

## HOW TO REDUCE AGGRESSION

All of us, at some time or another, have displeased those people we're responsible to, or those we love, or those who have the job of training us. It's got to happen.

When it does, there are ways for us to reduce the feelings toward us that we might think of as aggressive. In the case of your parents, even when you do the really dumb things that we all do, they still love you, and the actions they take and the things they say at those times are partly because they're disappointed in you and are partly their efforts to help you to understand what you've done and to make it easier for you to avoid doing those things again.

This is painful for all the people involved. You can lessen the anxiety this might cause by the way you react to being corrected.

### UNDERSTANDINGS

This exercise is not designed to allow you to save face, boost your ego, get the best of anyone, pull any fast tricks or get away with anything. It presents the techniques you can use to defuse a situation or lessen the tensions between whoever is being aggressive and yourself.

If you can accept that when the situation is back to normal that that person will still be your parent, boss or instructor, or friend, and that you will still have to live and/or work together, you can understand how these techniques can be valuable. The best thing that could happen between the two of you is that you wouldn't repeat the things that started the aggression, and that the other person would feel that the problem is solved and won't occur again. It would be best for all if this solution could be reached without anyone having hard feelings.

When you've done something dumb and you employ these techniques, the person you're with should feel that you've handled the situation well.

1. To reduce the aggression (and the pain) in these situations you must understand:
  - A. How your parent, friend, boss, or instructor feels
  - B. What they want
  - C. Why they're being aggressive with you
  
2. You must not defend your actions that caused the problem. You must:
  - A. Admit that your actions were wrong or dumb.
  - B. Agree that your parent, friend, boss or instructor is justified to be dissatisfied with your actions.

C. State that you'll make every effort not to repeat the error.

D. Be sincere in thanking the person for bringing the error to your attention and mention that you appreciate the help you've been given in understanding the situation. (Be careful here. This could be seen as being smart or sarcastic if you're not sincere. If you say these things and you don't mean them, it could make the situation worse.)

The following examples will help you see the difference between the typical response a young person might make to being criticized and one where these techniques are employed.

### Typical Response

Father: *John, I see that you've left your bike in the drive again. I had to park out on the street. I've asked you over and over again not to do that. What's it going to take to get you to do what I ask?*

John: *I just came in for a drink of water. I'm going right out again.*

Father: *I don't care how long you're going to be in the house. That's not the point. The point is that I've told you not to leave your bike in the drive.*

John: *Well, you won't let me park it on the lawn. You won't let me leave it on the sidewalk and I can't leave it in the street. What am I supposed to do when I want to come in for a minute, hang it up in the garage?*

Father: *Don't give me smart answers. Just do as I ask, or I'm going to take that bike and put it away till you get some sense of responsibility.*

John: *Just because I wanted a drink?*

Father: *That's it! The bike is off the street for a week. Put it in the garage now and leave it there till next Saturday.*

John: *That's not fair!*

What happens here is that John has done a dumb and irresponsible thing that he's often been warned about in the past. He then defends his actions, even though he knows that he's wrong. By doing this, he challenges his father's authority, and his father can't allow that to happen without a response, and it's a typical one. The bike is put away.

### Analysis

Look at this listing of attack responses in this exchange:

1. Adult confronts (attacks) youth. (*complains about bike in drive*)
2. Youth defends actions. (*makes excuse for bike in drive*)
3. Adult feels that his authority is challenged. (*son shows that he doesn't recognize father's request as reasonable*)
4. Adult feels that he must escalate aggression with threat. (*to put bike away*)
5. Youth calls threat unrealistic. (*"Just because. . ."*)
6. Adult must now apply threat. (*bike is put away*)
7. Youth complains about punishment. (*if adult again is threatened by this reaction, the punishment is increased until resistance is squashed.*)

The same sequence of actions and responses may occur with any two people when one is in a position of authority and one has done something dumb. It could be a boss or a supervisor and an employee, a teacher and a student, any adult in the care of any child, and it works the same way even with a police officer and any motorist who has been caught speeding or making a rolling stop at a stop sign.

It might pay you to go over in your mind the last time you were criticized for doing something you shouldn't have done. List the events (do it on a piece of paper), much as I have done here. Examine the listing. See if you recognize your reactions in some past situation.

### **A More Appropriate Response**

The same situation follows—the bike has been left in the drive. But, this time John employs this aggression-reduction technique.

Father: *John, I see that you've left your bike in the drive again. I had to park out on the street. I've asked you over and over again not to do that. What's it going to take to get you to do what I ask?*

John: *Oh, boy. You're right, Dad. I did it again. I'm really sorry about this. I'll go out and move it into the garage right now.*

Father: *Now wait a minute. I want to make sure this doesn't happen again.*

John: *I do too. I'm going to tie a piece of bright yarn on the handlebars to remind me. I hope that works. I'm sorry I forgot, Dad. I'll try really hard not to leave it in the drive again. Thanks for being patient with me about this.*

Father: *Well. . . okay. Thanks, Son.*

### **Analysis**

Again, look at the listing of responses in this similar exchange, but notice the differences in the father's reactions:

1. Adult confronts (attacks) youth. (*complains about bike in drive*)
2. Youth admits error, tells adult that the adult is right, apologizes and offers to move the bike right then. (*does not defend action or make excuse*)
3. Adult asserts authority. (*doesn't want to let youngster get away free of criticism*)
4. Youth reduces aggression in adult by agreeing with him that it can't happen again and offers suggestion about tying yarn to bike to help him remember. He then thanks the adult for being patient with his mistakes. (*this makes it almost impossible for the adult to continue being aggressive*)

This resolution to this adult-teenager situation is much smoother than the first one. The results for the father are that:

1. The father understands that the son recognizes his error and doesn't feel that his authority has been questioned.
2. The father doesn't feel badly toward his son, because he understands that the son is young and forgets things.
3. The father respects the son's effort to solve the problem.
4. The father feels that the son won't commit the error again, and further, the father is pleased that he's good at handling situations with his son so well.

The resolution for the son in this situation is that:

1. The son is not punished.
2. The son does not have a father who is mad at him.
3. The son has a chance to solve the problem himself.
4. The son feels that his father respects him for his attitude and that their good relationship is maintained.

Keep in mind that if this technique is used by the son, it's not a process of the son manipulating his father, because one of the main points of the technique is that the son has to be sincere to make this work as it should. If you use this technique, and I recommend that you do, be very sure you mean exactly what you say. If you do, you'll find that things will go very smoothly for you, but only if you do what you say you will.

## **EXERCISES**

1. You should write a script similar to the example I just gave you. Of course, it should be longer and contain more detail. It should be between you and one of your parents or your boss or some instructor. It should have you doing something dumb and have the adult correct your actions. In this script, apply the principles of this technique to your responses to being criticized. This will lock into your mind the principles and how they work.
2. Once you feel that you thoroughly understand this technique, set up such a situation with one of your parents to practice. Explain what you're trying to learn. You might even have them read this exercise so that you're sure they understand what you're doing. This time you won't have a script. You'll have to make it up as you go along.

You might have to do this three or four times before you're sure you have it down right.

3. Now it's just a matter of waiting. Soon you're going to do something dumb. There's no way to avoid it. We all do dumb things. This will be the test for you. Can you reduce the aggression when you're caught doing the dumb thing?

Of course, your parents will recognize what you're doing, because they've worked with you on it. That won't make any difference if you're sincere in what you say and do. You both should have so much fun with this experience that, right in the middle of you getting bawled out, the whole family might just burst out laughing.