

## The Parent Child Coercive Cycle

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This article is based upon basic principles of reinforcement and research conducted by Gerald Patterson and his colleagues at the University of Oregon and Oregon Social Learning Center. Their studies of interactions between parents and their children for over 30 years have demonstrated a surprising pattern of interaction between parent and child that invariably results in worsening behavior in children and loss of control in parents. They call this sequence The Parent Child Coercive Cycle. It can start with either parent or child. The following examples illustrate some variations of this cycle.

### SCENARIO 1

Toby, age 13, is in his room on his Xbox 360. Mom comes in the room and interrupts him.

**Mom:** “Why aren’t you doing your homework? How many times have I told you No videogames until you do your homework! You’re flunking math and here you sit playing that stupid game!”

**Toby:** (without looking up from the game) “I don’t have any homework.”

**Mom:** (yelling) “What do you mean you don’t have any homework? Your teachers all tell me you never turn in any work! You’re not going to pass seventh grade the way you’re going!”

**Toby:** “I don’t understand the math we’re doing and besides I forgot my book.”

**Mom:** “You never bring your books home even when you have homework! How do you expect to pass if you never bring home your books?”

**Toby:** “But Mom, I don’t understand the math we’re doing. I hate that class! The stupid teacher never gives me any help!”

**Mom:** “That’s no excuse for not doing your homework. If you’d spend as much time thinking about school as you do that game you’d get straight A’s. I’m sick and tired of you and that Xbox. Look at this room! It’s a mess. The trash needs taken out, the cat box needs emptied, and here you sit. What would you do if your dad and I spent all our time playing videogames? Who would get anything done around this house? Who would bring any money home? If you think you can spend your life playing those silly games you’ve got another think coming!”

**Toby:** “Dad plays videogames! You watch soap operas all afternoon! I’ll take out the trash later. It’s not even my turn to empty the cat litter. My sister never has to do anything, and she spends all her time on her cell phone – you never get after her! I don’t care if I drop out of school! I hate school! Uncle Gus never finished school and he makes more money than Dad.”

Mom throws up her hands and leaves the room. Toby returns to his game.

## SCENARIO 2

Mom and her 5 year old daughter Angie are grocery shopping. In the cookie aisle Angie begins to beg.

**Angie:** “Mommy can I have some Oreos?”

**Mom:** “No Angie, we have cookies at home.”

**Angie:** (whining at the top of her voice) “I want Oreos, I want Oreos, I want Oreos!”

**Mom:** (irritated but tries to keep her voice down): “Angie, you’ve already had ice cream today and I don’t want you to spoil your dinner.”

**Angie:** (bursting into tears, screaming repeatedly at the top of her lungs), “Mommy I want some Oreos! I want some Oreos! I want some Oreos!”

**Mom:** “Oh all right, but this is the last time I take you shopping with me.”

Mom puts Oreos in the basket. Angie immediately quiets down and stops begging.

## SCENARIO 3.

Dad sits down to read the newspaper after dinner. His 7 year old son Billy and 5 year old daughter Amanda are playing in the same room. After a few minutes Dad is aware of bickering between them. The older boy is teasing his sister, who is squealing in protest. Their noise level is just enough to get Dad’s attention.

**Dad:** (muttering from behind the paper) “Billy, leave your sister alone.” Dad goes back to reading. A few minutes later Dad hears Amanda fussing louder.

**Amanda:** “Daddy, Billy is bothering me!”

**Dad:** (irritated) “Billy, knock it off if you know what’s good for you!”

**Billy:** (protesting) “I wasn’t doing anything! She started it!”

Dad goes back to his paper. Billy and Amanda continue to argue, and Dad tries to ignore their behavior, hoping it will die down if he doesn’t pay it much attention. But Billy and Amanda get louder, until finally Amanda screams and Billy chases her across the room, practically tripping over Dad’s feet. At this point Dad loses it, throws down the paper, stands up, grabs Billy and gets in his face.

**Dad:** (yelling) “I told you to knock it off! Can’t I have any peace in this house?!”

Billy is now wide-eyed with fear and immediately pipes down, lower lip quivering. Amanda has also frozen in her tracks. Dad, suddenly embarrassed by his own emotion, calms down, apologizes to the kids for yelling, and leaves the room. Billy and Amanda go back to playing.

Before breaking down these scenarios into their component parts, it is important to learn some principles of reinforcement.

## **The Principles of Reinforcement.**

Human behavior is motivated by many things, but for our purposes there are several basics which motivate children and adults alike.

**Positive Reinforcement** is *any consequence to an action that increases the likelihood that action will happen again*. Such consequences are called *positive reinforcers*. Positive reinforcers come in many varieties, and what reinforces one person may not reinforce another. However, there are basic reinforcers that work for most of us. For example, a person who smiles at you when you make eye contact will cause you to increase eye contact in the course of a conversation. Smiling and making eye contact are simple but powerful reinforcers of social behavior. Positive comments such as, “Good job!” or even a pat on the back will often reinforce performance or cooperation from a child. Sweets, treats, other material items, or privileges can also be used as reinforcers. Positive reinforcement is strongest when it occurs just after a behavior. It is less effective the longer it is delayed.

**Negative reinforcement** is not what you think it is. It is not punishment (e.g., spanking a child for acting out). It is not reinforcing the “wrong” behavior (e.g., giving a child attention when he is being “bad.”) Negative reinforcement is just as reinforcing as positive reinforcement; that is, when it follows a behavior it will make the behavior more likely in the future. So what is it? *Negative reinforcement occurs when an action causes a painful or obnoxious experience to end*. It happens frequently in parent-child interactions. For example, a Dad who stops spanking his son when he says, “I promise I’ll be good!” negatively reinforces such comments during punishment. A mom who stops lecturing her daughter when she talks back to her negatively reinforces back talk. Kids who stop making noise when Dad yells at them are negatively reinforcing Dad for yelling. Once a behavior successfully stops a painful or irritating experience, it is more likely to occur the next time the irritant occurs. In behavioral terms, this is called **escape conditioning** because the person learns to escape from the painful experience by behaving in a certain way.

