

Getting it together

Punished kids—alienated parents

By
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"Spare the rod and spoil the child," so they say. But they also say, "My teenager doesn't talk to me anymore. Everything is 'yup,' 'hope' and 'I don't know'."

The not-so-obvious reason is frequently that parents have come to be seen as disciplinarians rather than friends. When parents don't "spare the rod," they are in serious danger of becoming domestic policemen in the eyes of their children—controllers, rather than confidants.

Granted, parents need to control their kids, and kids need a certain amount of parental influence, especially young kids. The problem is that too many parents over-use and misuse punishment and threats as their primary control methods.

This is quite understandable when you consider the circumstances. Punishment is the easiest control technique for parents to

use, and it gets the quickest results, especially with young children. Even more significant, it is the parental model that most of us know best. It is the one that our parents used on us and their parents used on them, for many, it is the only way that they know.

To expect some parents to use any other parental model, given the circumstances of their own childhood, is asking them to act in ways that seem unnatural, immoral and unteachable. For most of us, it is not simply a question of which behavior-control technique is most effective, to adopt other techniques would mean going against our own ingrained natural inclinations.

But if you want to be more than just the family cop, you may have to go against your grain.

PUNISHMENT MAY BE quick and easy to use, but it has a lot of hidden costs and dangers, too. When it is applied with less than perfect consistency, children are inadvertently rewarded for "getting away with it." They learn that if they are careful, if they can fool their parents, if they can feign remorse, they may get off with a "suspended sentence." They learn to not get caught.

If parental discipline seems unreasonable to children, it may cause them to reject their parents and all they represent. This occurs when punishment is not explained, when it is given in such irregular ways that it is unpredictable and when it is given without adequate proof of a wrong-doing.

Punishment also will seem unreasonable when it enforces rules which seem unfair or arbitrary. Parents who set a lot of rules which are unexplained and not open for discussion probably will be rejected by their children.

When punishments are too harsh they may lead to shy, fearful children or even to cruel children. Although they may seem obvious, it can happen in subtle, insidious ways. For punishment has a way of getting out of hand, even with well-meaning parents.

Frequently, for example, children may get used to a certain level of discomfort from painful spankings and thus become less susceptible to them as deterrents. Frustrated parents respond by increasing the degree of punishment until they get results, but eventually this, too, is ignored and the severity must again be escalated. Too frequently, this vicious cycle can lead to battered children and guilty, frustrated parents.

AS LONG AS CHILDREN see discipline as the exclusive responsibility of their parents, all of these ill effects of punishment are likely to occur. When kids think of their parents as domestic policemen they are less likely to trust them as friends, less likely to show them their inner feelings and more likely to be secretive—a high price to pay for control.

The alternative to this sad state of affairs is not necessarily to just throw out all responsibility for parental discipline. Parents who have swung over to extreme permissiveness have proven the flaws in that approach.

The best answer is to work toward teaching your children increasing self-discipline. As young human beings mature, they become capable of more and more self-control. The most important role a parent has in this process is encouraging the growth rather than preventing it.

Self-discipline is encouraged when kids have an active part in planning and setting the rules for their own behavior. It is prevented when these rules always are arbitrarily set by parents. Likewise, children are more likely to learn self-discipline when they see their punishments as the predictable consequences of breaking rules rather than just angry outbursts by parents.

All of this is easier said than done. It takes much more time to teach self-discipline than to control undesirable behavior with punishments. For many parents, it would mean breaking a lot of old habits. For most parents, it is well worth the trouble.

Bob Trenz is a Rochester marriage counselor and psychologist. Questions for Dr. Trenz may be sent to the Rochester Observer & Eccentric, 418 N. Main, Rochester 48603.

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Added to the basic class program this term are some special interest subjects. By demand, an astrology class will be offered during the day program. First aid will help prepare mothers for summer.

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