

Counterwill

“Counterwill” is the name for the natural human resistance to being controlled or directed by others.

Although adults experience this phenomenon, we often seem to be surprised when we encounter it in young people. Counterwill is the most misunderstood and misinterpreted dynamic in parent-child and teacher-pupil relationships. Misunderstood and misinterpreted as most people are unaware of its existence.

The instinct to resist is just that – INSTINCT - it is not by choice. This instinctive resistance can take many forms—refusal to do what is asked, resistance when told, disobedience or defiance, and a perceived lack of motivation. Counterwill can appear as delaying tactics or in doing the opposite of what is expected. It can be expressed as passivity, negativity, or argumentativeness. The word has fallen out of fashion but we might have described a child displaying counterwill as obstreperous! It is readily acknowledged at certain stages of development, giving rise to the term “Terrible Twos” and re-appears again as stroppy teenagers. For some children however, it never seems to go away and in reality can happen at any time.

The underlying dynamic is deceptively simple: a defensive reaction to feelings of coercion.

Counterwill is normal in toddlers, preschoolers, and students of all ages—as well as in adults. Adults misinterpret counterwill in a young person as a manifestation of being strong willed, as being manipulative, as trying to get one’s way, or as intentionally pushing the adult’s buttons. Trying to deal with this dynamic by using traditional coercive discipline techniques is a recipe for disaster because no one likes being pushed around or disciplined by someone else—including young children.

The antidote to counterwill is to avoid prompting feelings of being coerced. The key is to focus on influence - rather than on obedience. The art of influence is to induce people to influence themselves. Teachers and parents who aim at influencing - rather than dominating - have more success, less stress, and greater joy in their relationships with young people.

The practice of telling children to do something is often perceived by them as being coercive. The inference is that what they are doing is not good enough and that they need to change. The key to avoid triggering feelings of coercion and counterwill is to prompt students to reflect, thereby redirecting their attention and thinking. This requires different strategies to the behaviourist approach that has dominated in schools for some considerable time.

Adults who are successful in addressing counterwill understand that relationships are critical for motivating others. They avoid anything that prompts counterwill in the form of negativity or that aims at obedience. Instead they aim at having people discipline themselves by promoting responsibility and using collaboration.

We may be able to make more sense of this if we look at the original meaning of the word discipline, which is to teach, and avoid the more modern sense that it means to punish. Punishment is naturally, and correctly, viewed as coercive - something which is imposed on one person by another.

If the relationship between the adult and the child is not based in mutual respect and understanding (secure attachment) then there will be strong counterwill. We are sometimes then drawn into a battle of wills where the coercive stakes are raised by the adult (increasing sanctions, etc.?) which generates greater counterwill on the part of the child. This is only going to escalate when we bear in mind that counterwill is an instinctive survival mechanism designed to avoid being manipulated by those who we have no real relationship with.

Adopt the PACE approach in our interactions with the child.

This is not, as some may interpret, a laissez-faire approach as it still has to have an element of challenge and negative consequences that spring from unwanted behaviours. What we must do is not rely on the imposition of a sanction as being the mechanism that brings about positive changes in behaviour.

Kevin Hayes

Challenging behaviour should be seen as an opportunity to **teach** the child a more adaptive way of responding to a given set of circumstances. This is not something that happens when a child is off their baseline behaviour, as any form of reflective thinking is impossible in those situations. The primary focus at such a time should be in de-escalation. Later perhaps, when the child has their emotions under control one might start by asking them (being Curious) what they hoped to achieve by behaving in that way. Point out that their desired goal is **not** attainable by those means and that they will either have to forego their goal **or** change their behaviour to an acceptable model. This needs to be done in an assertive NOT aggressive manner (PACE again). Remember this is a teaching situation, NOT a punishment opportunity.