



THE FAMILY TREE

Red Light! Don't cross the line of good parenting

Imagine how you might feel if someone you loved and trusted yelled at you every time you made a mistake, belittled you with words like “lazy” and “stupid,” or constantly compared you unfavorably to someone else.

Unfortunately, that scenario plays out every day for far too many children – children who come from all walks of life, and in all colors and sizes. It's called emotional or mental abuse, and it's perhaps the most insidious kind of assault, as its wounds often go undetected for years, and can do irreparable damage. Children who are its victims more often than not grow up lacking empathy, self-esteem, healthy conflict resolution and interpersonal skills. And, as with physical and sexual abuse, emotional abuse frequently becomes cyclical, handed down from parent to child, through several generations.

But let's step back a bit, and look more closely at the problem. We have all, as parents, felt out of control with our kids at one time or another, usually because we are frustrated, tired, or under some sort of stress. And sometimes we act on it, insensitively snapping orders, or saying unkind things we don't mean. So, when do these outbursts cross over the line and become emotional abuse?

According to James Garbanno, a nationally recognized expert on emotional abuse from Cornell University's Family Life Development Center, we have crossed the line when it becomes “a chronic pattern that erodes and corrodes a child, not just a few isolated incidents.” Dr. Arthur Green, Director of the Family Center at New York's Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, agrees. “We're talking about the kind of things that a good parent may do 10% of the time, but a troubled parent does 80% or 90% of the time.”

At The Family Tree, we believe that all parents want the best for their children, but for a variety of reasons – stress, poor parenting skills, mental illness, social isolation, or inappropriate expectations – some parents harm their children. Sadly, the vast majority of these parents feel they must inflict this kind of assault on their kids in order to “make them mind,” or in other words, to control their behavior at home and in public. Unfortunately, however, it becomes a vicious cycle. As children feel increasingly more shamed, frightened, demeaned and angry, they will often fight back in both words and deeds to “save face,” and maintain some level of control over their lives.

So, what can we all do to prevent emotional hurt or abuse of any kind?

Count to ten, when you need to. Learn to walk away from a situation when you feel you are losing control. Excuse yourself by saying, “Let’s talk about this when we both cool down,” leave the room, count to ten, and take a few deep breaths. By the time you regain control, the situation has often de-escalated sufficiently on both sides, and rational, thoughtful and meaningful interaction can take place.

Address the behaviors, without attacking the character. The most common form of emotional abuse between parent and child is name-calling. Labels such as “lazy” and “good for nothing” are character assaults that attack and destroy self-worth. Keep the focus on behaviors, instead. And make sure you spell out – and follow through on - a reasonable and appropriate consequence, preferably a lost privilege of some sort, for undesirable behavior. For example, when your youngster fails to clean up his room for the third day in a row, open the fourth discussion with “I feel so frustrated when you don’t pick up your room after I have asked you to. So until you finish the job, you cannot go bike riding with your friends.”

Avoid the proverbial “battle of the wills.” We’ve all been there. It’s 8:00 in the morning and you’re getting your 4-year-old ready for preschool. You have chosen a lovely little Gap outfit for the occasion, but she would rather wear her red fleece sweatpants with a blue and orange halter top and cowgirl boots. Mortified at the thought of your daughter showing up at school in this get-up, you steel yourself for battle. Quickly, your patient entreaties dissolve into shrieking epithets, while her forceful demands become piercing howls that could wake the dead. Finally, after resorting to intimidation, you get your way. But, you both leave the house angry and resentful, and you of course feel unbelievably guilty.

So, how can you change this lose-lose situation into a win-win? By offering rational choices. As children grow from toddlerhood to adolescence, they naturally develop a need for greater individuality and independence. It’s up to us, as parents, to steer this independence toward good choices and behavior. The best way to avoid battles of the will is to allow your child to choose between one or more options, any of which will result in the outcome that you, the parent, feel is best. For example, in the clothing wars – a choice between two Gap ensembles of different styles and colors would have solved everyone’s dilemma.

Don’t be afraid to apologize. Let’s face it. We all make mistakes, losing our tempers and wishing we could simply start over again. When it happens, do what you would do with another adult – apologize. Children need to know that adults can admit when they do something wrong

Never miss an opportunity to compliment your child on good behavior. Child development experts agree that parents should accentuate the positive whenever possible, as a way to eliminate the negative. Therefore, when your kids are caught doing something good, let them know that you know. Make sure that you link praise to behavior. For instance, “you did a great job clearing the

table today,” or “your room looks spectacular since you put your toys away.” The result – your kids will feel competent, valuable and loved. And, isn’t that what we are all about as parents?