

Family Forum Who's In Charge? (Part 1)

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

"Jason, you need to go put your toys away now, okay? Megan, we're leaving now for your piano lesson, okay? Derek, I want you to stop screaming now, okay?"

What's wrong with this picture? Who is really in charge here? Something is off track if we need to ask for our kids' consent when we're directing them to follow our instructions.

In dog training, we want to ensure that we are the "alpha," and we issue commands in a strong, calm tone of voice. We don't wait to see whether or not our dog feels like cooperating; we are firmly in control. Not to put our kids into the same category as our pets exactly, but there is a lesson to be learned here. In the case of both our dogs and our children, we are trying to raise well-disciplined, respectful, and cooperative members of the household.

From a young age, children are well aware of their power within the family. Parents need to walk a fine line between being compassionate and caring, yet insisting on certain behavioral requirements. It isn't easy.

One sign that your emotions instead of your reason may be guiding you is if you engage in lengthy discussions with your child when he challenges your decisions. A little participation is fine, so that your child has a chance to feel heard. You may even decide to accommodate some of his wishes. But if you want him to take you seriously, it is important to minimize words and maximize action.

Children often complain that their parents lecture them repeatedly. As we all know, they tune us out after a while. Along with excessive lecturing, some parents issue two or three or more warnings and then fail to deliver consequences. Or they yell out of frustration when their wishes are disregarded.

For your family's peaceful functioning, and also to help train your child to respect all authority – including teachers, coaches, and other adults – it is essential to instill a cooperative attitude as early as possible. Despite their loud protests, children feel most secure when they have limits and consequences.

Taking control in a benevo-



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lent, but firm manner involves advance planning. The benevolent part is important so that your children will see that you discipline them reluctantly. They need to realize that their behavior forces you to take action. In this way, you are not an ogre (well . . . maybe a little bit), but they are ultimately responsible for their choices and the subsequent consequences.

Just as we engage in financial planning, home remodeling planning, and vacation planning, we need to do advance behavioral planning for our children. We can't all be "Father or Mother Knows Best" and figure things out on the spur of the moment. In my next column I will present one approach to positive discipline that I use with families.