



The Soft & Hard Sides of Discipline

A Brief Look at Empathic Parenting

BY KATHY CAPRINO

Have you ever had difficulty determining when “enough is enough” with your child? Or questioned when you should draw the line rather than be flexible and give in to his requests? Have you ever experienced the pain and confusion of knowing your child wants softness from you, but feared that this softness will somehow be “bad” for him/her in some way?

These are issues that all parents face regarding discipline and how best to provide the guidance and support your child needs along with the love, nurture and empathy they most long for. In working with coaching and therapy clients, and as a parent myself, I’ve come to understand the deep complexities involved in serving as a loving, empathic parent while at the same time providing effective guidance and authority.

These are not simple, easy or comfortable issues. But asking yourself the following questions can be greatly beneficial and productive in the process of empathic and effective parenting.

When my child is acting up, what is he longing for on a deeper level?

Often, a child acts up or misbehaves for purposes that are not readily apparent on the surface. Misbehaving can in fact be a child’s way of gaining your attention and direct engagement with him. He may be craving your attention and love, and unable to achieve these in a productive manner. Sometimes, acting out is a way to distract parents from their own conflicts, so that the attention is again

refocused on the child. It can be a form of “homeostasis,” keeping the family intact and functioning. So the key question here is: What may my child’s misbehavior be saying that I haven’t yet fully understood?

Who is in control here? Do I need to set clearer, more consistent boundaries?

Often as parents, our own insecurities about our parenting skills lead us to doubt our ability to control and question whether we rightfully deserve a place in this “executive” role. When this occurs, we typically lose our ability to be effective and authoritative. In essence, we have allowed our children to climb up into the executive position and make decisions for us. If you experience a sense of being out of control with your children and feel as if they are running the show, it is very helpful to stop and examine your beliefs and attitudes around setting and enforcing guidelines. Are you consistent, and firm? Do you provide natural consequences when your children do not behave as you need them to? When we make this careful examination of our difficulties in acting authoritatively in our own lives, we often find beliefs and fears carried over from our childhood about ourselves, our parents, the nature of love, support and self-assertion that need to be re-examined.

Am I showing empathy and care in my reactions even though I need to be firm?

There are times, of course, when children need from parents firmness and resoluteness, so that they may learn new ways to achieve what is considered acceptable and beneficial behavior in the family, and later, with their peers, in society and their world at large. This firmness may be required in many different areas including respect, rules, rituals and communication as well as in enforcing appropriate boundaries. But when we are firm and unmovable, can we at the same time be loving and empathic? As parents, it is important to examine our ways of enforcing rules to ensure they leave room for demonstrating our genuine empathy and care for the child’s inner experience and her unique individuality.

Do I validate my child? Do I let her know that, while I may not agree with her position, it is a valid one to her?

What we humans seem to crave deeply and consistently is validation—experiencing others’ support that our personal beliefs and actions make sense. Yet often when we struggle with our children, we invalidate them as we attempt to provide guidance about the ways we need them to change. We can discredit or undermine their behavior or thoughts, telling them they are wrong, silly, immature or crazy. A different approach that builds self-esteem is to support the idea that, while we need some change in their behavior, we still *understand* and can relate to their position, and consider it valid.

When I need to reprimand and give a consequence, how can I execute it so that my child

can save face with dignity, while learning and growing from the experience?

It is very difficult for children (and adults) in a power struggle to admit defeat and lose face. Yet this is often what we exact from our children when we demand that they change, or that we are right, thus inferring that they are not. We become much more effective when we allow our children to remove themselves from the conflict with their dignity and self-esteem intact. There are many ways to do this, all of which require keeping in mind the goal of fostering our children's life energy rather than vanquishing their spirit as we attempt to bring about positive changes in everyone's behavior.

Am I on the same page with my spouse so that the parental unit is strong and cohesive?

In my work with families and children, one of the most common patterns to emerge involves one spouse unwittingly using a child as a tool against the other spouse. How does this occur? When we feel in some way powerless to affect a desired change in our marriage, we can find ourselves using a child to side with us, or to be pitted against our spouse. In our collusion with another, we become more powerful and feel less alone. Further, when a child is acting out and disregarding one parent, often there are ways in which the child is gaining support in his struggle from the other spouse. The key question at the heart of this dynamic is: Am I on the same page with my spouse about parenting and about our own relationship? If not, am I involving my child in any way, through conflict or through direct collusion, to get back at my spouse?

Can my power struggles with my children teach me anything about my own fears and insecurities that need to be addressed?

When we struggle with our children, there are often underlying themes and patterns that are playing out. It can be helpful to look at the struggle from a distance, as a metaphor, to gain clarity on the key issue. As an example, we often fight with our teenage children over their breaking curfew or disregarding other rules. A deeper look can reveal key developmental challenges occurring, such as the teenager's natural process of striving to achieve autonomy versus dependence. Looking beneath the surface of our struggles, we often see our own fears are being tapped...perhaps a fear of losing our children as they grow up, fear of being alone, or fear of losing meaning in our lives as our children leave home to pursue their own lives.

Am I fostering my child's own unique individual path or am I trying to make it in the image of someone else's?

Finally, a very significant key to effective, empathic parenting is to ask ourselves the question: What is my key goal in parenting? What am I, overall, hoping to achieve as a good parent? To provide love and support, offer guidelines for development, to foster the growth of a happy, healthy, productive individual? Or perhaps, is it to create a loving, safe, supportive environment for my child to become all he is meant to be in this world, based on *his or her own* dreams, passions, energies and goals?

Whatever your answer to this pivotal question, its exploration will be extremely helpful in setting your own parenting course. Increasing your awareness of your actions as a loving, effective parent will ultimately help you expand your choices as to how to react, communicate and behave. In the end, modeling empathic parenting will benefit not only your children, but future generations as well.

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Dog Days of Summer —The “Booming” Dilemma

by Marian Brown



If the sweltering heat of summer nights mixes with cool breezes, the combination could be one that sends your pet running for cover. An estimated 19 percent of dogs suffer from what veterinarians term “thunder phobia.” The phobia can range from mild anxiety, whining, frantic pacing, hiding, running away, even jumping out of windows.

Although no one knows for sure what causes some dogs to panic during storms, the noise, light and drop in pressure can all cause pets to become edgy. Some pets may have memories of a bad experience during a storm. Others simply mirror and concentrate an owner's own anxiety.

Assuring young dogs and puppies that everything will be all right and keeping them from developing the phobia can be key. However over time, once the fear is developed it can worsen with age.

But there is always hope for helping your pet. Holistically, desensitization (behavior modification) can work well. Slowly introduce the thunderstorm sounds (using a tape or CD). This will normally take several weeks. Reassure your pet throughout the process. Another approach is the use of herbs and herbal-based products*. Herbal products, specially formulated for pets, can be very effective. The calming effect often can last for several hours. Flower remedies such as Bach's Rescue Remedy or NSP's Distress Remedy can also be given. No matter what method you use, reassurance and love are always comforting to your pet.

**Remember that there are some contraindications for herbal products—such as nursing pets and pets already on medications. Check with your veterinarian.*