

The Red Flags

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I grew up in a neighborhood with loving, caring families and many children. We children were all best friends, playing outside on nice days, or in one of the eight houses on our block if the weather were bad. Even our parents were great friends. We children also benefited from close friendships among our parents. Our block was idyllic and special!

One morning our mothers were having coffee and discussed how their children too often would ring doorbells and interrupt family activities such as dinner and game night. Parents had tried putting notes on the doors, but younger children could not read the notes.

One mother suggested that most of the children were conditioned to “stop” when they saw red and go when they saw green. And if young child had not been so trained he or she could easily learn. The mothers agreed during any family time, a red flag or fabric of some sort would be placed on the door. Also, the mothers noted that the red flag should be visible from a distance. In this way, children would not run to their neighbor’s house only to find their friends were busy.

One afternoon the children received instructions about the flags and the procedure was implemented. To make this work, every family put an extinction procedure in place: If the red flag were out, and a child rang the doorbell, no one answered. This was tricky initially, especially for the little ones, but soon it started working because everyone used the procedure. If mom wasn’t home for dinner, then dad used the flag and vice versa. Additionally, the parents supported their children’s using the procedure. My brother and I implemented extinction as we

always put the flag on the door when we were told and made sure no one answered the doorbell.

Consistency was critical.

We came to mount the flag on the door at night when we worked on homework, when we went to bed, when we had babysitters, or when we had company. And the parents loved the red flag for their young children's naptime! The red flags were more effective than the parents originally planned. I lived in this close-knit neighborhood for six years, and the red flags were around for the last five. The red flags were a long lasting and very effective solution.