**Punishment** is *any action that suppresses or decreases a behavior*. Such actions are unpleasant, irritating or painful. Parents typically punish children by yelling, lecturing, withholding privileges, removing toys, or spanking. Children can also punish parents by such activities as yelling or arguing, name calling, throwing temper tantrums, or breaking precious objects. Punishment is effective in stopping certain ongoing behaviors. For example, a young child who starts screaming in the midst of a lecture by her parent will usually stop the lecture. Likewise a parent who swats a child’s hands when he reaches for the cookie jar will usually stop the reaching, at least momentarily. Punishments, like reinforcers, are most effective when they occur immediately following a behavior (or in the middle of an ongoing behavior) and end quickly. However, there are at least four problems with relying on punishment to manage behavior.

### Problems with Punishment

- 1) It can easily escalate to the point of becoming abusive (name-calling, slapping, hitting).
- 2) Its effects are temporary. That is, it stops the child's behavior only briefly, so that the same behavior will crop up again once the punishment is lifted or the punisher is not around.
- 3) Punishment doesn't teach the child any new behaviors.
- 4) Punishment leads to escape conditioning, whereby the child looks for any means to avoid the punishment, which sometimes leads to desperate actions, including aggression (see below).

**Extinction** is *the removal of reinforcement*, which is ultimately followed by a lessening of the behavior that was previously reinforced.. If you give in to your child every time she wants something in the grocery store (positive reinforcement) you are conditioning the child to ask for something every time. If one day you decide not to give in to her request, you have just shifted to a path of extinction. However, *the first time you stop reinforcing a behavior after a history of reinforcing it, the behavior you are trying to extinguish actually gets worse!* A good example is the mother who finally refuses to give her child what she demands in the grocery store – the little girl is likely to increase whining and throw a bigger temper tantrum than before. This effect may linger over a period of several more visits to the store before the child finally stops begging for treats.

**Intermittent reinforcement** is *the intermittent application of a reinforcer to a behavior, that is, it occurs only once in a while*. Suppose for example Mom in Scenario 2 resolves to stop buying treats for Angie each time she begs for them in the grocery store. As noted above, the first time she refuses Angie is likely to throw a big tantrum, but after several trips without treats the begging will begin to subside. Suppose Mom then gives in to a modest whine for treats – next time they go to the store Angie will resume whining and begging in full force. And she is likely to keep it up longer even if Mom goes back to saying No. Indeed intermittent or “once-in-a-while” reinforcement has been shown to keep a behavior going much longer than constant reinforcement. Parents are especially prone to reinforce behavior intermittently for a variety of reasons. First, they sometimes forget their own rules (e.g., “No more treats for begging!). Second, they are easily seduced by their children's toning down the negative behavior so that they want to reinforce it. Third, parents often tire out before a negative behavior is fully extinguished and it seems easier to “give in” and reinforce it instead of standing by their rules.

**Stimulus control** occurs when the mere presence of a person or object becomes associated with either positive reinforcement or punishment. This often happens in families where one parent is designated in charge of discipline (“wears the black hat”) and the other is associated with more pleasant activities. After a while the parent in charge of discipline will become so strongly associated with punishment that the children will engage in escape tactics even when they are not in trouble! Likewise the parent associated with positive activities will become a magnet for the children's attention.

Stimulus control, escape conditioning, and reinforcement can combine into a sequence of events in which neither parent nor child is really in control of their behavior. This sequence is called the **Parent-Child Coercive Cycle**. So let's go back and analyze each of our scenarios using these principles.

## SCENARIO 1.

- Step 1: Mom scolds Toby. *(Mom is an irritant to Toby)*
- Step 2. Toby attempts to ignore Mom. *(Toby attempts to extinguish scolding)*
- Step 3. Mom increases scolding. *(First trial extinction leads to escalation of scolding, which is also punishing to Toby.)*
- Step 4. Toby argues with force. *(Toby tries to escape scolding by arguing, which is punishing to Mom.)*
- Step 5. Mom withdraws *(Mom negatively reinforces arguing)*

Mom's mere presence may be a negative to Toby (see **stimulus control**) but her scolding is like a **punishment** to him. He initially tries to ignore it with a brief comment, which is essentially an **extinction** tactic, but trying to extinguish a behavior that has been reinforced in the past will initially lead to an escalation of it, and so Mom actually increases her scolding. At this point Toby begins arguing back, essentially punishing Mom for scolding, which eventually does suppress the behavior, to the point where Mom leaves the scene. Mom's departure **negatively reinforces** Toby's arguing, making it more likely he will argue with her the next time she comes to scold. Also notice how the original goal of getting Toby to do homework is lost in this sequence.

## SCENARIO 2.

- Step 1. Angie begs Mom *(Angie is an irritant to Mom.)*
- Step 2. Mom says No *(Mom tries to extinguish begging.)*
- Step 3. Angie escalates whining *(First trial extinction leads to escalation of the behavior.)*
- Step 4. Mom gives Angie Oreos *(Mom positively reinforces begging.)*
- Step 5. Angie quiets down *(Angie negatively reinforces Mom's compliance.)*

In this scenario Angie begins the sequence by begging for cookies in the grocery store. Mom attempts to stop the begging by saying No, but the begging escalates to a painful level for Mom, effectively **punishing** her for saying No. Mom finally capitulates by giving Angie the cookies, which **positively reinforces** Angie for making a scene in the grocery store. Then Angie quiets down, which **negatively reinforces** Mom for giving in. It is this last step which makes the entire scenario more likely to happen again the next time Mom and Angie go shopping.

