

State of Mind – August 2008

Nothing can disrupt productivity at work and peacefulness at home more than the pressures arising from problems with a child. All too often parents call my office in desperation because their child is in trouble. Bad grades, disruptive behaviors and lack of respect are the major concerns when it seems that life is spiraling out of control.

Helping your child succeed means giving him something to believe in. The world throws so much at kids that shakes their sense of security and believability. Such influences as advertising and, sadly, their peers emphasize the material and superficial as keys to acceptance and happiness. There is a growing expectation that everything they want should be given to them. They grow up too fast... have too much...are involved in too many things. Today's youth expect life to be easy and to be forgiven for all their mistakes. Parents capitulate and try to be friends to their kids. This does not work.

As a new school year looms, it might be wise to think about implementing a few strategies that may help avoid unnecessary conflicts. If you call in crisis, it's actually too late.

Unity between the parents is essential. Unless this is assured, all else will fail. Children will quickly learn to play one parent against the other. Sometimes the parents will actually undermine each other in a power struggle. This is particularly true in divorce situations. The best interest of the children must be the paramount concern. Of course, in many situations this is easier said than done.

Whatever plan is developed must be something that can be enforced with **consistency** and **predictability**. The child must come to know that what has been promised will occur. This means that rewards will be bestowed, as well as negative consequences implemented, whenever conditions are met. This takes planning and effort on the part of parents. Expectations must be clearly defined and should be reasonably structured, given the abilities and characteristics of the child. This is the fundamental of an *a priori* **parenting plan**. You must avoid reactive discipline that is dominated by your surges of heated emotions; such measures lead to crazy punishments, ones that restrict you as much as the child. Especially when assailed by a whining kid, such times are when you are most likely to back down and curtail the punishment, the grounding or limits set on driving, Internet or phone privileges. When you give in ... the battle is lost. The results of the war may even be in jeopardy. By contrast, when you think ahead and let your child know what is expected, you can remain calm and put the burden where it belongs—on your son or daughter.

You must anticipate the conditions of expected behaviors and set rules accordingly. The feelings and emotions you have for your children often confound effective plans because you may not want to hurt or disappoint them. Love should drive your efforts, without question, but rational thought must be at the base of your plan. Separate the power of your emotions and keep your eye on the end goal: a healthy and productive child, one who learns to live responsibly in the world.

It helps to think of the parenting process as a business relationship where you let your children know that they are being treated as adults. Such an approach counters several of the ruses they often use including such gems as: “I’m not a kid;” “You can’t tell me what to do;” “I know what’s good for me;” and “I want my freedom.” Much to their surprise, you might inform them that you agree, and it is all in their hands. Consequently, all they have to do is show they can handle what comes with being a grown-up. This is where you can inform them that there **are few innate rights** and, instead, that **privileges** govern most of what they want. Those privileges are grounded in fulfillment of responsibility. Basing “freedoms” on accountability makes more sense than traditional guidelines such as age. In fact, the more you define roles and expectations, the better this will go. Actually, in some families a conscientious 14-year-old may be worthy of more freedoms than an irresponsible 17-year-old.

Values play a great part in this process. Children must know where their parents stand. Modeling is critical. It is no longer sufficient to say, “Do as I say and not as I do.” Hypocrisy cannot be defended and creates confusion in the minds of offspring who see unacceptable behaviors and attitudes manifested by the adults in their lives. This is not simply about drinking or cussing; it encompasses all aspects of life. If a child sees disrespect in her mother and father, she will come to adopt that as an acceptable way of dealing with others. Being a “heroic parent” demands **self-examination and sacrifice** without portraying oneself as a martyr for what you are doing. You must try to see yourself as your children see you. Face the fact that kids know insincerity and can find flaws that will give them advantages.

It is part of growing up to try to test one’s limits. However, if parents do not establish guidelines from the beginning that are backed up by a sensible plan and further reinforced by good modeling, then a child has no idea about boundaries, or ultimately what it takes to earn the privileges that are part of the freedom all of us seek as adults. Lest this seem too daunting, parents should take solace in the good news that most children make it through developmental phases with few serious problems.

On a related note, as the 2008 Olympics begin, we will see athletes from ages 16 to 41 ... people who have sacrificed to achieve world-class athletic stature. As individuals, each of those athletes reflects what used to be the American spirit. We would work hard to be the best and to win, academically socially and economically. Of late, Americans have become lazy and willing to accept mediocrity, excusing sub-par performance with platitudes and excuses. What does this tell future generations who may be stunned to find that the USA is no longer the leader of the free world? It says America has become a society of entitlement and that we are not modeling the true keys to future success. It’s time to stop whining and start working to be the best. Let’s not allow the world pass us by.