

ALL THINGS MATERNAL – A THERAPIST’S PERSPECTIVE

By Deena Solwren, LCSW

Q: My 4 year old son refuses to stop kicking the back of the front car seat. He will cry and scream if he’s not allowed to kick. How can I stop him from kicking without having him throw a fit?

It can be exasperating trying to deal with a child kicking the back of your seat when attempting to drive and a child yelling and screaming in the small, enclosed space of a car – especially when you really have to get somewhere.

Of course this situation is upsetting, but what aspects of it most trouble you? Is it the physical discomfort of being kicked repeatedly in the back...or the din of crying and screaming...or that your child won’t listen and behave when you ask...or safety concerns due to difficulty concentrating in an uncomfortable environment...or worries about the interior of the car being damaged...or not knowing what to do to get him to behave...or ... ?

What you think about the situation will influence how you feel about it. I wonder what your emotional reactions are? Does the kicking incite feelings of anger or anxiety? Does the yelling and screaming leave you feeling out of control or angry or ashamed? Any number of a wide of range of reactions may be precipitated by such undesirable behaviors.

When pushed to one’s wits end, it’s easy to resort to intimidating and overpowering the child with one’s own yelling and use of physical restraints to obtain compliance. In the short term, this may induce the child to stop misbehaving, but ultimately it backfires. You both end up feeling bad, guilty and ashamed for inappropriate behaviors. Your yelling or corporal punishment makes him feel bad about himself and scared of you. It breaches the secure attachment bond leaving the child feeling insecure and ambivalent towards his parent - the person he most needs to provide for him a safe haven in the world. At his still tender age, in his eyes, you are always right and all knowing. So, if you are treating him like he’s bad, he’ll come to believe that about himself. Losing a parents love is the ultimate negative consequence for a child. The most important thing to him is your love and admiration. This instills in him an internal self representation that he is inherently good. And ultimately, this helps him mature into a responsive, responsible and independent person.

Determining why the behaviors are happening will provide direction as to how to intervene effectively. His acting out communicates something he doesn’t know how to articulate. How do you understand his behaviors? Does he kick out of anger, frustration, boredom, or discomfort? Are these new behaviors or an already established pattern?

Can he finally reach the back of the seat in front of him whereas before he was too small? Does he feel boxed in or trapped? Does he not want to be in the car or restrained in his car seat? Is his car seat properly adjusted to his size? Is it self-stimulating behavior? Does he have other things to do or play with to entertain himself? Does he kick only when behind the driver's seat where he can't see you? Is he trying to get your attention – and negative attention is better than no attention? Does it happen each time he's in the car or just sometimes? If it happens sporadically, why? Are there particular places he doesn't want to go? Is he tired or hungry?

His crying and screaming, just like the kicking, is a form of communication. He's telling you how he feels by acting out what he cannot say with words. Does he yell and scream out of anger, frustration or shame? Like so many of us at any age, we don't like to be told "no," reprimanded, or restrained. Feeling irritated, angry, resentment and shame are normal human emotions. What's important is how we express them. As we mature, we understand why we can and can't do myriad things. We learn to accept much that we don't like, to repress our true feelings, and to discuss our reactions rather than act out.

Many sensitive children absorb the energy being communicated even if they don't understand all the words. Your feelings of love and concern or anger and tension will be transmitted and provoke a reaction. Depending on your child's personality, he may reply in kind and return the anger, and/or feel hurt and/or ashamed and/or scared. While his emotional responses may be complex, they get communicated through crying and screaming. Just as a new parent learns to interpret her infant's cries when hungry or tired or wet, we must learn how to interpret an older child's inarticulate communications and then strive to help him find the right words to say what he wants and needs rather than act out. Some articulate 4 year old children can explain why they do certain things, particularly when guided with limited choices such as responding to yes or no questions.

Many 4 year olds are beginning to exhibit greater levels of self control and remember what's asked of them for longer periods of time; although, they often need frequent reminders. Prepare ahead of time for the car ride. When not in the car, engage him in a calm conversation. Explain in clear, age appropriate language the positive behaviors you expect him to exhibit as well as stating what not to do. It may be acceptable to sing, clap hands, talk, play with a special toy. Explain why kicking the seat is improper. Identify and discuss a range of consequences for misbehavior ahead of time. Remind him of what you expect shortly before getting in the car, and remind him again once you are in the car. If he begins to misbehave, a simple reminder will likely put him back on the right track. Be sure to reward appropriate behavior with praise and admiration.

Changing behaviors and learning new skills takes time and patience. Your four year old didn't learn to walk, use the potty, feed or dress himself overnight. With your support, guidance, and gentle reminders, he will learn what behaviors are acceptable to you. Over time, he will develop the cognitive capacity to remember and the self control to do what you and he both desire.

“All Things Maternal” is a trademark of Deena Solwren’s. Deena is an experienced licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) and a mom who’s been there. She has a private psychotherapy practice with offices in Rockridge and Pinole. She works with individuals and couples regarding infertility, pregnancy, post-partum adjustment, attachment parenting, changing roles & changing self image, balancing work & family life, and mother/daughter relationships. She is currently accepting new clients and may be reached at (510)594-8224.