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Sesame Family Newsletter

November 28, 2007

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**Don't Use Reverse Psychology!**

by Jordan Brown

When his daughter gets defiant, a dad gets playful.

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**OLIVIA VERSUS THE BROCCOLI**

Parenting can sometimes be a hair-pulling, nail-biting, headache-inducing experience. (Depending on the kind of day you're having, I suspect some of you may be thinking, "What do you mean SOMETIMES, buster?!") For me, the frustrating side of fatherhood usually emerges when I'm overwhelmed and impatiently urging my children to get dressed, finish their meals, use the potty. My kids usually detect my stress level, and often respond by being even more defiant and difficult. It's a volatile combination that usually leads to a lose-lose outcome. From time to time, I manage to avoid the "perfect storm" by digging into my bag of parenting tricks, and pulling out a marvelous, underused elixir: reverse psychology.

As you probably know, "reverse psychology" is a strategy for getting someone to do something they don't want to do by suggesting that he or she do the opposite. Over the years, I have used this method with my children, Olivia (age 3) and Finn (age 6), in a number of contexts. During lunch, I might look at Olivia's plate, and see that she hasn't eaten any of her vegetables. I say: "1-2-3-4-5. Okay, there are FIVE pieces of broccoli on your plate. You're probably too full to eat them. [big pause] Hey, I feel really, REALLY tired. I'm going to take a little nap. Olivia, would you PLEASE make sure that NO ONE eats any of this broccoli?" Then after a brief completely fake snooze (peppered with exaggerated snores), I wake up "disoriented." With a big smile, Olivia urges me to look at her plate.

"Don't worry, sweetie!" I assure her. "All five pieces of broccoli are just where we left them." Olivia



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laughs. I then count the broccoli, and act shocked that some are missing. "WHAT?! There are only THREE pieces of broccoli here! What happened to the rest?" Olivia responds, "A ghost took them."

"A ghost that likes broccoli?!" I exclaim. "That's weird! Well, I hope the Broccoli Ghost doesn't come back." Then, I take a nap again and again until all the broccoli is gone, gobbled up by my happy daughter. The final act of this little game involves my saying, "I WISH I could catch that ghost. He's soooo sneaky." To which Olivia responds, giggling and grinning, as if she's sharing the biggest secret of all time. "I'M the ghost, Daddy!" she cries, "I'M the ghost!"

Now, I should point out a few behind-the-scenes details. First, this strategy only works when Olivia is hungry, well-rested, and in a good mood. Second, I can't be doing anything else except giving Olivia my undivided attention. If she sees me trying to sneak a peek at the newspaper, or make a to-do list, she won't play along. The key is turning a potentially combative situation into a silly and fun one. Rather than a parent versus child struggle, I'm implicitly saying, "If you're willing to eat your veggies like a good girl, then Daddy will play a funny game with you." And, thank goodness, Olivia likes this arrangement much of the time.

## GO WITH THE FLOW

A word of caution, though: Be careful not to overuse "reverse psychology." In small doses, at the right time, it is almost magical. But like any parenting "trick," if you use it too frequently, it will become ineffective. Take Olivia's potty training, for example. For almost a year, Olivia has been "experimenting" with learning to use the toilet instead of her diaper. For many months, Olivia was eager to show off her ability to pee on the potty. Much of this enthusiasm had to do with encouragement and practice at Olivia's preschool.

These days, Olivia seems reluctant to tell us when she needs to use the potty. My hunch is that when she's deeply involved in some game with Finn, or watching a favorite TV show, she doesn't want to stop the fun just to go to the bathroom. The novelty of using the potty has worn off. So, to try to head off an "accident," every hour or so, I'll casually say, "So, Olivia, should we take a break and use the potty?" And she almost always says, "NO! I don't need to go!" So, taking her at her word, I back off. Then, as the movie scriptwriters say, "CUT TO" Olivia with a big, soggy, stinky diaper, and a sweet expression on her face. Unprompted, she'll come over to me and say, "I don't have poopy!" And sometimes adding, without irony, "See? I told you when I had to go!"

To encourage Olivia to use the potty, I sometimes use "reverse psychology." By changing the situation from a struggle to a playful contest that she knows she'll win, I can motivate her to be more cooperative. Before dressing her in the morning, I might suggest that she TRY going to the potty. If she resists (OK, WHEN she resists), I switch gears and suggest a playful challenge: "Guess what? I'm going to get to the potty BEFORE you. On your mark, get set!" Before I can finish my sentence, a running, giggling Olivia darts for the nearest bathroom and hops on the toilet herself. In a comedic and exaggerated way, I scamper to the bathroom, "out of breath," and say, "Oh! You beat me!" Then, she'll excitedly pee.

