



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

Changing Behavior by Changing Belief Systems

What you think about yourself and your world significantly impacts what you do every moment of your life. Changing those underlying belief systems is critical to maintaining any long term behavior change.

Three belief systems seem to be particularly problematic with young people.

1. **School should always be interesting and every teacher should be loving, funny, and a great entertainer.** This belief system leads to unrealistic expectations and causes many kids to blame teachers when learning gets tough or boring.

Annie is in fourth grade and does very well in some subjects but terribly in others. After many hours of testing by a school psychologist, it was determined that she was an above average learner who was unmotivated about school.

The real problem wasn't Annie's laziness but her views about education. For years, her parents and others kept telling her that "learning is fun." While that is sometimes true, apparently Annie never heard that learning can also be boring and hard work.

Parents need to reset their children's outlook about education. I tell kids that school is work, similar to what their parents do every day. There are times when it is fun and exciting, and other times when it is boring and tedious.

2. **I really matter to the world.** Many kids get a message about how special and important they are to everyone. They get an incessant amount of attention from parents who cater to their kids' whims and wants. Many children develop an intense sense of entitlement that the world revolves around them.

I deliver a different message:

With 6.8 billion people in the world, most people neither know nor care anything about you. What you need or want doesn't matter to these billions of people. In spite of what your parents said, you are not really "special" unless you work hard and accomplish something.

The world will judge you by how you act. Nurture your relationships with family and friends, for they are the only people who truly love you.

3. **My feelings are really important, and I should feel comfortable about whatever I do.** Stop listening to your parents' lectures that you should have a positive self concept and feel good about the "real you." That's "parent talk" that has no meaning in the real world.

Rather than being so introspective, focus more on accomplishing things that matter. Spend less time reflecting on your feelings and more time developing habits of hard work, focus, and persistence in the face of failure. A meaningful self-concept comes from what you achieve, not how you feel. You will feel good about yourself when you do good things.

Instead of always looking for rewards and punishments to change your children's behavior, focus attention on those underlying belief systems. That's the real way to achieve change in your child's behavior.

Gregory Ramey, Ph.D., is a child psychologist and vice president for outpatient services at The Children's Medical Center of Dayton. For more of his columns, visit www.childrensdayton.org/ramey.