### SCENARIO 3.

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|---|--|
| Step 1. Billy and Amanda become noisy             | <i>(Kids are irritants to Dad.)</i>                                  |
| Step 2. Dad tells Billy to leave his sister alone | <i>(Dad mildly punishes Billy and positively reinforces Amanda.)</i> |
| Step 3. Amanda calls out to Dad                   | <i>(Reinforced behavior escalates.)</i>                              |
| Step 4. Dad attacks Billy.                        | <i>(Dad punishes Billy.)</i>   |
| Step 5. Billy argues with Dad                     | <i>(Billy tries to escape punishment by punishing Dad.)</i>          |
| Step 6. Dad returns to paper                      | <i>(Dad negatively reinforces arguing.)</i>                          |
| Step 7. Billy chases Amanda, who screams.         | <i>(Both kids' behavior becomes more irritating to Dad.)</i>         |
| Step 8. Dad loses temper, shouts at both kids     | <i>(Dad punishes kids.)</i>  |
| Step 9. Both kids stop                            | <i>(Kids negatively reinforce Dad's yelling.)</i>                    |
| Step 10. Dad calms down                           | <i>(Dad negatively reinforces kids.)</i>                             |
| Step 11. Dad gives kids attention                 | <i>(Dad positively reinforces the entire scenario.)</i>              |

The first sequence begins with the children making noise while Dad is trying to read the paper. Dad's presence may be reinforcing to them (see **stimulus control**), perhaps because he sometimes plays with them (see **intermittent reinforcement**), or perhaps they don't see much of Dad during the day, so his presence is highly valued. Eventually they succeed in getting his attention. Dad's first comments are too mild to be a punishment and he **positively reinforces** Amanda for telling on her brother. In Step 3 Amanda successfully gets more of Dad's attention by complaining about Billy in a loud

voice. Dad responds by scolding Billy, a **punishment**. Billy responds to Dad's attack with a counterattack, which **punishes** Dad, who retreats back to the paper (see **escape conditioning**), allowing both children to escalate their behavior. In Step 7 Amanda's screaming and Billy's reaction to it push Dad over the top, and his shouting suddenly becomes **punishing** enough to get both kids to stop what they are doing, which **reinforces** Dad for shouting at them. Dad is now embarrassed about losing his temper, calms himself down and apologizes. His departure **reinforces** the entire sequence so that it is more likely to follow the same course in the future. An alternative ending might have Dad apologize and then get down on the floor to play with Billy and Amanda, to "make it up to them." While this sounds like a happy ending ("All's well that ends well"), this kind of **positive reinforcement** at the end of a series of confrontations also makes the sequence more likely to occur again next time, the lesson being that no matter how mad Dad gets, it will end in a happy moment.

As can be seen from the examples above, the Parent Child Coercive Cycle can start with either the child or the adult making a demand on the other, which leads to arguing, which suppresses the original demand or escalates to the point where someone gets mad and the other submits, reinforcing the person who either gets mad first or who becomes the most intimidating, who then calms down enough to reinforce the other for submitting. In both cases the participants feel helpless to do anything different, and the entire exchange is reinforced at the end either negatively (by the other party withdrawing) or positively (by getting what they demanded) or both. This pattern is especially dangerous in families prone to domestic violence, where neither child nor adult submit until physically attacked. Even then the pattern is "locked in" by the submission that ends it in negative reinforcement.

### Breaking the Cycle

The best approach to breaking the cycle is to not start it. Let's go back to Mom and Toby.

#### SCENARIO 1.

It may seem logical to ask Toby to get off the Xbox and do his homework, but when parent and child have been through this scenario a few times, starting with a demand will lead right back into the cycle, especially if the parent is strongly associated with punishment in the child's mind. In fact, approaching Toby at all when he is already on the Xbox primes him to ignore or rebut anything Mom might say (another example of **stimulus control**). The fact that Toby is already on the game when Mom comes in the room gives him the upper hand. Mom could give herself the advantage if she confiscated the Xbox before Toby comes home from school. When Toby asks what happened to his game, Mom can tell him he can have it when he shows her some finished homework. If Toby hasn't brought any books home from school, Mom can keep the game until he chooses to do so, maybe tomorrow.

Now let's suppose Toby decides to argue with Mom about it right then. Recall that arguing is a **punishing strategy** designed to get Mom to back down and give him the

Xbox. What should Mom do? If she starts arguing back he will increase his arguing, and they will be right back in the coercive cycle. So let's encourage Mom to try something different – removing herself from Toby. She can do this by going to some other room, going outside, or even leaving the house (provided the Xbox is not accessible in her absence). *The key is to stop interacting with the child at that point.* It takes two to argue, and without a partner Toby has to find something else to do. Mom's departure is also a way to **extinguish** Toby's arguing, so we have to remember what happens the first time Mom tries to extinguish a previously learned behavior. Toby may react by escalating his arguing. He may even follow Mom around the house to try to keep her engaged in the argument. Or in extreme cases he may become threatening or even violent toward her. If Mom gives in and relinquishes the Xbox she will **reinforce** his escalation, making it more likely he will go to that extreme in the future. If she cannot easily remove herself from the arguing, what's a mother to do?

De-escalating the angry child through behavior shaping.

**Behavior shaping** is the use of positive reinforcement and extinction to modify behavior a little at a time. In the case of Toby following Mom to argue with her, she needs him to do two things: 1) Quiet down, and 2) Leave her alone. To achieve either of these goals Mom must first *calm herself down* (see **The Importance of Emotional Preparation** below). Once calm herself, Mom can look for pauses in Toby's arguing and **reinforce** them with a positive response, such as respectful attention or acknowledging his feelings about the Xbox (without giving in to him). *At the same time she does not want to respond to his arguing, even if it rises to the level of threats, foul language, or loud voice.* Demanding that he show respect or countering his threats with her own threats will only lead back down the coercive path to a bad ending. Instead, she is better off not attending to his threats or abusive comments at all (**extinction**). To achieve separation she can break off eye contact and turn to leave, saying nothing. If he does not follow her she can say something positive, like, "Good. Once you've had time to calm down we'll talk about this some more," then leave the scene. If he continues to follow her, she can turn back, make eye contact, say, "Not now," then leave again. Eventually Toby will leave or go to his room. Once he stops following *it is important not turn around and follow him or to try to have "the last word" with him*, which will only reignite the argument.

