventure he can be either "Fascinated or Frustrated". Let him know that some adventures are playful and some are challenging; and both can be amazing.

Some playful local adventures I love are children's museums like Kohl Children's Museum in Glenview, Chicago Children's Museum, or any of the museums downtown that have children's exhibits. More fun during the cold weather might include a few hours at an indoor play facility. Better yet, get dressed warm and go for a winter hike at our local forest preserve. Play fascinating games with your son: see how many different types of live animals or plants you can find. Have him help prepare and pack a lunch and have a cold picnic that he helped to make! Bring your video game machine and see how many pieces you can smash it into and clean it up (a bit radical, I know!).

Challenging adventures can be even more meaningful and memorable – think of these as a mini Heroes Journey. Prepare your son and reframe the excitement of an adventure that may challenge him intellectually and/or physically. Say, "Let's plan to do something that will be kind of hard for us so we can grow and learn. Some stuff we may win or succeed at and some stuff we might not overcome

today and that's okay." I often ask the young children I work with if they know what 1+1 equals? They say, "Sure, it's 2". Next, I ask them would it be fun if we keep learning 1+1 over and over and we never learn more difficult math? They say, "No, that would be boring." And, I say, "Great, then let's challenge ourselves... what an adventure!"

Make challenges fun and attainable in either short or long term efforts – let him know that with an adventurous spirit he can have a great life and reach some lofty goals. Years ago, my son and I visited Boston for a baseball game. During that visit we had many adventures that that great city offers. We visited a famous university and I asked him what he saw and he said, "I see people and buildings." I said, "That's Harvard." ●

For a list of great outdoor play spaces in our area, or ideas for indoor and outdoor play, visit the Alliance's Let's Play webpage (www.TheAllianceForEC.org).

Have a question you would like addressed by Dr. Sweetow? Submit it to **Director@TheAllianceForEC.org**.