



## **We Can Learn So Much about Ourselves from our Kids** *by Arthur Barrett*

As a father of young children, I have come to realize how much we can learn from our kids. In so many ways, they are really pint-sized adults (or maybe we are just oversized kids!). It is uncanny how my boys' minds operate just like a mature adult's (or at least like mine). I get a lesson every day in communication, expectation, and adaptation.

While our learning initiative at Barrett University started with our Communications course, I am getting a more rigorous education at home. Michael is 2, and Brian just turned 4. For about two years Brian has been relentless in making sure he and I have a "meeting of the minds" after every conversation. Brian will never settle for a one-word answer. Instead, my response has to paraphrase his original question. For example, if he asks "Can I call Aunt Julia after supper?"; I have to say, "Yes, we can call Aunt Julia after supper." A simple "Yes" will not suffice. At times, I think Brian could be a guest lecturer for our Active Listening class at Barrett University.

Michael can be just as animated, but with simpler sentence structures. Michael gets excited when he uses a new word. If I repeat what I heard, and it is not the word he heard himself pronounce, frustration sets in for both of us. Driving on 95 recently, a siren passed us heading south while we were passing a red truck northbound. Here is a recap of the conversation.

Michael: (excited) "See the \_\_\_ truck?"

Daddy: "Yes, I see the red truck."

Michael: (agitated) "No, fire truck!"

Daddy: (Certain he is still saying "red truck") "Yes, I see the red truck."

Michael (frustrated) "No, fire truck!!"

Daddy: (frustrated) "Brian, what is he saying?"

Brian: "He's saying *fire* truck."

Daddy: "Oh, yes, I see the fire truck." (long past, never saw it)

Michael: (relieved) "Yea!"

Daddy: (relieved) "Thank you, Brian."

How often does a similar disconnect occur at work? You may be listening intently to a customer or teammate, yet your brain is making a translation that is completely off the mark from what the speaker (in his mind) is telling you. I use my Active Listening tools with Brian and Michael to paraphrase back to them what I hear, and confirm *my* perception of *their* message. I definitely need to use these skills more consistently at work.

When I come home from work, feeling pretty tired, I have to keep my guard up to make sure I don't enter into any verbal contracts with my kids that I will soon regret. They don't tolerate any backpedaling once the agreement is "signed". The same holds true at our company. Every employee can bank on the response of his/her manager, and work to eliminate ambiguity in those conversations.

Whereas I tend to avoid conflict, Brian attacks conflict head-on. Brian is teaching me that it is better to face the issue and deal with it at the outset, instead of ducking the issue and hoping that the other party will let the matter drop. (See what I mean about Brian's tenacity – he can be so cunning that I am now referring to this 4-year-old as "the other party".) Skirting the issue in the hope that it will go away is never successful at home, because Brian and Michael never let you "forget".

The same holds true at work for me – an employee or customer may not be as blunt as Brian, but they don't forget either. It is always preferable to use those Active Listening skills and ask your internal or external customer to reiterate in his/her own words the "meeting of the minds". Make sure both sides have the same understanding and are truly *in agreement*.

Whenever we need to break Michael's routine, he does much better if given some level of control over the situation. For example, Michael likes to wear blue socks every morning. If we don't have any clean blue socks, he can go nutty. Instead of forcing him to wear red or gray socks, I will hold them up and let him choose. Michael is much more tolerant of the problem when he controls the alternative choices.

While the boys hate disappointment, they dislike last-minute surprises even more. The nighttime routine is the best example, because it is a daily routine that still requires careful management by Mom and Dad. We like to end the night with a quiet video that reinforces the bedtime theme. Even though the intent is obvious to Ann and me, the boys still need that "two-minute warning" that their bedroom is their destiny. We cannot just snap off the TV at the end of the video and expect Brian and Michael to accept their fate. A simple heads up 5-10 minutes before the end of the video goes a long way toward a smooth transition to night-night.

The same is true at work. Whether it is a client or a teammate, you will better manage the transition if you are able to:

- Give the customer fair warning; and
- Offer alternative ("next-best") solutions to the dilemma.

The worst scenario is when we wrestle with the boys to stay in bed, think we have finally won that battle of wits, and get the boys to accept their fate for the night; only to have Brian holler downstairs that we forgot to say prayers! As I said, these boys never let you forget. Prayers are part of the nightly routine, and Brian just does not tolerate changes to his routines.

Didn't Darwin tell us, in *Survival of the Fittest*, that it is not the strongest specie, but that which best adapts to change, that is the likeliest survivor? I guess, then, I am leading by example for Brian and Michael; because they are definitely shaping me to behave just to their liking. (And now it is payback time, because Brian and Michael have a new baby brother to go along with a new baby cousin; and all that undivided attention from their aunts and uncles is a distant memory!)

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