

Children Are People

by Carol Hitz

One pediatrician used to say, "Be careful what you say to or about your children, they may live up to your expectations." The same doctor said, "It is good for caregivers to get out of their homes at least once a day for a change of scene and recharging."

In a local store, recently, I was horrified by what a young Father said to his three young children in a cart, "If you don't sit down and shut up, I will cut off your legs."

In a grocery store parking lot last summer, I was aghast when I heard a baby crying, non-stop, from an unsupervised car. Windows were slightly down and I kept my eyes fixated on this car for fear that someone would reach in and kidnap this precious bundle. I couldn't stand it any longer after about ten minutes and I rushed over to the telephone booth to dial 911, only to be told that by the time they got there the car and people would be gone. I assumed it was against the law to leave children unattended in a parked car.

I overheard another Mother tell another person that her child was a klutz and never did anything right. As I looked over at the child, I noticed her little lips quivering, her eyes tearing. It was as if that lady had put a knife in my heart.

Also overheard in a parking lot another parent says to their son, "If you don't shut up and quit crying, I'll give you something to cry about." Another Father says to his son, "You are going to get the belt when you get home."

Children are literalists and believe what they hear. They get the message that they aren't worth much with the above responses. You and I both have heard messages like that. We might wonder how we can help or change messages that would be harmful to children.

If we as parents and caregivers don't give the children permission and protection, than who will? Being a parent or a child can be tough, but it can be more rewarding and fun with a few tools. No person alive will be 100% perfect with parenting and controlling anger.

Imagine as an adult receiving messages that are critical or discounting, being constantly overlooked or being compared to someone else. Do those kinds of responses improve your self-esteem, or performance? Children don't come knowing how to react and they will look to us for modeling and example.

So many people abuse and neglect because that has been done to them. Some parents even think that they have to toughen their son or daughter up for the grown-up world. People who have been abused and neglected may over-eat, have low-self-esteem over-drink, turn to drugs, irresponsible sex, or punitive religions, become super-achievers, or become low achievers to numb their pain. One may get even with themselves or someone else.

Before change is possible, one must know they have a problem, admit it, and understand that it is a sign of strength to ask for help and treatment. This is the first generation that has the tools and technology to alter unhealthy behavior. No more excuses. We can now be pioneers in this most important calling of parenthood, teaching and caregiving.

Abuse is an active assault against a child, to be put to bad use, to do wrong, to injure, to dishonor, to cheat, improper treatment, improper use, insulting.

Neglect is when a child is deprived of essentials such as food, water, clothing, shelter, appropriate mental and emotional stimuli.

Parents who have been abused and neglected as children or have been abused by their husband, wife, or significant person, will likely perpetuate this behavior on an unconscious level unless intervention or help is sought. It is like an illness that needs treatment because it affects families and society at large significantly. Often children, even though they know they are being abused, will not tell because they fear being taken from their family. Any family is often seen as better than no family at all. Also if a child tells the family secret, he risks being taken from the family and placed in foster

care, or worse yet, ostracized by others for being different. The stakes are high.

It is said that all problems have solutions. Along with solutions comes new problems, and problems are where we find them. The paradox is, the more love one has for oneself, the more love one has to give to others. Everyone matters and deserves love and validation.

Sadly, in U.S.A., one child every four hours a day is dying of child abuse. When we are kind, gentle, supportive, empathetic to children, it is as though our own inner child gets another opportunity to be reparented and empowered. We all need reasonable boundaries and limitations with reasonable consequences.

Children will strike back if they are not heard. Sometimes they will do criminal behavior to release those pent-up feelings, or you may notice them being over-rebellious or overadapting.

Everyone deserves to be heard and honored, because every life matters and counts. Our families are our best teachers. Our families will take us places that we never dreamed we would be going.

Parents, children, teachers and caregivers can make it a game to go for the highest and best in each situation. Test and see if what you are about to do is illegal, immoral, or harmful to oneself or others. Then proceed with choice and new attitudes as we model healthy behavior and support and empower one another.

