

“WINNING THE TUG OF WAR: PARENTS FIGHT THEIR WAY BACK FROM PERMISSIVENESS”

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Richmond Magazine

April 2005

It's become passé to complain about how today's youth are out of control. The malls are packed with 12-year-olds wearing skin-tight “Porn Star” T-shirts. Seven-year-old boys are learning from television how to “mack” on their female playmates. A visit to any family restaurant is liable to involve dodging children as they play in the aisles while their parents chatter on obliviously.

“I am always shocked by the lack of actual parenting that people do,” says Chesterfield mother Beth McDonald. “I feel like parenting is hard work. It's a thoughtful, on-your-feet process, and I'm just shocked by the number of people who have children but don't want to make the effort.”

A 2002 survey commissioned by Child magazine found that 70 percent of parents agree that parents today let their kids get away with too much. Ninety-one percent said that discipline is less strict now than when they were growing up, and 80 percent don't think that's a good thing.

Twenty years ago, the parenting pendulum had swung all the way from authoritative to permissive, says Suzanne Hanky, a family educator with the Commonwealth Parenting Center. Parents who had grown up in traditional households, where “parenting was something very separate from the parent-child relationship,” wanted to know and understand their children. With that priority of establishing loving relationships, these parents moved away from making rules, setting boundaries and instilling values.

Hanky, who has been working with parents through the center for seven years and is a mother to five grown children, says this trend has been reversing over the past five years. “Parents are frightened,” she explains. After the Columbine massacre in 1999, she saw “sheer panic” and “a real knee-jerk reaction to parenting.” Parents were searching their children's rooms, reading their children's diaries and trying to keep them away from computers, malls or any other exposure to potential danger.

Now, says Hanky, the drastic swing back to authoritative parenting has mellowed. “I'm pleased to see more of a middle ground,” she says. “Parents are beginning to understand [that they] can have a loving relationship with [their] child, but not without some real good hard work.”

Mom and Dad in the Middle

Hanky says that one of the keys to balancing permissive and authoritative extremes is to establish a parent-centered home, as opposed to a child-centered home. In a very permissive home, the child comes to see his own needs as supreme. In a parent-centered home, the child learns to look to the parent for guidance. “If your child has a focus other than himself,” Hanky explains, “he will learn to listen, he will learn to respond, he will learn to cooperate, he will learn to be respectful and responsible — all of those things evolve from having a focus other than ourselves.”

“One of my favorite things that Suzanne [Hanky] says is that ‘firm, fair and friendly’ is how you should treat your child,” says Caroline Walters, a Henrico County mother of two boys. “Doing all three at once can be a challenge.”

Walters describes her parenting style as “in between” strict and permissive, “probably closer to strict or firm,” and she sees a trend toward more conservative, authoritative parenting among her friends. “I think people are starting to figure out that children are ruling the houses, and that's not really the way it's supposed to be. Parents need to be in charge.”

Another of Hanky's clients, Sarah Leszczysyn, is not so sure that this shift is happening. "From what I've heard and from what I've seen, I think we're a lot less strict than parents used to be," she says. "I think parents today are a lot more permissive. We talk about all the things our parents would never have let us do."

On the other hand, Leszczysyn observes that parents are more involved in their children's lives today, especially with horrors like Columbine, Sept. 11 and wars throughout the world ratcheting up the worry factor, while the media pumps out images of sex, drugs and violence. "I don't think that many of [my peers'] parents were that involved, but they probably didn't have to be. There wasn't the kind of outside influence there is now."

Just Say No

"Our kids are being inundated by a lot of things that are glorifying sex, violence, and drug and alcohol use," says John Clarkin, president of The Passage Group, an Atlanta-based organization founded in 1988 to take the Parent to Parent Program to schools and communities nationwide. Parent to Parent is an eight-session program developed by Passage Group founder Bill Oliver to give parents tools, strategies and skills to protect their kids from what they define as the "toxic culture." The video-based program is led by parent facilitators through a number of schools and organizations in Richmond.

