

PARENTS AND CHILDREN ARE NATURAL ENEMIES

ABOUT THE CONFLICT OF AUTHORITY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF GETTING ON THE SAME TEAM WITH YOUR CHILDREN

By Clinton Callahan 20 October 2004

You know the routine: wake up in the morning; try to get your kids ready for school. Five days a week the battle begins. Armies form up on either side of the breakfast table.

On one side are the adults. For attack weapons the adults use positional authority ("Because I am the parent, that's why!") backed by threats of forfeiting privilege ("No more Gameboy for you!" "Forget going to Europapark for your birthday!"), name calling ("You slowpoke!" "You brat." "You are such a devil!"), very loud voices, and as a last resort, physical violence or threats of physical violence ("I could just wring your neck!"). In the name of expediency we parents use our superior size and strength, but what is the result? A part of us unconsciously contributes to irrevocably crush the living soul of own children as if they were the enemy.

The objective of the parents is to manipulate the children to fulfilling the cultural requirements of going to school, doing their homework, cleaning up their room, being nice, and so on. We use whatever control and force is necessary without looking so fiendish that the neighbors get scared and call the police.

The objective of the children is quite different from that of the parents. What children are doing is learning how to be a human being that can love and play passionately so as to bring their own personal unique vision into reality in the world.

Our modernized technical culture creates a huge gap between what adults want and what children want. Our culture provides adults with time pressures, financial worries, artificial insecurities (such as, "Are you looking older?"), and a set of constantly changing unsatisfiable needs ("But have you seen next year's car?"). Across the breakfast table from us sit our children, wondering if it is worth it to grow up and become adults like us in such a world?

Why don't the worlds of adults and children synergize anymore? In older traditional cultures several generations all lived together and each had its place. In today's world parents and children are natural enemies. How does this happen?

The battle begins at our beginning. If infants are not taken care of on all levels with love and respect they figure that their survival is in their own hands. Such a child is not a problem child. Their autonomy is not rebelliousness as we might think; it is simply a desperate attempt to survive. When we exercise our authority as parents, the children must fight that authority because to give authority to another is a threat to the child's continued existence. From experience the children already do not trust us to take care of them with dignity so they must take care of themselves in whatever ways they can.

Why can't parents adjust to being with children? Because of the unknown. A child represents an eternal inexhaustible curiosity, an unfillable well of wanting to know. The child wants to learn about the world. The whole world – not just the limited world encompassed by our personal understanding. By asking questions a child is perceived as a natural enemy to an adult's already knowing.

We parents assume that we must provide the answers. Adult psychology naturally defends the position of a parent: "I know. I have to know. The child needs me to know. If I do not know, who does know?"

Adult psychologies do not want to re-open the "can of worms" of existential questions. For a normal adult, these questions have already been answered. So adult psychology perceives the source of authentic questions as a threat to its survival. Instead of being in a reciprocal, nurturing, joyous relationship with our children we try to limit their effect on us. We deny the needs of the developing child mind filled with awe and wonder, and we try to force children prematurely into an adult reality.

Life with children does not have to be a contest to see who has the cleverest manipulations. It is possible for parents and their children to be on the same team. To make this shift in your family requires some new behaviors on the part of the parents. This does not mean that the parents lose. It means that the parents get to reclaim a heart-warming connection to companions who view life with the fresh eyes of an explorer. You can change the mood at your breakfast table with only a few minutes a day of conscious efforts.

Here are 5 simple steps to get on the same team with your children:

- 1) Do "silent interviews" with your children twice a week for twenty minutes each. A "silent interview" is just like it sounds: interview your child to get to know about him or her without saying anything. Interview your child through listening. Interview your child through being open towards them. Without saying what you are doing, dedicate twenty minutes to allowing your child into your perception. Memorize these open-ended phrases: "Oh, wow! That is interesting. Can you say more about that? And then what happened? Thank you for telling me this." Listen for both the information *and* their feelings about the information. Do not moralize, praise, blame, problem solve, psychoanalyze, or instruct. Just listen. Respect their efforts. If they want your input they will specifically ask for it. Meanwhile, appreciate that such a miraculous person is willing to share with you a few stories from their life.
- 2) Observe every time you position yourself towards your children as if they are your enemy. Stop doing it. If you are trying to manipulate, force, convince, contradict, educate, prove yourself right, or change your child you are at war. Stop the struggle. Instead, find your child's true motive, put yourself in their shoes, and help them to do the experiments they want to do to succeed with their desire. Honor their desires. Important note: This in *no way* means to not say, "No!" when a boundary is needed. Making a boundary or saying "No!" need not make you enemies. Just be clear that the boundary is a boundary. Children need boundaries like a gymnast needs climbing bars. Without bars a gymnast cannot perform. Without your boundaries a child cannot responsibly create. After an initial recoil, children respect you for giving them sane boundaries to work with. Do not let the children run the show. This drives them crazy.
- 3) Stop assuming that you must be the ultimate authority and have the answers to all questions. Get used to saying "I don't know," without beating yourself up. Saying "I don't know," can often be the wisest thing to say, like when someone is asking you a riddle for which you already know the answer. Stop assuming that you must be responsible for the design of our culture. You do not have to enforce our cultural rules on your children. Get real. Question the culture yourself. Stand in awe of life and be okay with not knowing all the whys and wherefores. Take your

child's desires, conflicts, and questions as invitations to play, discover and explore the world together.

- 4) Don't give the responsibility for raising your children to someone else, e.g. the teachers, the childcare people, your parents, or to the culture at large. Your children are your responsibility. Responsibility is love in action. Children can feel your avoidance of responsibility for them. When you try to avoid responsibility for your children they experience it like you do not love them. Even if you do not know how, you can still be responsible for the well being of your children. Commit first to the well being of your children. Everything else will come from that.
- 5) Respect the basic goodness of your children. Tell them that you are sorry for what has happened up until now, and tell them that you really do not know anything about them. Tell them that you want to know who they are. Tell them that you trust them, that you did not know before that they were trustworthy. And then trust them. What they do is their life, not yours. Through feedback, the world will instruct your children clearly about what works and what does not work. You do not have to instruct them about the world. You simply have the opportunity to be with them and share some life together. If you arbitrarily trust your child it is true that you might from time to time be betrayed by your trust. Such mistakes are forgivable. If it happens that your child does not keep their promises to you, be honest. Do not protect your child from your feelings. The child's mistakes are forgivable and it is the way the world teaches the child about life. The pain of now and then being made the fool is far less than experiencing the proud joy of living with trustworthy children.

These steps are simple, yet not necessarily easy. Give these experiments some time to produce their magical effect. Then be vigilant against old habits returning to trample on fresh shoots. Have fun!

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