## SCENARIO 2.

Let's now take a look at Scenario 2. Angie begs Mom for cookies in the grocery store. Mom says No and Angie increases her whining. As we have seen, arguing with Angie will lead down the coercive pathway. Suppose Mom just says No once and moves away from the cookie aisle. Angie may continue whining, but without the temptation of cookie packages staring her in the face (**stimulus**) she may get distracted and calm down about cookies. On the other hand, if she is used to getting her way in the grocery store she may increase her whining (See Step 3 of this scenario). *At this point it is important that Mom not start arguing with Angie.* Instead, suppose she keeps quiet, ignoring the behavior altogether as she moves on to the next aisle. Of course Mom also has to ignore the

attention of other shoppers as Angie keeps making a fuss (see **The Importance of Emotional Preparation** below). Once Angie begins to calm down Mom can attend to her again, with **positive reinforcement**, such as a brief “Good girl,” or some soothing physical contact, such as taking her hand or stroking her hair. Or she may engage Angie in some joint decision making, such as, “Hey, what do you think we should we fix for dinner tonight?” If Angie engages, Mom stays engaged and talking with her, *but without bringing up cookies*. If Angie brings up cookies or goes back to pouting, Mom disengages and ignores the behavior.

Suppose Mom decides to remove Angie from the store when she starts fussing, with statements like, “That’s it! We’re leaving. This is the last time I take you shopping with me!” While this approach does save Mom embarrassment in the store and keeps her from giving in to the child’s demands, there are several problems with it.

#### Problems with Taking Angie out of the Store

- 1) Removing Angie may not stop the arguing but may instead transfer it from the store to the car.
- 2) Mom forfeits a shopping trip, which can be costly if she needed the groceries for dinner that night.
- 3) The cookie problem will likely come back during the next shopping trip. Remember that removing Angie from the store is basically a punishment, which may suppress her whining about cookies at the time but will have little lasting impact. Threats by parents to “never take you shopping with me again” are rarely carried out, and so the next time Mom takes Angie to the store she is still going to beg and whine.
- 4) Most important for Angie’s development, *it prevents her from learning how to control her demands for immediate gratification*. Children don’t just naturally stop demanding as they grow older. They have to learn how to do it, and such training works best when their parents start early. The grocery store is actually a wonderful place to practice checking impulses in the face of temptation. **Modeling** and behavior shaping by parents are two of the best ways to train children in this very important skill. Parents may think they are doing their children a favor by keeping them from such temptations, but without them children don’t get a chance to either see how it’s done or practice doing it themselves.

**Modeling** is *the demonstration of a behavior by another person*. Believe it or not, children acquire most of their behaviors by watching their parents, especially during their early years, before peer influences take over. From the first eye contact of a newborn to their first steps or their first words, children observe closely what their parents are doing and mimic those behaviors. The effects of modeling by parents require no outside reinforcement. Children just start doing what they see their parents do. This can sometimes be embarrassing for parents who don’t realize how closely they are being watched. However, when they are mindful of what they are doing, modeling is also a powerful tool for parents to shape the behavior of their children.

### Modeling Impulse Control for Angie

Suppose before they even get to the cookie aisle, Mom shares her thinking aloud as she goes down the aisles: “Let’s see, we need potatoes, lettuce, and tomatoes. Mmmm those avocados look good but they’re awfully expensive and we don’t need them so I’m going to pass on those today.” Or “We need bread. Mmm those sweet rolls look good but Mommy doesn’t need sweets” as she walks by. By the time they get to the cookie aisle, they may even look at cookies together, with Mom commenting, “Do we have sweets at home or should we look at the cookies? Do you think we could find some other sweet things to eat in the store that didn’t have so much sugar and fat? Let’s go look at the fruit and see what we can find.”

### SCENARIO 3.

Let’s face it. Children can be irritating and get on parents’ nerves. Such irritation is not unusual, nor is it a sign of bad parenting. However, irritation can easily lead down the coercive parent-child path without a plan to divert from it. In the case of Billy, Amanda, and Dad, they have likely been down this path many times before. So what might Dad do to reverse it? First let’s assume that Dad’s presence itself is somewhat reinforcing to the children; that is, Billy and Amanda like being around him (**stimulus control**). If Dad were scary or mean all the time they would avoid him when he enters the room. Is there any way Dad can use his presence as a **positive reinforcer** for quiet play? Suppose the kids are relatively quiet when he first enters the room. Before they begin to get noisy he could reinforce them by showing them some attention, e.g., by asking, “How’s the day going?” or, “So what’s been happening with you guys today?” These comments are not only reinforcing but are likely to prompt positive responses from them to approach and talk. Billy and Amanda may compete for attention, but a few words of direction, such as, “One at a time, I’m not going anywhere,” keeps the mood positive and assures each will get some attention. Sometimes when children get adult attention they soon run out of things to talk about, at which point Dad can move to the paper, perhaps with a prompt, such as, “OK, Dad needs to read the paper for a while. You kids can go back to your playing.” Let’s suppose the kids are quiet for a few minutes and then start to bicker. Dad has already given them attention for being quiet, and he doesn’t want to give them attention for bickering, so what should he do? The simplest solution is to get up and *leave without saying anything*. Dad’s presence is like oxygen. The bickering is like a small flame in a big pile of kindling. Cut off the oxygen and the flame goes out (**extinction**). If Billy and Amanda go back to playing quietly Dad can re-enter the room and read the paper. In this way his presence reinforces playing quietly and his absence extinguishes bickering. However, sometimes the flame may follow the oxygen, and so Dad (like Mom in Scenario 1) may not be able to find a place where he will be left alone. In this case, a more structured form of extinction called **Time Out** may be necessary.

**Time Out** is the *removal of a child from reinforcement for a specified period of time*. Because it forces the child to leave a desired space or activity, Time Out is also a kind of punishment for the child. For it to be effective Time Out must follow certain rules.

### Rules for Time Out

- 1) The Time Out area should be less reinforcing than the area from which the child just left. If Billy would rather be on the Play Station in his room than playing with his sister, sending him to his room actually reinforces his bickering with her.
- 2) Time Out should only last long enough to stop the disruptive behavior. Five to ten minutes is sufficient for most children. Like other forms of punishment, Time Out does not teach the child how to behave but merely stops the action altogether and gives the various players (in this case Billy, Amanda, and Dad) time to calm down and try something different.
- 3) Time Out is not effective if it is accompanied by yelling, lecturing, or other interactions with the parent. It requires separating the child from the parent and from other children.
- 4) Time Out loses its effectiveness if the parent forgets the time. For this reason I recommend an automatic timer that will ring or chirp when the time is over. Timers are impersonal and make it less likely the children will call to parents asking, “Can I come out now?” or “What time is it?”

