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OBSESSED WITH ORDER

**IS OBSESSIVE-
TYPE BEHAVIOUR
A QUIRKY PHASE,
OR SOMETHING
MORE?**

BY STACEY STEIN

Many kids chafe against rules, but not Franklin Cappadocia. Quite the opposite: the fastidious six-year-old thrives on boundaries, structure and orderliness. Standing in line at school perfectly illustrates Franklin's fixation. Not only will he diligently stand in perfect formation, but if another child steps out of line, he takes it upon himself to correct the behaviour.

"He gets pretty loopy when anybody around him doesn't follow the assigned set of rules," says his dad, Howard, adding that Franklin will sometimes let loose "a shrill scream" or even cry when other kids step out of line. "He just can't seem to understand why people can't act in an orderly way," says the Toronto father of two. "But in his quest for orderliness he can lose it and become very upset."

Behaviour such as Franklin's is not uncommon in young kids, and they may very well grow out of it as they become older. But for parents concerned about their child's seemingly off-beat personality traits or extremely quirky behaviour, figuring out whether to intervene or to just let it slide can be a challenge.

Registered psychologist Dr. Vanessa Lapointe leans toward the latter, although she cautions parents to be mindful of “the tipping point”, which is when obsessive behaviour begins to interfere with a child’s healthy development.

“Are they being held captive by the perfectionism or obsession or compulsion?” asks Dr. Lapointe, who works with children and parents in South Surrey, B.C. “If they’re being held captive by it to the extent that it’s likely interfering with their development, and they’re missing out on opportunities to play and interact with other children and families, then that’s when it would become a worry.”

While Howard and his wife, Sandra, often discuss Franklin’s eccentricities, they aren’t terribly worried about his behaviour. However, Howard acknowledges that playdates can sometimes be an issue. Franklin’s otherwise friendly and pleasant demeanour may suddenly vanish if the other child isn’t playing with a toy in the way that Franklin deems to be “correct”.

“He’s so used to having control of his own situation that he has a hard time with other people doing things in a different way,” says Howard.

Doing things the “right” way also extends to Franklin’s bedtime routine; he is compelled to ensure that everything from his pillows to books are arranged just the right way before he rests his weary head.

This need for control, structure and everything being “just so” is something to which Linnden King, mom to five-year-old daughter Emerson, can relate. Emerson’s rule-bound personality leads her to become extremely fixated on very minor details, which can cause problems when the family needs to get ready and out the door in a hurry.

“Her socks have to be on a certain way, her shirtsleeves have to be pulled down and can’t be bunched up in her jacket,” says Linnden, who lives in Lethbridge, Alta. “We need to take that extra time to do things the right way.”

The “right way” even extends to turning Emerson’s socks inside out so that she doesn’t feel the inside seam, which she says bothers her pinky toe. But Linnden and her husband take a very laid-back approach, supporting their daughter’s quirky personality while trying their best to make her feel comfortable in any situation. “If you’re fighting the behaviour all the time, you’re just creating a constant battle for yourself and your child and they’re going to feel insecure,” says Linnden.

WHEN TO DRAW THE LINE

While taking the path of least resistance in such instances may seem like the easier option for beleaguered parents, Dr. Keith Saunders, a registered psychologist in Vancouver, B.C., cautions parents to recognize when it’s time to draw a line.

He notes that this kind of behaviour is often the precursor to an anxiety disorder. He encourages parents to nip certain habits in the bud before the behaviour becomes worse. “If you go along with what the child wants then they seem to eventually



WHAT YOU CAN DO

> Support your child

Parents need not worry that supporting their child’s particular behaviour or giving in to their fixations will create a dependent child. Dr. Vanessa Lapointe says if we allow children to be dependent on us as parents or caregivers, sensing their needs before they’ve even voiced them, “we shore them up in remarkable ways from a developmental perspective to be these wonderfully independent beings as they grow.”

> Play games

If your child’s fixation on rules seems to be getting out of control, try playing games to modify his or her behaviour, says Dr. Keith Saunders. For example, if your child is fixated on always wearing the same socks, and insists on pulling them up to the knees, one day try wearing two different-lengthed socks to show it’s okay for things to be different. “What you’re doing is continually showing flexibility,” says Dr. Saunders.

> Talk it out

Both Howard Cappadocia and Linnden King speak with their very particular children in a mature, reasoned manner. Linnden says she explains that things can be another way and that’s okay, while Howard says they try reasoning with Franklin and never resort to time outs. “We try to appeal to him as a mature person,” he says.

> Know when it’s time to seek help

It’s important to recognize when a child’s obsessive behaviour may require intervention from a professional. “If you feel like your child is really crashing and burning, then it’s a good time to at least begin with some parent consultation with somebody you feel you click with, like a mental health professional, just to make sure that everything is as it should be,” says Dr. Lapointe.

get satisfied, but what happens is they will find another object or another behaviour that they will want to control as well,” says Dr. Saunders. “And they’ll just keep adding behaviours to the things they’re concerned about.”

Dr. Lapointe takes a very different tack. Acknowledging that her approach runs counter to what parents are often coached to do, she recommends that caregivers indulge their obsessive children unless the behaviour seriously hampers their day-to-day lives. And rather than simply try to correct the behaviour, she urges families to look behind a symptom and examine the need that backs it.

If children need structure and order to help make their world feel safe and secure, then parents should help facilitate that, says Dr. Lapointe. In supporting their child’s obsessive ways, she says parents show their child that the “big people” are in charge and “get it.”

“Then there’s no need for children to up the ante and come out with all of the drama and all the other things to make sure that that need – whatever it is – gets heard,” she says. “Then everybody is kind of released to the business of going about their day.”

Be aware, however, that kids who become fixated on particular things or behaviours are likely to remain that way into adulthood. The hope is that the extreme nature of the behaviour softens as they get older. It often does once children be-

come more aware of their peers, social expectations, social norms and boundaries.

DOES YOUR CHILD NEED HELP?


If your child’s behaviour is interfering with his or her developmental progress, consult with a professional to make sure there are no deeper issues at play. But as long as your child maintains positive relationships with family and friends, and is able to go about day-to-day life with relative ease, parents can focus more on supporting and managing the behaviour.

Besides, these orderly children often do well later in life.

“Anxious people who are very diligent in their work tend to do well in their jobs and do well in so many areas, as long as it doesn’t go over the top,” notes Dr. Saunders.

Indeed, Howard Cappadocia recognizes that Franklin’s focus on details has an upside. At school, Franklin is a favourite with his teachers. “In so many aspects of his life he’s so successful. He’s the model child because he follows all the rules and his hand is always up in class,” Howard says with a laugh. ○

Toronto-based writer Stacey Stein’s six-year-old son is a textbook perfectionist, while her four-year-old son embraces disorder.

 For more on your child’s mental health go to ParentsCanada.com/mentalhealth