Monkey See, Monkey Do: Is it really a thing?

It seems there is some scientific basis to the old adage, *monkey see, monkey do*. As parents and teachers we’ve certainly used that phrase often enough, usually to provoke kids into thinking twice about getting into trouble as their peers do.

But what if, with some scientific evidence, we could use that concept to advance our behavior management and emotional literacy skills?

Apparently through monkey research, neuroscientists have determined there is something in the monkey brain they refer to as mirror neurons. Those mirror neurons really do cause the monkeys to mimic each other. If the same is true of us humans, what then?

Clearly when one yawns, it prompts the other to yawn and so too with smiling and even other behaviors such as even crossing one’s arms or legs. When viewed by another, it seems to influence them to do similarly.

Applied to children escalating out of control, it is not uncommon to see that as the child escalates, so too does the parent or teacher. It is as if they are each mirroring the other.

If this is the case, let’s use it.

Rather though than escalating distress, what if the parent or teacher chose to exude another posture, something else for the child to mirror? What if we exuded calm? Would monkey see; would monkey do? It seems so.

As we model calm, we actually increase the likelihood of the child settling down. It is when we try to in a sense, out-escalate the child, the child gets on a track of trying to out-escalate us. Upset begets upset and calm begets calm.

This kind of thinking is consistent with principles of emotional literacy and consistent with facilitating emotional regulation in children. As we the parent or teacher manage our own triggers (think of our mirror neurons getting pinged by the behavior of the child), we are then in a position to choose our response separate from the reflexive monkey see, monkey do.

We can choose to remain calm. As we remain calm, we increase the likelihood of the child following suit. It turns out our influence in calming kids has less to do with cajoling, threatening or shouting at them to settle down and more to do with presenting ourselves as we would seek for them. Calm.

Once calm, then we can talk reasonably to understand what was at issue and provide support.

Need help remembering this in the throes of child behavior. Consider this line: Let them borrow our calm. Let’s have plenty to spare and share. It certainly is a benign intervention and in the end may help us with our stress levels too.

Need help? *Borrow my calm.*

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