How might **Time Out** work in Scenario 3? Dad sits down to read the paper and the kids begin bickering. It is too late to give them positive attention, as they are already acting up, and he doesn't want to leave the room where he has his favorite chair. Dad puts down his paper, gets out of his chair, and tells Billy and Amanda to go to their rooms while he is reading the paper. Amanda starts crying and Billy starts arguing, “But Dad, I wasn't doing anything! She started it first!” etc. *Without engaging in discussion* Dad escorts Billy and Amanda to their respective rooms and tells them, “The timer is set for 5 minutes. When it rings you can come out and try again to be quiet.” Dad returns to his chair and reads the paper. There is no need for Dad to respond to the timer himself as long as Billy and Amanda can hear it.

### Summary of the Coercive Parent Child Cycle

By now you may have noticed there is a final common pathway for all of these coercive interactions, which usually start in one of two ways:

A) Parent gives a directive that is ignored by the child.

Examples: “Do your homework.” “Get off the computer.” “Clean your room.”  
“Stop bothering your sister.” “Don’t speak to me that way!”

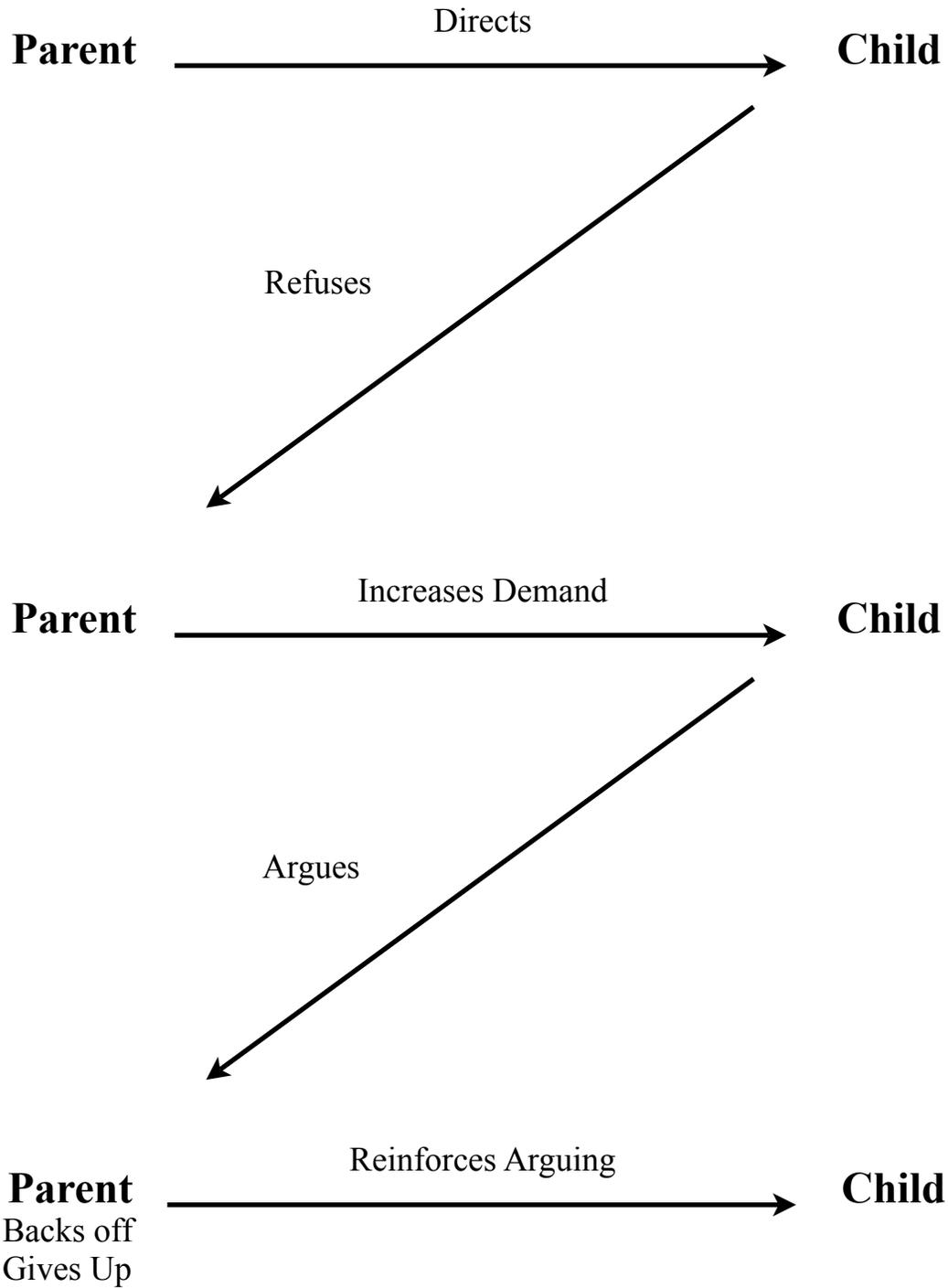
B) Child makes a demand that parent rejects.

Examples: “I want cookies!” “Give me back my computer!” “I need my allowance right now!” “I want my cell phone! I bought it with my own money!”  
“I have to go over to Jimmy’s house.”