Let's not dwell on the pathology of the earlier responses, but let's examine some healthier responses to both parent and child for a win/win situation. Life is pretty much a do-it-yourself project with the Higher Power. We have brains that can be creative and do a better job. We can change our minds with new information and still save face

The man, who threatened to cut off his children's legs if they didn't sit down in the cart, might have practiced empathy and said something like this, "You children have had a busy, and exciting day, and you must be tired." He could have gently taken them and firmly sat them down. If they didn't comply, he could have said, "Because we are tired,

we are going to leave and go home and come back earlier in the day." He could have told them their behavior was unacceptable and then found at least one thing about what he appreciated about the children to tell them as he left and was going home. Each parent definitely needs to set boundaries and limits with reasonable consequences. Give children some choices in stores. "This is how much money we have, and you can choose this article or that and we don't have enough money for that article or toy. We could work and save up for the more expensive item. What do you think about that? What would you like to do?"

In the car situation where the baby was left unattended, the baby needed to be taken in, left with a trusted older person or left in a licensed day-care center.

The klutz example could be solved by pointing out the positive aspects of what the child does well and than model or show one thing at a time that leads towards more graceful and confident behavior.

When a child any age is crying, a response like, "Sounds like you are feeling sad, scared, confused, disappointed, and it's ok to cry." "You will probably feel better after you do." "Would you like to talk about it." Then don't judge as they talk, let their feelings be OK.

This is where the active listening principle of, "Sounds like you may be feeling _____." (Let them agree or disagree.) I'm curious what you need from me." (Let them tell you, without judgment.) Then tell them what you are willing to do and not do. Get their feelings about what they might be willing to do to change if they can in this situation.

Responses to other adults and children like: "This is what I appreciated about what you said and did." "This is the way I might have done it." "This is what I didn't care about." "Let's work together to find better ways." These responses go along way in creating winning feelings not only in children but also in adults. Usually there is a desire to do better because one feels supported with those kinds of responses. It becomes easier to take risks, win a few and lose a few, and still remain an OK person.

Belts, belittling, rejecting, discounting are never acceptable. These threats create powerless, angry children, who will often strike back in very unacceptable ways. It is never acceptable to leave a child unattended during these confusing times when we are not sure who the enemy and friend are.

In order to avert abandoned feelings when leaving a child, it is OK to say: "You feel sad and scared when Mom, Dad or caregiver leaves. These feelings are normal." "I will be back." The caregiver needs to acknowledge children's feelings as legitimate and then being supportive and loving take them into an activity. One three old girl use to say to her parents, "See you when you get back, Mommy and Daddy, and have a good time." Sometimes letting them know that children and parents need time off from each other and that they can love and care about one another during that time as well. This teaches children the truth of life.

Some of the most important gifts we can give our children are problem solving, conflict solving, communication skills. Let each child know that both their positive and negative feelings are OK and that they will not be used against them. We are raising children to be adults when they are on their own. Children do matter. They are loved and cared about no matter what they do or don't achieve.

If you are abused, if you are abusing, if you see your grown children abusing their children, you might say, "What I did to you was not right or acceptable? It is not appropriate or acceptable to do the same to your children." Only we can stop abuse by seeking professional help.

When you or I see people abusing or neglecting, we might intervene and see if there is some way we can be of help. We could attend parenting or anger management classes, see a therapist, seek a support

system like Parent's Anonymous. We could call Children's Protective Services for advise and help. There are many wonderful books to read to give us new insights about parenting and grandparenting.

When dealing with children, we might attune to them, listen to their agenda from time to time, see if we might identify what we think they are feeling and needing, and then check with the child to see if that is their truth. We should never ask a child to do what we aren't willing to do ourselves.

Children are people like us, who deserve to be seen, heard, and honored. They deserve our best. What we put out comes back to us. Can we do any less? Training along with support and counseling can be our best allies for healthy family life. We can teach everyone about choice. If it isn't illegal or immoral, will not hurt God, self or others, then we can proceed with choice without consequences or harm to anyone.

Exercises:

- 1) Break up into a family with Dad, Mom and child. Let grown children tell you how it was, what they were feeling or needing then, and how they would have liked it to have been. Father put back up against Mother as she cradles grown child to her bosom. She than without judgment gives back to the child what they wanted. She may say something like, "You are beautiful, wanted, loved unconditionally, and I am here for you." Take turns and trade off till each person has had a turn at each role.
- 2) Set your inner child on an imaginary chair and tell that inner child what it would like to hear. Give Touch for Health balance before and after exercise. Use frontal eminences in painful trauma, use active listening, and find how they might have liked it to be different.