

# They Don't Think Like We Do

In our relationships with other people, we imagine that what goes on in *their* heads is something like what goes on in *ours*. When it comes to small children, this is often not true. As parents, we need to understand how our children think, so we don't misinterpret uncooperative behaviour as willful defiance. They aren't always doing this just to drive us crazy!

When our expectations become more realistic, we are able to choose discipline tools that are better adapted to our children's level of development.

## Immature intellectual skills

It's easy to see that children's physical abilities are different from adults'. We don't expect a three year old to ride a bicycle or a seven year old to use a full-sized hockey stick. Intellectual skills are harder to see. Once children start talking in sentences, we may expect that words mean the same thing to them as they do to us. In fact, limited information, lack of experience and immature brain functioning all make it impossible for young children to think like adults.

Here are some examples of how you can take your children's thinking abilities into account while you help them learn and follow the rules.

**Get their attention** - Most children are very distractible. It takes time for the brain to learn to focus attention. Help them pay attention to you by getting down to their level and making eye contact.

**Keep it positive** - For a long time, it's much harder for children to understand rules when you phrase them in the negative. When you say, "Don't scream like that!" it's as if they only hear "scream!" You make your expectations clearer when you say, "Use a quiet voice to talk to me."

**Go into detail** - If you expect children to follow your instructions, you need to make them precise. It may be clear to you what "Put your clothes away" means, but children need to hear "Fold your pants and put them in your pants drawer. Hang your shirt on the hook in your closet." You will need to repeat these instructions many times before your child understands everything that is involved in "putting things away." You will also need to give detailed instructions whenever your child takes on a new job. If you ask an older child to vacuum the living

room, don't be surprised if they don't put the vacuum cleaner away. You didn't say to do that! It may be obvious to you, but they are still learning. You can't take it for granted that they know what you know.

**Keep it simple** - Listening and following instructions are complex skills. In general, children have difficulty remembering more than three instructions at a time. "Go upstairs, get your jacket, and bring it to me in the kitchen," is likely to get results. Add any more steps, or make them more complicated, and you are setting yourself up for disappointment. If children have a longer string of things they need to do, like a daily morning routine, help them make a poster as a visual reminder, with a picture for every step.

**Avoid asking "why"** - Under the age of six or seven, children have difficulty thinking about their own thinking. They have reasons for their actions, but they can't reflect on what those reasons may be. When you ask, "Why did you leave your toys on my chair?" the question doesn't mean much to them, nor does it set them thinking about what they could do differently next time. It would be more helpful to say, "I want to sit on my chair, not on your toys. What can we do to help you remember to put your toys in their place?"

**Remember their point of view** - The world of children is firmly centred on themselves. You can start to teach empathy young by talking about how other people feel, but it isn't till about age seven that most children can really see things from another person's perspective. Before then it is very hard for them to understand that other people see things differently and feel differently from them. If they are selfish, it is not because they are thoughtless or ungrateful people. They are just acting their intellectual age.

## Growing up takes time

Fortunately, in the course of normal intellectual development children do develop their skills. They learn to pay attention, remember routines, understand their own motivations and feel empathy for others. But the process takes time. Recent research shows that the brain's ability to handle complicated decision making doesn't fully mature till the late teens or early twenties. In the meantime, parents need patience and understanding as they guide their children to think like adults. *by Betsy Mann*