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Pick your battles wisely

- **BEHAVIOUR**



by Michael Grose

Three-year-old Sam was tired and cranky. He refused his mother's request to put his plate in the sink after a snack.

Elsa, Sam's mother, who was usually quite firm didn't insist that her son comply. She knew that when her son got into 'one of those moods' it was best to leave him alone.

"You've got to pick your battles," said an exasperated Elsa to the other parents in the room.

She also added, "You've got to pick the timing of your battles." Tired and emotional kids are incapable of processing what a parent is saying. Reason goes out the window.

This was a smart piece of parenting by Elsa. She could have easily locked herself into a battle of wills with her son, but it would have been a fairly pointless exercise. She may have won the battle, but at the cost of an agitated son and ongoing resentment.

Is winning your aim?

Often the battles we have with kids are about bigger issues such as power ("You should do as I say!") and control ("This is the way things should be.") rather than immediate issues such as cleanliness and tidiness. Good sense goes out the window when we get locked into disputes with children.

Do you choose the right time?

Like all parents, Elsa wants to develop good habits in her child, but wisely she picks the time and place to do so. The best time for productive teaching and habit-forming is when parents and kids are fresh and on good terms. Spending enjoyable one-on-one time with kids is such a wonderful opportunity for relationship-building and teaching.

What battles do you pick?

The battles you have with your children reveal a great deal about your parenting values. If you find that you stand your ground over a child's disrespectful behaviour toward a sibling or friend then respect is a strong value you hold. If you always insist that your child uses good manners even when they are tired, then fair treatment and

good manners are strongly held values. If you insist that your child is kind and generous to others, and you find yourself bristling at their selfishness, then generosity is more than likely a trait you value highly. We tend to fight hard for the values that we hold dearly, and become upset when our kids don't follow suit.

Do you sweat the small stuff?

Sometimes children and young people can display a multitude of annoying behaviours and attitudes when going through difficult times. For instance, a young person may leave their bedroom messy, repeatedly sleep in, pick fights with siblings, continually argue with their parents and always come home late from school. If a parent fights with their child over everything then they are in for an emotionally draining time and a deterioration in their relationship. It would be better to ignore most of the minor misbehaviours and focus on the more significant behaviours such as how a young person treats others.

If, for instance, a young person continually swears at and is critical of a younger sibling, would you pick up on the swearing or the put down? I'd suggest that the put down is far more harmful than swearing and should be the focus of your attention. Often, we focus on the minor stuff at the expense of the more significant issues because it's easier and less stressful that way.

Do you avoid all battles?

As much as we'd like always to maintain good relationships with our children, this doesn't have to come at the expense of good child-rearing. The parent who never goes into battle with their children is generally not doing them any favours. This is known as the Laissez-faire or permissive approach where parents are high on relationship-building and low on firmness and boundaries. It's far better for kids if you adopt a collaborative or authoritative approach where there's a healthy mix of relationship-building and firmness. Parents who use this approach are generally adept at picking their battles, specifically those that should be ignored and those that are worth spending time and energy on. They also have spent a great deal of time building up enough goodwill with their kids that enables them to survive disagreements that they may have.

So, pick your battles wisely. Avoid using up energy and goodwill by fighting with kids over minor stuff, or when they are obviously tired and cranky. On the other hand, make sure you pick them up on the really important stuff regardless of their moods, which is where your parenting values come in.