

*Six Trade Secrets about Parenting:
One Approach Does Not Work for All*

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My colleague (Dr. Heaton) and I get the privilege and task to sit and listen to many parents and their children as they journey through critical life adjustments. Sometimes those adjustments are specifically focused on the child's development, and sometimes it is the overall family that is experiencing a developmental need or challenge. For everyone (psychologist, parent, and child alike) it can sometimes feel like we are a herd of harried cats trying to decide if we can all work, play, and live together. Other times we may wonder "Do we even want to?"

Let us give you a glimpse into some therapy trade secrets. Every parent and every child, whether in the therapy office or in the family room, has the much same struggle and feels much the same way. All it takes is for two humans (not even three or more like in a family) to be in the same space and there is bound to be confusion of some kind. What usually happens when people or family members try to work something out is that they each have a different idea about the experience and want at least two different responses. It's the same for husband and wife, siblings, and parent and child and may get even more complicated when you're trying to work something out between three or more people.

Here's the ***first trade secret***: No one's opinion in the twosome or the group is right on its own merit, because one person can have only one perspective of the experience or need and there are two or more people involved. Answer: listen, listen, listen to each other and only then work to collaborate on a response.

Second trade secret: It is sometimes more important for two personalities to blend well together than it is for any one personality to get their way – it’s called relating... Seriously, the idea of “goodness-of-fit” is huge in relationships. Goodness-of-fit includes the concept of working on how each personality can collaborate and bond with the other, in the service of each person’s unique needs, all the while celebrating their differences. The strongest bonds sometimes seem to come from things and people who are different and yet find ways of complimenting each other wonderfully.

Third trade secret: Parents should be mindful that not every child needs the same type of encouragement, parental involvement, structure, or discipline. While it may be easier to have a “one size fits all approach,” especially from a parenting and household management perspective, if you have just one child that is different than just one parent, you will be required by “life” to make adjustments based on personalities alone. The goal is to match the task with the child’s personality and developmental needs.

Trade secret number four: We have too often found that the behavior of the child, upon closer inspection, seems to reflect greater family needs and issues. In other words, though the child may be struggling or misbehaving, when we look a little deeper we find that the family system or the marital relationship reveals an issue that is something greater than the child can handle. Thus, the child’s behavior and/or emotional struggles, in some instances, may reflect environmental stress with which the child is unable to cope. Parents, when dealing with an individual child, would be wise to consider the overall family and marriage environments.

Trade secret number five: Relationships are more important than behaviors or to be proverbial, don't get lost in the trees of behavior and forget about the greater forest of the relationship. It is said that "Rebuke without relationship breeds rebellion." To state this differently, work on the relationship first and changes in behavior will follow. Make sure your child knows that you are their greatest advocate and encourager before you work on their behaviors. A good coach is one who can pull the greatest from someone, not push the best into them. Make your limit setting about being "for them" and they will sacrifice for you and their future.

Trade secret number six: No one gets it all right all the time. Forgiveness is the greatest parenting tool, when received and when given. We are not shooting for perfect; just good enough to let our families and our children reach their potential. Parents, don't be afraid to say "I blew it and we need to start over." If you don't setup a power struggle likely they won't either. And, if they do, a power response will likely breed more power struggles. Plus, it's just wonderful when we all just don't take ourselves too seriously.

If you've got a parenting question, maybe we can share a trade secret. Email us at allen@vitalsources.org or aaron@vitalsources.org. Put "parenting question" in the subject lines. Checkout our website for more info., www.vitalsources.org.