

## A Few Words on Spanking and Punishment

I have been approached by adults who have taken issue with my suggestions that parents should not spank or punish their children. They believed that withholding spankings and punishment just creates more bad behavior and that children need to “learn a lesson.” Some have even compared them to adults going to prison for not behaving in society. They stated that prison time is not an adult time-out, it is a strong and swift message to let law-breakers know that what they did was wrong. They must pay for their actions. These folks felt strongly, as many parents do, that a misbehaving child must pay for their actions in the family. I pointed out this false premise that a misbehaving child is equal to an adult who commits a crime.

Some adults however, agree with this comparison. Others don't but turn to spanking and punishment because they don't know what else to do. Many of us were raised in an autocratic world with this way of thinking and when we become frustrated as a parent, we end up taking the path of least resistance, resorting to the tools that our parents used with us when we were children. Robert Fritz defined this path and the resistance we feel in his book, *The Path of Least Resistance* (1989, Ballantine Books). In order to take a new path he said, whether it is dieting or changing the way we discipline our children, we must first identify the resistance and address that before we can create new paths. A little education about a child's behavior changes the resistance we feel and it in turn can change our approach to discipline. This little bit of education, along with some simple training on alternative tools that work, can change the family experience and the relationships we have with our children (and others).

Spanking or punishing a child never feels good to us or the child. We do it because we don't know what else to do. We also do it because we often suffer from a buildup of frustration from life stresses when we are trying to do too much and are not setting aside time to take care of ourselves. Then our children don't cooperate and it creates resistance that pushes us to take the easy path of spanking or punishing our child. It creates a temporary relief of the stress we feel, similar to the boiling water in a tea kettle letting the steam out and sounding the whistle. We do so much for our children and when we get resistance from them in the form of a lack of cooperation, we feel betrayed by them and angry.

The kids don't care about our life stresses and all the things we have to accomplish. A child who is misbehaving is either trying to communicate a need he has, or she is behaving in a way that she has been taught. When a child refuses to cooperate in the morning, she may be saying, “I don't feel important or valuable to you. I want you to slow down and notice me.” If two brothers seem to fight every morning at the breakfast table, their behavior could be an extension of the stress they feel emanating from their mother emotionally as she scurries around in a frantic rush to get everyone out of the house on time. If one child is screaming NO at the top of her lungs at her mother, perhaps she has seen this type of behavior demonstrated by others somewhere else in her life. Children behave in ways that the caregivers around them have trained them to behave. Instead of spanking and punishment, the caregiver should address each of the specific needs the child is demonstrating at the moment. If you can't respond that minute, then do what you can to get through the moment and look for opportunities

to satisfy those specific needs of the child later on. Eventually, the misbehavior subsides when these needs are addressed at appropriate times.

Going back to inappropriately comparing a misbehaving child to a criminal, a child is still learning his way and testing his boundaries to figure things out. But an adult breaking the law is not entitled to test things out and misbehave. He is already grown and expected to obey laws to keep the world fair and safe for everyone. Quite regularly, I find myself with a father in my parenting class who tries to compare a child's acting out to breaking the law speeding on the highway. He feels that the punishment a child should receive equals the traffic ticket given out to the speeder. Whether we like it or not, a child is wired to test out the limits and boundaries that we create for our children. That is how she learns. It is our responsibility as parents and teachers to put firm boundaries in place and to reinforce them in an unconditionally loving and respectful way that can incorporate other methods besides hitting the child or making them feel bad through punishment.

When we were kids, we too tried to test our parent's boundaries but they were not equipped to deal with our exploration and testing. Back then, adults had different, autocratic schemas about family life. Through abrasive punishment, the "explorer" in each of us was burned out quickly and as a result, many of us grew up to live mediocre lives and unable to "explore" our world to truly discover our inner purpose for being here and live life to its fullest. When we take the time to build respectful boundaries for our children to explore within, we preserve the explorer in them to remain there when they become an adult. This will enable them to discover their true purpose and live a full and happy life. Children who are spanked and punished on a regular basis grow up just surviving and being a follower... I did not want my children to be followers, I wanted them to lead others and find their purpose. Today I am joyfully watching them lead happy and productive lives as young adults.

Perhaps you agree with my point of view in this article, but you may be asking yourself, "what am I suppose to do instead?" You'll find these solutions in my past and future columns, also available on my Web site.

*Bill Corbett is the author of the book "Love, Limits, & Lessons" in English and in Spanish, and the founder and president of Cooperative Kids. He has three grown children, two grandchildren, and lives with his wife Elizabeth near Hartford, Connecticut. You can visit his Web site [www.CooperativeKids.com](http://www.CooperativeKids.com) for further information and parenting advice.*