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EDUCATION INFORMATION SERIES

Stubborn Behavior: A Different View

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It is interesting, how many people talk about a person's stubborn behaviour as if it was part and parcel of having a cognitive delay. It isn't. There are many people who are stubborn who do not have a delay, in fact; in some situations being stubborn is seen as a positive trait. I have heard people say 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"

What is this stubborn behaviour that we see and how could we think about it?

I see stubborn behaviour as a direct result of lacking the skills and/or language to negotiate a new or different 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 person's view. A person with a cognitive delay 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 his behaviour, when we try to introduce new things, we threaten his "safe place". Some people are open to change and will accept change far better than others. Some people are able to argue our side of an issue, some can be persuasive and bring people to their view and not have to change-the other person changes. People who have a cognitive delay usually cannot argue their point because they lack the language skills, the cognitive flexibility needed in verbal discourse and the larger worldview to win many verbal arguments. So...they look 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 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 do we change the pattern?

We need to let go of the myth of stubbornness and start by seeing stubborn behaviour as a form of communicating 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 resistance is to help him or her to feel

safe enough to try something new or different. When a child is young, s/he will not respond well to change; s/he will withdraw. As s/he grows older, s/he will use the strategies that have worked in the past.... withdrawal, not looking, pouting, sitting, and noodling. The more stubborn a person looks, the more useful these behaviours have been in the past; using this repertoire of strategies has allowed the person to remain in their safe place.

Adults are part of the problem

When we change our behaviour when someone is "stubborn" we have taught him or her that it works. Then, sometimes, we become angry or frustrated. As we become stressed, the person with the cognitive challenge resists further as she 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 person who appears to be stubborn, think about the following:

1. Although this makes sense to you, it must not make sense to the person. How can you help him gain a better understanding of what it is you are wanting? Remember, saying that it is "good" for him is not helpful. Can you show, act out, the positive outcome of the request? Can they try it in small steps? Can you find away to make it clearer/ less threatening? What kind of language are you using?
2. Is there a way to help the person use other means to say...."no", "wait", "this is scary", "you want me to do what?" other than the behaviour that is being seen? Until a person has some way of communicating what he is thinking, his resistance will look like stubborn behaviour.
3. Follow the old adage..."Honey works better than vinegar"...any human being will respond to positive approaches far better than being coerced. Always enter a new situation using something that the person likes from past situations, go from what he already knows and build on it. Pair a new experience with something that is already successful and likes. Use play, songs, games etc. to help deal with new experiences. Watching another person have success may not work; some people 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 you will try something new. You usually do not do things people you do not know or trust. Some people take a long time to reach a level of trust. You cannot be the "punisher" and build a trusting relationship with a person at the same time. You cannot coerce some behaviours and reinforce others; this inconsistency will stress a person; he may never feel safe enough with you to let go of those behaviours that help him 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 person will come around because you have calmed down and re-entered the relationship in a non-threatening way.

Some of the best people are just stubborn enough to hang in there when many others have given up on an individual. So, join them. Be stubborn about a person's ability to learn. and help them to feel safe enough to venture into new territory with you by their side.