

Who's in Charge?

Ruth A. Peters, PhD

"Help, my child is running the family!" is a concern voiced by many parents today. Mothers and fathers often feel powerless in dealing with their youngsters. Children can exhaust even the most well-intentioned parent, and slowly the adult feels that it is not worth the battle.

When the parent loses the reins of control, the child loses the parent. Children without parents, or children whose parents have abdicated power are youngsters without boundaries or guidelines. When there are only few limits, the child sets the rules without the benefit of experience to guide the rule-making. Just as in political abdication, the child's take-over coup leads to chaos. Chaotic families abound, and many parents feel as if they are being held hostage by their tykes. They resort to defensive postures due to fear of conflict with their children as well as guilt if they do punish them.

The incidence of dictatorial, self-centered, and demanding children appears to have increased tremendously since the 1950s. Many childcare workers have, in the past 30 years, been teaching parents that conflicts with their children are to be viewed as differences of opinions and misunderstandings. In effect, parents have been taught to "reason with the unreasonable." This *laissez-faire* attitude trains parents to allow natural consequences to affect the child. Therefore, parents are not being encouraged to give immediate consequences for the child's actions.

Most parents with noncompliant children literally have tried everything before seeking professional advice. Disciplinary tactics that they have employed often include time-out, removing privileges, and most notably — lecturing.

Parents note that each of these consequences seems to work for a short time, but the effectiveness soon dissipates. They generally give in due to confusion

and exhaustion. Parents come to the counselor's office at wits end, looking for the magic cure. They find out the cure is not magic. The solution involves common sense and effort, and is quite workable if the parents can employ consistent, effective discipline given in a nonchalant manner.

An example of parental inconsistency is as follows: Eight-year old Tommy continually asks his mother if he can play outside, even though it is near dinner time. Mother has said "no" three times and even has threatened to send him to his room, but Tommy's persistence paid off as he continued to whine. Mother finally threw up her hands and told him "Just this once — but be back in 15 minutes!" Another notch in Tommy's gunbelt! There would be many more such incidents that would only serve to reinforce the inappropriate message, "If I wear her down by begging and bugging, I'll get my way". Had mother stood her ground and forced effective discipline, Tommy would have received another more appropriate message, "When mom says 'no', she means it!"

In an effort to do the best job that we can, parents often give children too much. "Too much" includes too many material objects, too many freedoms, and too much control. In the process of giving our children too much, parents are not giving them enough of a very important value — the value of self-control.

Self-control is accomplished by parents creating boundaries and limits for their children. The old adage: "It was almost as if he was asking to be punished," is quite apt. One often sees children who appear to be happier after they have been punished, and limits have been set for them. Children usually do not seek limit setting, but their temperaments improve when they know what they can get away with and what they can't.

Mothers and fathers eventually find parenting as a "benevolent dictatorship" rather than parenting as a

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"democracy" to be the most effective manner of teaching children frustration tolerance and self-control. The parent has greater control and establishes more stability in the home. The child learns to delay gratification, which is a skill of immeasurable value in terms of the effects that it will have throughout the individual's life. When the child learns that the parent will set the limits and establish the boundaries rather than the child having the final vote, it will be easier for the youngster to be able to accept rules that do not please him later in life. This is extremely important to the adult in work and marital situations.

Youngsters who grow to adulthood not having learned the skills of self-control and frustration tolerance tend to become unsuccessful, unstable adults. We must therefore, teach the parent in order to teach the child. Rules for good parenting include:

1. Reward consistently good behavior and do so immediately.
2. Be sure to punish inappropriate behavior, and use an effective punishment such as time-out.
3. Do not reward inappropriate behavior.

Behavior management techniques involving specific consequences for appropriate and inappropriate behaviors have been suggested by many psychologists. Consistent use of such programs has been found to be quite effective. However, the parent must be willing to invest a considerable amount of time in evaluating his child's behavior as well as the parent's own responses and possible inconsistencies.

In addition, parents need to be strong enough to tolerate the manipulation of their youngster. For instance, the worst thing that a baby can do is scream, but a screaming child has never actually harmed an adult. If the parent behaves appropriately, the screaming will cease. Too many parents dread their child's screaming and will do anything to stop it. In

addition, many parents feel that the child may cease to love them if the youngster is punished for negative behavior. In reality, the child will cease to respect the parent if he or she is not given appropriate consequences for inappropriate behavior.

Youngsters who are taught self-control at an early age develop and understand self-discipline naturally as adults. Most likely, these youngsters also will pass this gift on to their own children and will perpetuate the positive approach to disciplining children. As Dr. Scott Peck notes in his book entitled *The Road Less Traveled* (1978), "discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life's problems. Without discipline we can solve nothing, and with some discipline we solve only some problems. With total discipline we can solve all problems."

Parents cannot look to external helping adults in their children's lives (educators, pediatricians, pediatric dentists) to teach their children responsibility and self-discipline. It must come from the home environment. Consistent, strong, well-disciplined parents are the prescription for the evolution of self-disciplined, successful youngsters. Breaking the cycle of low frustration tolerance, irresponsibility, and self-indulgence is a societal mandate for the future. Children are happier, more successful, and more self-confident when they know the rules and when they realize that they can achieve them. Let us give our children the opportunity to succeed. Let us love them, guide them, and, most importantly, let us provide an environment rich with opportunities to explore and to grow within clear boundaries.

Peck MS: *The Road Less Traveled*. New York: Touchstone, 1978, pp 15-16.