

Stubborn Is... As Stubborn Does by Carol Johnson, Chaos Consultation.

CDSS Quarterly Vol. 11.1, 5-6 (1998 Spring). Printed with permission of the CDSS.

It is interesting, to me, how many people talk about their child's stubborn behavior as if it was part and parcel with having Down syndrome. *It isn't.*

There are many people who are stubborn who do not have Down syndrome. In fact, in some situations being stubborn is seen as a positive trait. I have heard people say that the reason they came out as winners in a situation was because "I was stubborn and no one was going to push me around."

"They thought I would cave, but I was too stubborn to give up easily."

So, what is this stubborn behavior that we see with students who have Down syndrome and how could we think about it?

I see stubborn behavior as a direct result of *lacking the skills and/or language to negotiate a position.*

Often, we will take a stance on something we care about and, right or wrong, stick to that stance until we understand or agree with another's view. A student with Down syndrome will continue to do things in a specific way because it is safe, it is known and it has worked in the past. When we try to change their behavior, when we try to introduce new things, we threaten their "safe place."

Some of us are open to change and will accept change far better than others, this is the same with students with Down syndrome. Some of us are able to argue our side of the issue, some of us can be persuasive and bring people to our view and not have to change — the other person changes.

Students with Down syndrome cannot do this as well. He/she lacks the language, the cognitive flexibility needed in verbal discourse and the larger world view to win many verbal arguments. So...he/she looks stubborn.

Think about it. If you were in a situation where you did not understand what was going on around you and people were trying to get you to do something you were unsure of, what would you do? You would resist, you would stay doing what you know, and you would be seen as stubborn. What if you did not have the language skills to share your views, what if the other party did not understand you or did not care about what you had to say? Then, you were punished or censured because you were seen as stubborn. How would this affect your level of cooperation the next time? How would you respond to these people who "made you do something you did not understand nor even agree with?" You may become even more stubborn or resistive. And, they, in turn would see this as "non compliance" or as a "problem." They would respond in a way that assumes that your stubbornness is something that exists on its own; apart from you having a different view of the same situation or apart from you being unable to communicate your point of view successfully.

How can we change the pattern?

By letting go of the myth of stubbornness and seeing stubborn behavior as resistance .

Resistance to something new, resistance to something that is not understood, resistance to having others being in control, resistance to someone they may not trust or understand. The only way to help anyone become less resistant is to help them to feel safe enough to try something new or different.

When a child is young, s/he will not respond very well to changes; s/he will withdraw. As s/he grows older, s/he will use the strategies that have worked in the past ... withdrawing, not looking,

pouting, sitting, throwing herself down (stubborn looking behaviors). The more stubborn a student looks, the more useful this behavior has been in the past; using this repertoire of strategies has allowed the student to remain in his/her safe place. Adults are part of the problem. We have taught the child what s/he needs to do so we will stop pushing or so we will leave them as they want to be. Then, sometimes, we become angry. As we become angry, the child resists further as s/he does not understand what is happening and is often upset with the situation as well. How many of us respond to anger if we are nervous about a situation? How many of us would become less “stubborn” if someone demands that we do something that we are not sure about?

When faced with a student who appears to be stubborn, think about the following:

1. Although this makes sense to you, it must not make sense to this student. How can you help the student gain a better understanding of what it is you are wanting? Remember, saying that it is “good” for them is not helpful. Can you show, act out, the positive outcome of the request? Can they try it in small steps? Can you find a way to make it clearer, less threatening? What kind of language are you using?
2. Is there a way to help the student use other means to say ... “no”, “wait”, “this is scary”, “you want me to do what?” other than the behavior that is being seen? Until a student has some way of communicating with others, the resistance will look like stubborn behavior. If you were in a situation where you did not understand what was going on around you and people were trying to get you to do something you were unsure of, what would you do? You would resist, you would stay doing what you know, you would be seen as stubborn.
3. Follow the old adage ... “Win them over with honey” ... any human being will respond to positives over coercion. Always enter a new situation using something that the student likes from other situations, go from what the student already knows and build on it. Pair a new experience with something that is already successful and liked by the student. Use play, songs, games etc. to help a student deal with new experiences. Watching another student have a success may not work as some students do not learn from watching others as they may not understand that they too could have that success.
4. You need to have a trusting relationship with anyone before they will try something new just because you told them to do it. Some students take a long time to reach that level of trust. You cannot be the “punisher” and build a trusting relationship with a student. You cannot coerce some behaviors and reinforce others; this inconsistency will stress a student; the student may never feel safe enough with you to let go of those behaviors that help him/her to feel safe.
5. When you feel yourself becoming angry, stop, laugh, walk, relax, count, etc. Release the tension in the situation and then try again ... maybe in a different way. Sometimes a student will come around just because you have calmed down and re-entered the relationship in a way that is not threatening to the student. Some of the best people are just stubborn enough to hang in there when many others have given up on a child. So, join them. Be stubborn about a child's ability to learn and help him or her to feel safe enough to venture into new territory with you by his or her side.