

First Do No Harm

A main principle in the practice of medicine is captured in the expression, “First do no harm.” At its core, this principle means that before a physician decides on a course of action, he or she must be sure that the prescribed treatment won’t hurt the patient more than the illness or injury itself. In other words, the physician has to decide if the patient is at a greater risk from the problem or the potential treatment of the problem.

I think that the principle, “First do no harm,” can be borrowed from the world of medicine and applied to the worlds of parenting and teaching. The moment-to-moment interactions between parent and child, or teacher and student, are filled with opportunities for the parent or teacher to *do something*. Depending on the circumstances, very often our impulse in these moments is to teach or correct, reprimand or praise. Consider the following scenario, for example. A child approaches you with a piece of paper, on which are four lines of words. With great pride in her voice, the child hands you the paper and says, “Look at the story I wrote.” At first glance you notice that some of the words are misspelled, the first words of two of the sentences are not capitalized, and at the end of one of the sentences there is a comma where the period should be. What should you do?

Notice that I did not give you information about the age of the child or the context in which her story was written. Obviously these details might matter in terms of how you would respond. If the child were eleven years old and the story was a homework assignment for school, your response would be different than if the child were four years old and this were the first story she had ever tried to write. Drawing her attention to spelling and punctuation mistakes might be very appropriate in the case of the eleven year old completing a school assignment. But in the case of the four year old, “first do no harm” might be the guiding principle because the child is just emerging as a writer and correcting this first attempt at writing might discourage the child from engaging in the process. In other words, the treatment - correcting and teaching - might do more harm than the problem - misspelled words and misplaced periods.

Here is another example of when we should keep the principle, “first do no harm,” in mind. You have been trying to get your child to clean up his room after he has been playing with toys. Sometimes he cooperates but

oftentimes there are battles marked by the child's stubbornness and your frustration. Then one day he brings you into his room to show you that he straightened up his room before you even told him to do it. You stand in the doorway and feel caught between two reactions: you are grateful that he took the action on his own but you are not happy with the result. Toys are put back on the shelves but not neatly. Clothes are put back in drawers but some are in the wrong drawers, and his bed is made, sort of. To correct and teach at this moment may lead the child to decide that it's never worth trying to do the right thing because what he does is never good enough. A simple, "Thank you," and "I appreciate what you did," may be the most helpful response at that moment; lessons in making the bed can wait for another day.

Children do need to learn how to spell and punctuate sentences, and it is very helpful if they learn how to clean up after themselves. But depending on the circumstances, we can decide that there will be plenty of time in future for teaching and corrections. Sometimes we should simply be happy and appreciative that the effort was made.

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