As mentioned above though, I'm careful not to overuse this strategy in order to keep the game fresh. There are times when I say, "I'm going to get to the potty BEFORE you!" and Olivia gives me a look that almost says, "Daddy. Let's drop the charade. I'm too tired to play any of your reverse psychology games right now."

## THE OPPOSITE OF THE OPPOSITE

While thinking about "reverse psychology," I was reminded of the classic musical THE FANTASTICKS, written by Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones. In this allegorical story, two fathers know that children often do what their parents forbid. So they build a high wall between their houses... to ensure that their children fall in love. In one of the songs, the two fathers sing a duet musing on the reason behind why their children do rebellious things like pouring jam on the cat or



### [POTTY TALK](#)

Saying goodbye to diapers takes patience and a sense of humor.

### [DIARY OF A POTTY-TEACHING MOM](#)

One mother's journal of the joys and dejections on the road to potty autonomy.



sticking beans in their ears. The reason, of course, is that the fathers had told the children one simple word: "no." (If you're curious to see the lyrics to this clever song, do an online search for "The Fantasticks" and the song title "Never Say No")

This approach is something to consider when you and your child are locking horns. When Finn resists cleaning up his room, instead of pushing the issue, I might casually say, "You probably don't know where your toys go anyway. Don't worry. I'll take care of it." More often than not, he zips around his room, quickly putting his things away. The secret is sometimes turning your child's resistance around. In a type of martial arts called aikido, one of the tricks is to use your attacker's momentum for your own good. If someone attempts to strike you with his or her arm, the skilled aikido expert takes the person's arm and uses their energy to flip them over. Applying this metaphor to child psychology is sometimes quite effective. When Finn and Olivia believe that they are "calling the shots," they'll make the extra effort to do their chores, or help out. So for me the key is to figure out a way of not creating a power struggle, but presenting the task in a way that puts the kids in control of what happens.

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How to scold children without getting into a battle of wills.

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### TURNING THE TABLES

Yesterday, Olivia and I were eating lunch together. The menu was macaroni and cheese, crackers, sliced strawberries, and milk. Olivia scooped up some of her pasta and plopped it on my plate.

"Probably no one will eat these macaronis," she said, closing her eyes and smiling.

I took the cue, and quickly snarfed down the "macaronis" and innocently looked off into the distance.

"What happened to my macaroni?" Olivia said with mock indignation.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe a ghost took them."

We both cracked up then ate the rest of our lunch.

It was a proud daddy moment: The student had become the teacher! And I thought "reverse psychology" was just for parents.

Good luck turning power struggles into playful games.

Jordan Brown

Sesame Workshop

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### GAMES & MORE: SORTING IT OUT!

- [Super Grover in the Nick of Rhyme](#)  
Save the day with Super Grover by rhyming words.
- [Grover Goes Over and Under and Through](#)  
In this story, you get to choose if Grover goes over, under, through, and more!
- [Good Night Grover](#)  
What will happen in this good night story? You decide!
- [Greetings from Grover](#)  
Make a postcard with a furry blue world-traveler.

### WEEKLY TRIVIA

Secret Fact: Supergrover's secret identity is Grover Kent, ace doorknob sales for Acme Inc.

### FROM THE WORKSHOP



**Play With Me Sesame Makes Its Debut on DVD!** The *Play with Me Sesame* series encourages children to learn and play with their favorite *Sesame Street* friends. Each DVD comes with a convenient carrying handle and a bonus interactive CD-ROM filled with an additional 60 minutes of fun!

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Sesame Workshop is a nonprofit educational organization making a meaningful difference in children's lives around the world. Founded in 1968, the Workshop changed television forever with the legendary Sesame Street. Today, the Workshop continues to innovate on behalf of children in 120 countries, using its proprietary research methodology to ensure its programs and products are engaging and enriching. Sesame Workshop is behind award-winning programs like Dragon Tales and Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat, Pinky Dinky Doo and ground breaking multimedia productions in South Africa, Egypt and Russia. As a nonprofit, Sesame Workshop puts the proceeds it receives from sales of Sesame Street, Dragon Tales and Sagwa products right back into its educational projects for children around the world. Find the Workshop online at [www.sesameworkshop.org](http://www.sesameworkshop.org).

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