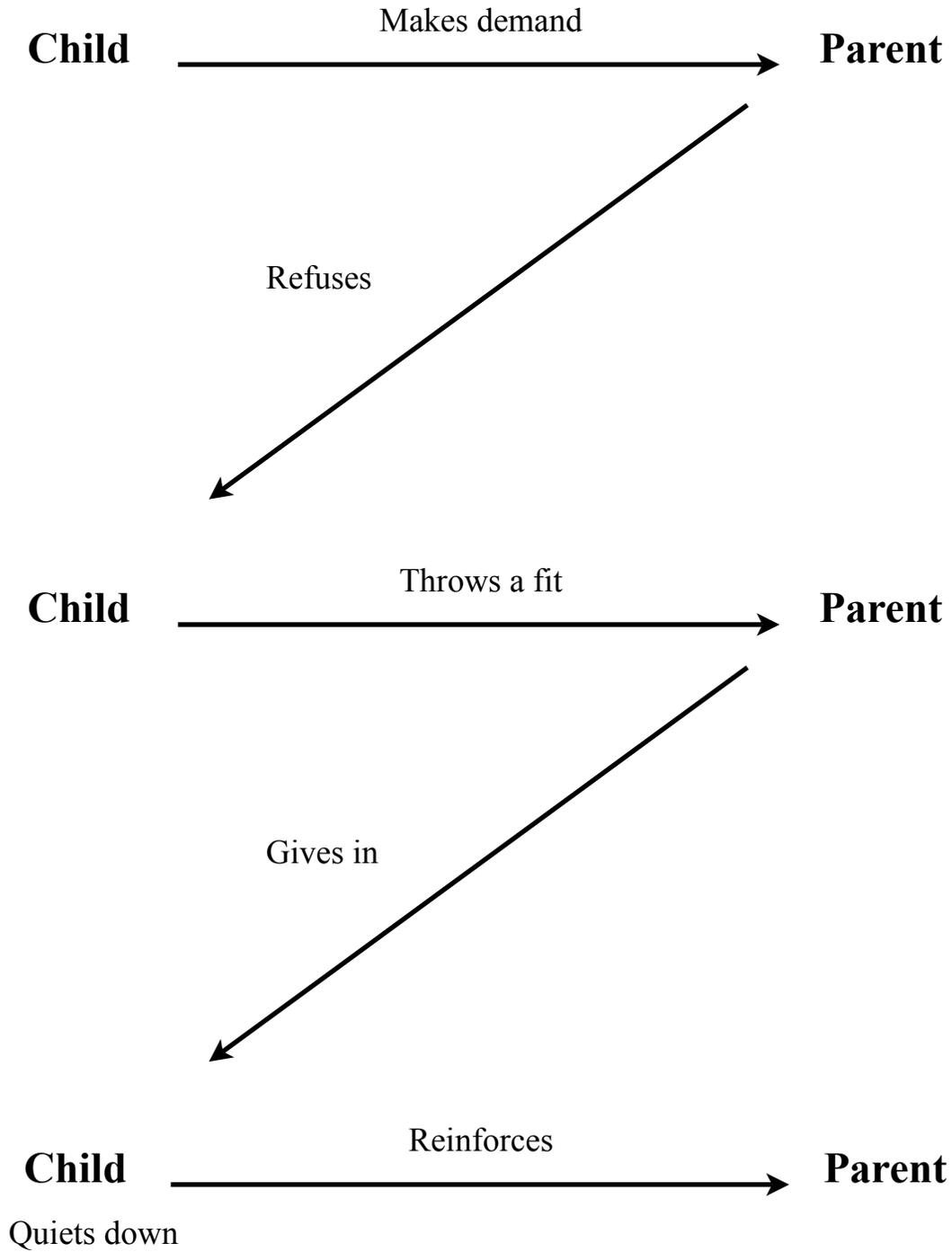
Each scenario leads to one person attacking the other. The party feeling attacked tries to escape the punishment by counter-attacking, which punishes the attacker. This back and forth attack and counter-attack goes on for a while, with each side escalating, until one party reaches a level of punishment severe enough to finally suppress the counter-attack of the other. Once one party finally gives in or backs off, the cycle ends in reinforcing the attacker, who is more likely to engage in the same behavior next time. If the entire sequence ends with both persons making up and apologizing, the entire sequence is more likely to occur again.

These two versions of the Parent Child Coercive Cycle are presented in diagram form on the following pages:

