

## *Family Forum*

### **Who's In Charge? (Part 2)**

**By Margie Ryerson, MFT**

Alison and James came in to discuss their five year-old, Maggie, who was hitting and kicking them when she was angry. She also shouted "I hate you" at times and frequently refused to obey. Both parents were trying hard to be reasonable and to obtain Maggie's cooperation. Neither of them wanted to be harsh or overbearing. However, they were not taking charge, and Maggie was exploiting the situation.

We developed a positive discipline plan so that Alison and James would have control. They waited until there was a calm time when no one was tired, hungry or emotional, and they explained that there would be new rules with consequences and rewards.

I recommended targeting two or three behaviors at a time. When Maggie mastered these behaviors, they could then work on others. If there were no new "challenges" they could take a break until a new issue arose.

For Maggie's plan we targeted the kicking, hitting, and mean words. Her parents explained briefly why these behaviors were not okay, and specified what she could do instead when she was angry and upset. She needed to use words, but not mean words like "hate." She could say, "I'm really mad," or have a signal, such as pulling on her ears, to show she was mad.

Alison and James set up consequences for when Maggie engaged in any of these targeted behaviors. There was NO discussion, lecturing, persuading, or explaining – only action. The consequences they chose included time-outs, no TV for two days, going to bed early, and no special outings.

At the same time, it is essential to have rewards built into the disciplinary plan which is why this approach is called "positive discipline." The key is for parents to show their reluctance to have to discipline, that your child's behavior unfortunately forces you to take action. There should be no anger involved, only disappointment. An angry reaction from you will only produce an angry reaction back from your child. You want to aim for calm resolution.

Positive incentives for Maggie included a longer bedtime story when she had a day of good behavior. Alison and James made a little chart with stickers and gave Maggie a small toy for achieving her goals three days in a row and then an ice-cream outing when she achieved a week of good behavior. You can stretch out the intervals for administering rewards, and eventually the new behavior will become well-established.

It is best for older children to participate in some of the decision-making in order to gain their



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist with offices in Orinda and Walnut Creek. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or [margierye@yahoo.com](mailto:margierye@yahoo.com).

full cooperation. They can choose among the consequences and rewards you propose, and occasionally you can select one of their ideas. Again, the idea is to have a calm, methodical way of disciplining so everyone knows in advance what to expect, and so that emotions will be low-key.

Children are very adept at reading body language. If they sense that you aren't sure what to do, they will often take advantage of a situation. Sometimes, they will provoke you for the sheer thrill and power of seeing you squirm. Therefore, it is important to act like you know what you are doing, even if you don't! And ultimately, if you have a positive discipline plan, you won't need to pretend.