Clarkin says that there is a trend leaning toward parents getting stricter, but he also sees a lot of parents who just want to be their children's friends. In one Parent to Parent videotape, Oliver refers to "a nation of parental wimps."

"We're afraid to say no to our kids," Clarkin explains. "The bottom line is that one of a parent's jobs is to say no, to set boundaries for our kids. We talk about 'love without limits' as being one of the traps that parents fall into."

Clarkin agrees that things have changed in the 15 years he's worked with the program. He says parents have gotten scared and are becoming more actively involved in their children's activities, and he notes in particular that he sees more dads at seminars than ever before. "I don't think the answer is just being more stern," he says. "We talk in the program about the five A's — be aware of your child's attitudes, be alert to your child's environment, be around your child's activities, be assertive in your parenting, and be awake when they come home."

The Parenting Paradox

"What's become clear to me is that what makes parenting so hard is that we are asked to hold opposites, contradictory statements, at the same time," says Jack Petrash, a parent, teacher and author of several parenting books. "It's really like this paradox. The very thing that's true in our parenting will also be false."

The polarity between firmness and understanding in parenting is particularly difficult, he says. "When we're long on understanding, we try to understand why a child does something wrong." The understanding parent nurtures and supports and lets the child make mistakes, hoping that she will eventually figure it out for herself. Often this strategy results in a child with very bad habits.

"Then we have a swing in our society where we're firmer with children," Petrash continues. Parents crack down on manners and monitor behaviors, "but a human element, an emotional element, slips away."

“As parents we have to embrace both of these opposites — firmness and understanding — at the same time,” he concludes. “Until we see that both answers are right, we’re going to keep swinging back and forth. The key to discipline isn’t just firmness. It’s loving firmness and the loving part is based on understanding.”

In January, Petrash spoke at Seven Hills School about “Navigating Boy Terrain.” He says that boys in particular will look for an excuse to discredit a parent’s position. “If you can stay calm and firm then it works. Emotional outburst gives them an excuse to write you off.” At the same time, he says emotional connection is vital. “They have to be reassured that you’re on their side.”

Hometown Advantage

Raising a child who will make healthy choices about drugs, alcohol, sex and other teen challenges begins when the child is 2 years old, says Hanky. In that transitional year, the parent stops meeting every one of the child’s needs and starts teaching the child how to meet some of their own needs. Then from about ages 3 to 12, the responsible parent is a teacher, instructing the child about their connection to the world and how they affect other people. “By the time the child’s between 13 and 15, your teaching days are over,” Hanky admits. “They’ve learned what they’re going to learn and your role again begins to shift. Now you’re more of a mediator or a liaison. You brainstorm and you help them manage their own lives.”

As parents and children move through these stages, conflicts inevitably arise. So what do you do when your middle-schooler talks back? Experts agree that the first step is to make sure that the child knows what your expectations are and that you are modeling those expectations. You have a lot better chance of having a child that talks to you respectfully, for example, if you talk respectfully to them and to others in their presence. The other half of the equation is providing consequences for behaviors that are unacceptable. Consequences depend on the age of the child and what will be effective. Some options include timeout, loss of privileges and grounding.

All this may seem obvious. The challenge is being consistent. “It’s really hard to keep the rules constant as opposed to just giving in because of what you’re feeling at the moment,” says McDonald, whose children are 10 and 5. “If you’re tired or in a bad mood, it’s hard not to react.”

Parents attempting to establish firmer boundaries in their homes can take comfort in the fact that they are not alone. Most parents and experts agree that Richmond is a fairly conservative place, at least with regard to parenting. There are a lot of stay-at-home moms, churchgoing families and close-knit neighborhoods full of children. In addition to networking with other parents, Richmond moms and dads can turn to organizations including Commonwealth Parenting Center, Jewish Family Services, schools, churches and community mental-health services.

“I see very conservative trends in Richmond,” concludes Hanky. “I will tell you that from observing the outcome — in other words, observing the teenager — that’s a good thing.”