## Parent-Child Coercive Cycle: Parent Driven



## Parent-Child Coercive Cycle: Child Driven



## Summary of Breaking the Cycle

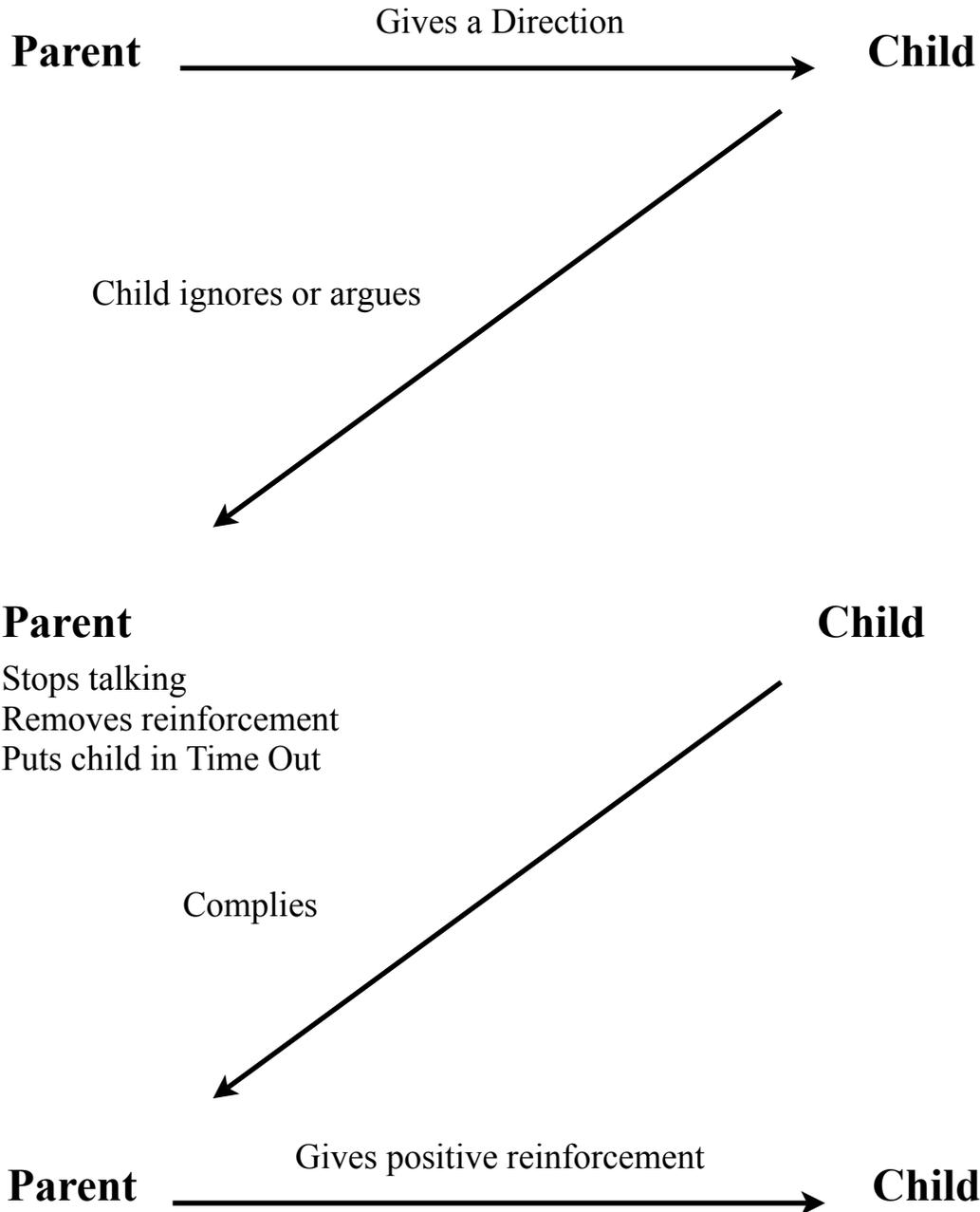
### Parent Directs Child

- 1) Parent gives a direction which child ignores.
- 2) Parent stops talking, leaves, removes a reinforcer (e.g., turns off videogame), or removes child from reinforcement (e.g., moves away from cookie aisle, puts child in Time Out).
- 3) Once child begins to comply, parent behaves positively, speaks positively, or provides some other reinforcements (behavior shaping).

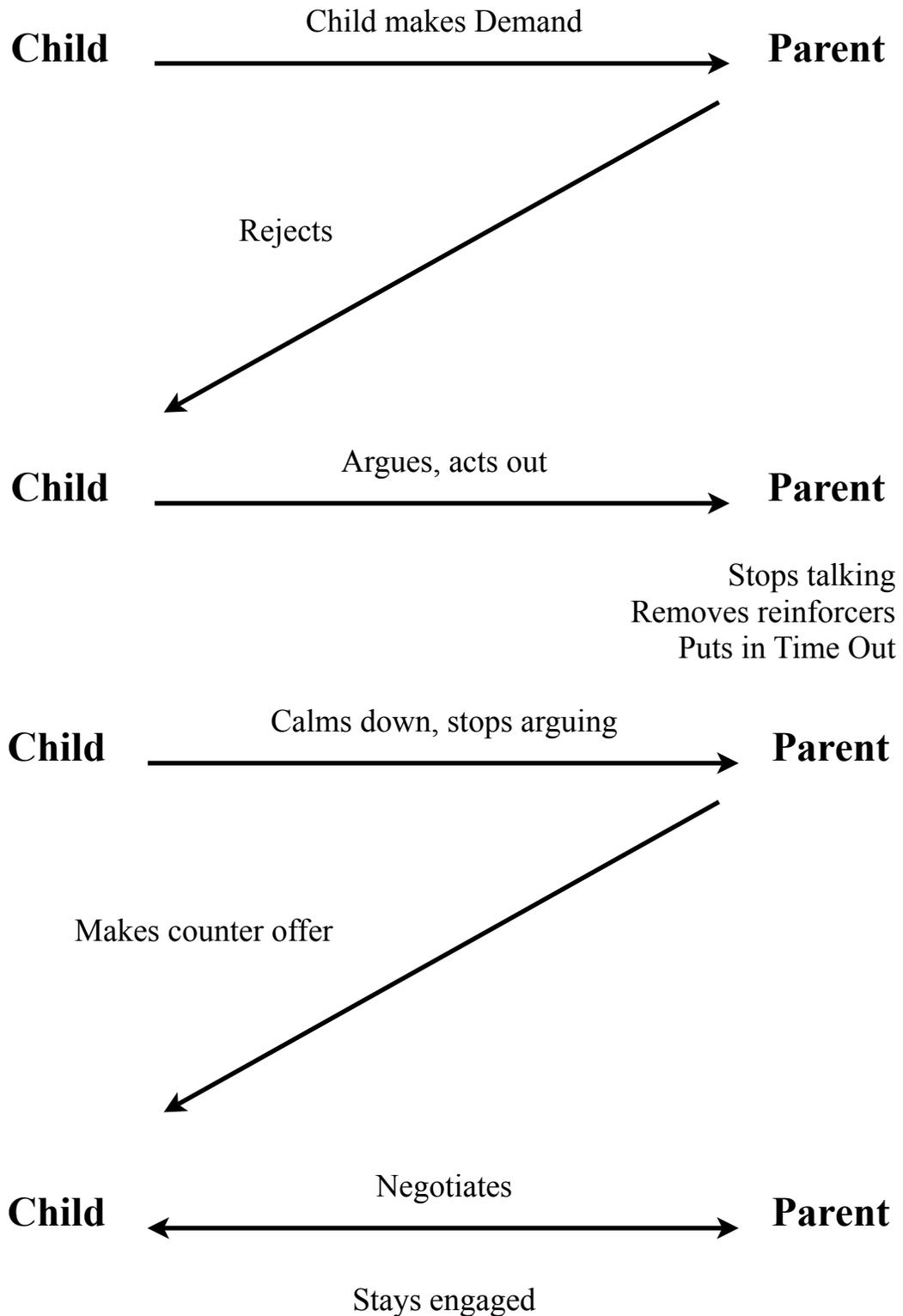
### Parent Responds to Child

- 1) Child makes demand that parent rejects. Child acts out or tries to argue.
- 2) Parent stops talking, leaves, removes a reinforcer, or puts child in Time Out.
- 3) Once child calms down, parent behaves positively, speaks positively, or provides some other reinforcement.
- 4) Once child stops arguing, parent makes counter offer to child's request, staying engaged with child as long as child stays calm.

