First what’s Right, then what’s Wrong

Recently, I posted my top 10 tips for parenting success. Now, I am elaborating on each item on the list. Parenting Tip #8 is this:

# Start with your children’s strengths and then help them

use what works to impact their weaknesses.

At age 5, little Elena loved helping mommy in the kitchen. She listened carefully to mommy’s instructions and followed them as best she could. She especially loved it when they baked cookies together. Maria helped her daughter follow the recipe, getting ingredients from the pantry. She even learned to help clean up while cooking, rather than make a big mess and then spend lots of time cleaning up when they could be eating those yummy cookies.

Now, when it came to Elena helping her mommy clean her room, not so much. She’d busy herself playing with her dolls or gaming on the computer. When asked to help, Elena barely responded and only said, “Not now. In a minute,” but a minute never came. Maria tried punishing Elena for disobeying, but it only seemed to get worse.

One night, after reading her a bedtime story, Maria snuggled with her daughter and they talked.

“Sweetheart, you know how much fun we have baking cookies?” she opened.

“Yaaay,” Elena sat up straight and smiled broadly. “That’s the bestest time ever. Can we make some more tomorrow?”

Maria tickled Elena’s belly and they both giggled. “Of course we can. I love being with you, having fun, and being productive also.” Maria paused, “But, you know, it’s not so much fun when we try cleaning your room together.”

“Yuck,” Elena chimed in, “That’s no fun at all.”

“But,” Maria persisted, “it could be, you know. Let’s make a plan and see if we can make it more fun tomorrow.”

The next day, Maria and her daughter talked about what needed to go into making 3 dozen sugar cookies for her Sunday School class. They then talked about how to get her bedroom straightened and clean. Mom suggested they divide the cleaning into smaller tasks and areas of concern. Maria agreed to pick up and put up all of her stuffed toys from the floor, while her mom straightened her counter tops and took her dirty clothes to be washed. She then showed Elena how to dust. They turned on some music and danced while cleaning. After a job well done, they took a short break and then rolled into the kitchen to start the cookies.

In helping Elena grow and be more responsible, Maria took a fun activity, where Elena was all in, and applied those lessons to a chore which needed to be done but was at the bottom of Elena’s fun list. She applied the family rule, chores first, fun later, and she joined in the task, supervising her daughter’s portion and adding lots of positive reinforcement for a job well done. In what seemed like no time at all, Elena had her bedroom cleaned and sugar cookies for class tomorrow.

When you start with fun stuff, with what your child can do well, and then address other, not so fun stuff, where your child stalls or rebels, the chores seem less onerous. Kids learn that I can use what I’m good at to also address what’s not so fun. Overseeing, or even sharing in the task completion, with lots of positive reinforcement, can help it also become a teachable moment.