

A Call to Action

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There must be some kind of epidemic going around. Some virus quietly infecting the planet that will one day bring an end to civilization as we know it. Perhaps you've seen the effects of it where you live. I know I have. I see it in shopping malls, doctors' offices, in theaters and churches.

The victims? Adults of parenting age who have children. The symptoms? These adults seem to be stricken with a mental and behavioral paralysis rendering them helpless to intervene when their children are out of control. Their children can be dismantling the office furniture or shouting "I want my dolly back", and the helpless victim ignores it as if it is not real. Some less afflicted individuals try to reason or bargain with the offending child, thinking this might keep the peace. I've seen fully-grown adults bribe children with gifts or promises of special activities if they will stop acting inappropriately. It's mind-boggling. Someone needs to call the Center for Disease Control (CDC) so they can work on an antidote. Or maybe they can reduce the risk of infection by teaching what I call "safe parenting." Something needs to shake this mental hold children now have on their parents.

What will happen when these children grow up and become parents? We are quickly becoming a society given to impulse and lack of inhibition. Many children are not taught to see and accept the reality of others' needs and sensibilities. Parents are raising a generation of individuals who have never learned to say "no" to anyone, including themselves

Don't get me wrong. I like parents...*most of the time*. However, I get this strange feeling as if I'm going to scream when I hear children talking disrespectfully to parents as the parent powerlessly tries to reason with little Megan so that she will calm down and tell mommy she's making the right decision.

Could this problem be happening within families that homeschool their children? The answer is in three parts: yes, yes, and yes. We have our share of this affliction in the form of passive, insecure parents who don't know how to be a solid person – a parent - to their children. They get pushed to a level of yelling or over-action, but, ultimately, they fail to know how to be firm with their child early enough in a behavioral to help the child learn to say no to the offending impulses. I know well-meaning, loving parents who simply don't see how they let their children dominate life. These parents usually grow in their frustration with their child (others usually are even *more* frustrated with the child) and feel increasingly helpless to get the youngster under control. They often respond to helpful advice with "We tried that... it just doesn't do any good with Billy."

My guess is that these parents:

- a) Don't feel very comfortable using their own parental power,
- b) Feel guilty about time spent away from their child (due to work or other commitments) and become conflicted when they have to say "no,"
- c) Have learned passive coping mechanisms that place value on avoidance rather than confrontation of issues
- d) Are too emotionally needy to make the child's supervision the most important thing to pursue.

The net effect of this passive pattern is:

- a) Other people become frustrated and angry with the parent and child,
- b) The child fails to learn consistent inner controls for impulses,
- c) The child learns to interpret restrictions on desires as abnormal or unnatural,
- d) Parents have rejected poor parenting methods they learned growing up, but have nothing positive to replace them, and
- e) The child feels alone and detached from the interpersonal world around him.

The model of parenting I present in this column promotes two themes: *consistent*, unconditional affirmation of the child, along with *consistent*, reasonable application of limits and structure so that self-control can be learned. The key word here is *consistency*. On the limits and structure side, we are trying to help the child move from external control ("If you jump up and down on the chair, you will have to sit in my lap", to partial internal control ("I want to jump on the chair but I won't because others don't like it, and I could get in trouble") to full internal control ("I want to jump on the chair but I don't want to damage things that are to be treated carefully"). Limits must be set and adhered to in order to be effective – deviation from the limits only serves to confuse the child and further complicate your goal.

A few tasks necessary to achieve mature behavior are impulse control, social etiquette, and respect for yourself and others. These tasks are supported by loving and *consistent* limits set by the parent in the early years. More structure and direct supervision are needed in the earlier years so that later, children can exercise self-control as they experience less control by parents. So often, the American family does it the opposite way - tightening down more controls during the teen years after having few controls early in life.

What are some practical things parents need to keep in mind?

1. Physically structure, hold or move two or three year olds rather than just using words to direct them. Words and reasoning don't work well by themselves with younger ones; they must be paired with structure and experience. I hear parents say to a three year old "I don't want you to pull the cat's ears and tail because cats don't like it. You pulled his ears last time and he scratched you. Cats are more docile and rather independent and daddy really likes that cat so I don't want you to..." On and on it goes, with no success. Actions must replace words. Move the child or hold them. Expect the child to have

desires to pull the cat's ears. Just teach them they can experience frustration of that impulse and still survive.

2. Have clear school time rules that may be more structured than other "around the house" rules. This can help things to be less chaotic during school time, and it helps the child learn there are different occasions for certain behavior.

3. Ask you children to have an "inside voice" (inside the house vs. outside the house) when around others. Voice volume is a learned function. Parents who raise loud, dominant children have alternatives. I'm not talking about the totally busy, clinically hyperactive child who's motor is running non-stop. These kids can be managed, but they are not the same as kids whose parents have just gone deaf upon hearing them yell. Some parents keep responding to a child normally when the child is being loud and demanding. Of course, all movement toward what the child wants should stop when they are whining, loud, etc. The key is to teach children to talk in a reasonable voice around others or in a public place.

4. Don't be afraid to use your lap and arms to help a child gain control. When young children, for example, hit at parents because they are frustrated at a limit, parents do the child a great disservice when they ignore or laugh it off. Holding children until they yield to the grown up (sometimes out of their own exhaustion) has its place in the parenting of young children.

5. Be careful not to engage in debate or lengthy explanation. It is usually something you are doing for you; to make you feel better and to lessen your guilt in setting a limit with your child. Parents often talk as if waiting for their child to validate and agree with them. It's really okay to have a different view of things than your children – in fact, it teaches children about other points of view and how to deal with differing opinions.

6. Avoid this scenario I overheard with a homeschool family: The four year old was hitting the glass window in the family van with a metal object. Mom said "Don't hit the glass... it will break." The child proceeded to hit the glass and mom ignored it. Later, she came back and told him again not to hit the glass, while explaining that it would break, only to continue to remain inactive with the child. This continued on and off for quite sometime. What a sad commentary on a parent's inability to be an adult around a four year old. How awful it must be to feel intimidated by a child. How awful for the child to know his parents are much weaker than he is.

In this issue I am hitting hard on action and control, but don't forget the other concepts in child rearing we teach; they are equally important. Gentleness, sensitivity, and support of the child are elements of good parenting too. These gifts to our children are active, not passive. They are not the result of us being inadequate in our role as authority. Our position as compassionate authority is what we must be comfortable with ourselves. This helps children feel secure, and it gives them a social environment where they can learn to control the screaming impulses within them. If done early in life, this will help prevent power struggles down the road.

So as we start a new year, let's commit to action rather than inaction. Let's help our children learn to control themselves while they're young - when it can be more easily learned. Let's correct things in our homeschool communities so the CDC won't need to spend time in our neighborhoods. Do it for your children; do it for yourself; do it for the better of society and our future generations. Whatever the reason, simply just do it.

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