

PULLING CARDS

They call it pulling cards, and it's a part of a quite ingenious and effective behavior management system. It works like this. Each child has a slide pocket on the wall with his or her name on it. Inside of the pocket are three cards – one red, one yellow, and one green. The red card is in the back and is hidden by the yellow card, which in turn is hidden by the green card. As long as a child doesn't have to be called down for some misbehavior, then all of the cards stay in the pocket. This is called "staying on green", but when a child misbehaves, pulling cards begins.

At first offense, the green card is pulled exposing the yellow card. Yellow is the nearly universal color for warnings, so when the yellow card is exposed (which doesn't happen very often), the child is warned of the need to curb the unacceptable behavior. If the child continues to misbehave, then their yellow card is pulled exposing the red card. This event is quite rare, even among kindergarten aged children. The appearance of the red card orders the child to stop the behavior right then and there, and they almost always do it. On the other hand, if a child should continue to misbehave, then the red card could be pulled, the child's parents would be called, and the child would be dismissed from school for the balance of the day. In practice, this step is virtually unheard of.

Card pulling, in and of itself, is a fairly effective stick, when it's comes to managing the behavior of a group of children, but in this case it is accompanied by a carrot which is nothing less than brilliant. Each day that a child stays on green, they have two stickers added to their name on a large chart. A child may also received bonus stickers for other examples of outstanding behavior or accomplishment during the week. All children who collect ten (or more) stickers during the week, become eligible to participate in Fun Friday. Fun Friday normally consists of a special snack – maybe cupcakes or something like that – and a chance to select a toy from the Treasure Chest. The toys are not expensive. They are small things like school supplies, tiny figurines, magic tricks, etc., but these little items become huge when some kids get them and some don't. Fun Friday takes on an importance far greater than the value of the toy or the taste of a cupcake. Everyone wants to participate in Fun Friday, and for a child to miss it is considered a disaster – sort of like Hurricane Katrina – and the other kids talk about it for days.

So the kids do their best to stay on green all through the week, so they'll be able to participate in Fun Friday, and it works famously. Almost all of them make it, and for most of the others, just one time of having to leave the room during Fun Friday is enough to snap them into shape. But what about the other few, the ones with some sort of habitual unacceptable behavior? Can pulling cards really bring them out of their bad habits?

Bad habits. I remember bad habits. I remember that for years Elizabeth talked to me about how I needed to get help in dealing with my depression, but I didn't get help. I didn't want help, and I was offended that she would suggest that I needed it. What business was it of hers? It wasn't hurting her. I was dealing with it in my own way. "I'll get help when I get ready", I told myself, and I did, some time later, but I got help for

other reasons, not because of the begging and pleading of loved ones. Somehow I just don't think a card pulling system would've worked for me. And I remember JC. I remember how he ate and ate and ate and how we tried to persuade him to eat less, to eat better, and to lose some weight so that he would live longer, but he wouldn't change. He had no interest in changing, even though he knew it was killing him. Looking back on that now, I have my doubts as to whether a card pulling system would've worked for JC either. Even with the reward of cupcakes on Fun Friday, I just can't believe that pulling cards would've worked for JC and me. I can't believe it, but of course I could be wrong.

A few days ago Katie came to me and in the most subdued and serious tone of voice said, "Daddy, if it's OK with you, I don't want to take blueberries to school in my lunch any more." I was floored. Katie loves blueberries – always has. We buy a big container of blueberries every time we go to Costco, and Katie eats almost all of them. A Gladware container of blueberries has been a fixture in Katie's lunch bag for over a year, and she eats blueberries as a side dish with a half-dozen meals a week or more. Now here out of the blue she doesn't want to take blueberries in her lunch anymore. I couldn't believe it. "Why in the world not, Sweetheart?" I asked in amazement. "Well you see, Daddy," she began, "there's this girl in my class named Tatiana. She's from France I think, and she sits beside me at lunch, and she's allergic to blueberries, and when she even just sees blueberries, she starts fidgeting and squirming around and getting upset, and if she keeps doing that she's going to get in trouble, so I don't want to take blueberries anymore, so she won't get yelled at and end up having to pull her card."

Well, I was amused, amazed, and more than a little bit embarrassed by her answer. Katie was willing to give up blueberries – a food that she really loved and that was really good for her – for the convenience of a little foreigner whom she had known for less than two weeks, while old JC and I were unwilling to give up habits that were killing us for the sake of loved ones who had been trying for years to persuade us to change so that we'd be healthier and live longer. The contrast was striking and the implications were devastating. In every way that mattered, Katie's approach was much more Christian, much more loving, and much more mature than mine and my Dad's had been.

I know there's a lesson here – that there is a point to all this, but I don't think it means that we need a nationwide card pulling system. No, but it does have something to do with Fun Friday and the Treasure Chest. You see, I did change. I did seek help after a time, but JC never did. I have often wondered why. It's certainly not because I'm a better man than my father was, and it's not because I'm smarter, or because I love my family more than he did. And it's not because he was just being difficult or that he wanted to punish us. He was a much better man than that. Reflecting on it now, I think the reason that I changed and Dad didn't was because he no longer looked forward to Fun Friday. He had become convinced that only more days filled with pain, loneliness, and hospital rooms were left in his Treasure Chest. On the otherhand, I knew that Elizabeth and Katie were in mine.

At this point, a fair question would be, "What now? What does Dean do with this knowledge?" Well, I'll tell you. I'm going to do my best to stay on green everyday, so

that I'll always be eligible for Fun Friday, and then when it comes, I'll have a cupcake or two for JC, and I'll spend as much time in the Treasure Chest as I possibly can.

Dean Greene

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