## Breaking the Cycle - Parent Directs Child



## Breaking the Cycle - Parent Responds



### **Fewer words have greater impact.**

Parents sometimes believe that they must explain the reasons behind every discipline they give. This belief often leads to lecturing, which causes most children to stop listening almost as soon as parents start talking. Talking louder or with more force causes the child to pay attention to the emotion of the message, not the content. Even monotone lecturing is irritating to children (and most adults too) and thus serves as a form of punishment. Children try to escape from it by tuning it out, arguing back, or creating a disturbance to stop it. Thus lecturing can easily lead to the coercive cycle we have been discussing. During discipline words have the greatest impact when they are brief, to the point and direct. Stick to the issue at hand and avoid going off on tangents. For example, compare Mom's speech in Scenario 1 with the following alternative:

Mom enters room.

**Mom:** Toby, turn off the Xbox.

**Toby:** Mom, just a few more minutes, I'm almost done.

**Mom:** Turn off the Xbox now.

**Toby:** But Mom, I'm right in the middle of the game! Can't you at least give me five minutes?

**Mom:** No. Turn off the game now.

**Toby:** I'm almost up to Level 5. Just give me 5 more minutes!

**Mom:** That's it. No TV tonight.

Mom leaves room.

### **The importance of emotional preparation.**

In any conflict between two persons the calmer person will usually prevail. Nowhere is this dictum more pertinent than in interactions between parents and their children. Indeed the child who can push the parent to lose emotional control has a powerful advantage over the parent. Thus one of the most important goals for parents in breaking the coercive cycle is to *stay calm and not react emotionally to the child*. Unfortunately this is also one of the most difficult tasks for parents who regularly get into these exchanges with their children. The coercive cycle primes children and parents to react to each other emotionally. Both sides can feel the tension, consisting of both fear and anger, which builds as soon as it gets started. Indeed emotional intensity may be mutually reinforcing, with each person bringing out strong feelings in the other. In this way parents can sometimes get trapped in their own emotions and find themselves helpless to stay calm.

Having a second parent in the home who can step in when one parent is feeling emotionally trapped can be very helpful, as long as the second parent can stay calm and has the same behavioral goal for the child as the first parent. When only one parent is available to deal with the child, it is important to prepare oneself emotionally before approaching the child. Here are some tips for staying calm:

- 1) Stay focused on the behavior goal (e.g., Homework first, Xbox later).
- 2) Anticipate the child's reaction to your behavior (e.g., He's going to blow up when he can't find his Xbox).

- 3) Have a plan for dealing with the reaction. Such a plan may simply be a look or a brief instruction to “Calm yourself down.” For more violent reactions the plan may require calling in the support of another adult or having an exit strategy.
- 4) Take a deep breath before your encounter. Keep your voice low and measured when talking. Take your time in responding to your child’s comments.
- 5) Rehearse what you intend to say ahead of time.
- 6) Talk yourself through the encounter (e.g., “I can do this. If I stay calm he’ll calm down. He’s not going to sidetrack me from this. I can stand my ground on this one.”).

### **Using negative reinforcement to get a positive result**

So far we have considered the negative impact of negative reinforcement. Can it ever be used to a parent’s advantage? Let’s go back to Toby and Mom. Suppose she hasn’t taken the Xbox away but wants Toby off it. She enters his room while he is happily firing away at alien zombies. Instead of telling him to get off the computer, suppose she comes up next to him, perhaps even leans against him a little bit with her body and starts asking questions about the game.

**Mom:** Show me how this game works. I’ve never understood the fascination you boys have with shooting zombies. What’s that one doing over there?

**Toby:** Mom, Get out of my room! You’re making me lose points!

**Mom:** Oh, don’t mind me. I’m just trying to see what all the fuss is about. Oh, that’s an ugly one! So how do you earn points on this? I don’t understand this at all. O my! look at all that blood and gore! My goodness what a past-time! In my day we played checkers, or maybe Cowboys and Indians, but I don’t know what we’d ‘ve done with a game like this.

**Toby:** Mom, I can’t concentrate if you’re gonna stand there and look over my shoulder! Please go!

**Mom:** Well this is the only time I ever get to see you, so I’m interested in how this works. Don’t mind me, I’ll just stand here and watch and see if I can figure this out. Maybe your Dad will want to shoot some zombies tonight after supper. We sure didn’t have games quite this noisy. What’s that one doing over there? My God that’s an ugly one. If you wanted a mystery in my day, we would play Clue. Now there’s a game with some skill. There was Colonel Mustard, Miss Scarlet...etc. etc. etc.”

**Toby:** Aaagh! I just got killed! I can’t play this with you in here!  
Toby leaves.

If Mom’s presence is sufficiently irritating to Toby, he will initially try to punish her by arguing and telling her to get out of his room. It is important for Mom to remain unfazed by his reaction to her, or else they will slide into the coercive cycle of attack and react. A

comment like, “Oh, don’t mind me, I’ll just watch while you play” lets him know Mom isn’t there for an argument. It is also important not to be positively reinforcing. For example, if Toby thinks it might be cool to explain the game to Mom then her presence is going to keep him at it. The key for Mom is to be calm – even cheerful – but just irritating enough that Toby will look for some way to exit her presence. At that moment Mom should let Toby leave without further comment and not follow him or keep up the talk, as she has succeeded in getting him off the computer. Getting off the computer is the first step in shaping his behavior toward homework. Coming into his room each afternoon at the time she would like to get him to do homework will eventually cause him to avoid going on the computer at that time (so as to avoid Mom), which makes him free to do something else. If he happens to bring home a book after school Mom can then use positive reinforcement (“I have some cookies in the freezer. Want me to heat some up while you study?”) to reinforce the studying.

Notice that parents are sometimes sources of positive reinforcement and sometimes sources of negative reinforcement for their children. In either case parents have some leverage to modify the child’s behavior. When the child is vying for their attention, their presence can be used to reinforce desired behavior. When the child finds their presence irritating, removing themselves can also be used to reinforce desired behavior.