

Teaching Our Kids to Be Ready for Transition

(Names have been changed, facts are real.)

By David Funk Co-author of Teaching with Love and Logic

Andy and His Parents

When Andy was diagnosed with a fairly severe disability that affected his behavior, his parents were acutely aware that without some specific instruction, Andy may not learn to be responsible for his own decisions. Andy's parents loved their son, to be sure, and knew that he had to work harder than other kids when it came to meeting school expectations. It was painful, at times, for them to see Andy struggle. Admittedly, they often wanted to bail their son out of some of these situations. However, they realized that eventually Andy would be on his own and for him to accept responsibility for his decisions would give him a great advantage in life.

An advantage Andy's parents had was they had actually learned a strategy called "Four Steps to Teaching Responsibility" at a conference. The handout the parents received explained that strategy as follows:

- 1. Give the chance to act responsibly.** By providing Andy with tasks well within his ability, his parents provided him with a lot of practice opportunities.
- 2. Expect (even hope and pray) a mistake will be made.** By having this mind set, the parents did not get all churned up when Andy did fall a bit short of the mark. Mistakes allowed Andy the opportunity for "real world" learning experiences.
- 3. Stand back and allow the consequences, accompanied by liberal doses of sincere empathy, to do the teaching.** As with all kids, Andy needed to learn that mistakes made because of poor decisions are a bummer—for him. The empathy provided by the parents increases the chance that Andy would spend time thinking about his own life and decisions instead of focusing on anger or other emotional reaction of the adult.
- 4. Give the same task again.** This sends the unstated (implied) message to Andy that his parents believed he was wise and capable enough to learn from his mistakes. This builds resiliency and wisdom—two very good things to have when parts of life are hard.

Andy's parents loved their son, but did not want him living with them forever. To be sure, Andy had problems in school, but by the time he graduated he had learned a sense of personal responsibility that held him in good stead. This sense of responsibility also prepared him for when school would no longer be there as a support.

Andy did not get to where he was by chance. To be sure, he had supportive parents. But perhaps more importantly, he had parents who loved him enough to allow him to

learn from the consequences of his decisions. They became quite good at implementing “The Four Steps to Responsibility” and used this strategy several times as Andy was growing up. The “sessions” were usually not very dramatic—the parents used common kid-stuff as an opportunity for Andy to learn. For this article, they provided the following story as a specific example of how they implemented this four-step strategy.

The Cleaning Lesson

When Andy was in middle school, he was not known for keeping his room tidy. Because a certain level of cleanliness was a rule of the house, Andy’s mom periodically asked him to clean his room—the only area of the house specifically allotted to him. One day when Andy’s mom asked him to spend some time picking up his things, her request was met by a sassy remark, “If you want my room cleaned, you can do it yourself.” Now, rather than go into a rant, Andy’s mom had learned to stay calm in such situations, and answered her somewhat surly son with the comment, “That’s an option—I’ll think about that,” and went about her business.

Andy’s mom could stay calm in this situation because she had come to recognize these are ideal opportunities to utilize the “Four Steps to Teaching Responsibility.” The other advantage of the mom staying calm is that Andy had learned after a very few experiences with this technique that when there was a problem and the adult was calm, that problem usually ended up being Andy’s to deal with.

The “incident” happened on a Saturday. When Andy went to school the next Monday, his mom actually straightened up his room. You see, Andy had “suggested this,” and the mom actually confirmed it as an “option.” She also knew just how to use such situations to teach her son a valuable lesson without scolding, demoralizing, sarcasm, or having him get mad at her.

Let’s analyze the situation and how the strategy fits.

First (Step 1), picking up his room was well within Andy’s ability. The first step of this strategy was done and, as long as we know our kids well, is a relatively easy part of this intervention.

Second (Step Two), the parents had come to learn that when kids make mistakes, those incidents can be valuable learning experiences for them—if the parents do not interfere with the process by getting overly emotionally involved. Andy’s decision to comment was, indeed, a mistake. However, his mom was prepared for such incidents and was not all that upset. Rather than use up her energy by being irked and frustrated, she used her energy to think how this could be a lesson to help Andy learn wisdom.

Third (Step Three), there are almost always consequences to decisions. You may remember that the mom did straighten up Andy’s room—and that took her time and energy. She noted that cost to her because she knew that would be an important

factor in Andy's lesson. It really didn't take too long to implement this third step. Actually it was that next Wednesday when Andy asked his mom to drive him to soccer practice. Now is when the consequence part of this strategy comes into play.

Upon Andy's request, the mom said, with a tone of legitimate care (i.e., empathy) in her voice, that she would really like to help out, but she had already used the time and energy for soccer driving this week to clean Andy's room last Saturday. However, she also reminded Andy that he should feel free to ask again in the future. True to expectations, Andy pouted and tried to guilt his mom by saying she was letting the soccer team down. His mom acknowledged Andy's comments by acknowledging his disappointment, but held her ground. Interestingly enough, within about 10 minutes, Andy found another way to get to practice. He was late, but that's OK as well— being late that day was one of those "consequence things" the parents allowed to happen. (By the way, they also let Andy do the explaining to the coach.)

Fourth (Step Four), giving the same responsibility again allows kids to learn from their mistakes. A couple of weeks later, Andy's room was again a mess. His mom took note and on a Saturday morning she mentioned to Andy she would like him to straighten up his room. This time, his response was not so sassy. In fact, he asked, "Is this going to be the same deal as last time?" His mom responded, "Probably so," and left to do her own chores. About a half hour later she checked in with Andy to see how things were going. Although he wasn't done, he was well on his way to having his stuff organized. His mom drove him to soccer the next Wednesday.

Making the Connection

So, what is the connection between a child cleaning his room and doing well after high school? The key is learning responsibility and for the child to understand that "when I make good decisions, things usually turn out well for me and when I make bad decisions, things don't usually work out that well." This is the essence of wisdom and is learned over time and from multiple experiences. Children make mistakes and how the adults in the child's life handle those mistakes is important.

The gift Andy's parents taught him was that he is responsible for the consequences of his own decisions. In the process, he learned self-advocacy, how to value his own ability to make things better for himself, and the skill of working with others. He still had reading and math deficits and he still had to work harder than most of his peers. However, before he was finished with high school, he was ready to transition to the next part of his life.

The lesson of this story is based on the principles of Love and Logic ©. Readers are encouraged to visit the website at <loveandlogic.com> for other resources and ideas for parenting and teaching.