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Family Focus Balanced Parenting

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. Contact her at (925) 376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. She is the author of "Treat Your Partner Like a Dog: How to Breed a Better Relationship" and "Appetite for Life: Inspiring Stories of Recovery from Anorexia, Bulimia, and Compulsive Overeating."

negative tactics were going to work. And because Ethan was already angry and negative about himself, their anger was even more hurtful and damaging.

After many spirited sessions, Ethan agreed to accept help from a tutor, and his parents agreed to use a kinder, more loving approach with him. They maintained their very appropriate expectations and standards, but they were able to guide Ethan with a lighter hand. We mediated many agreements on both sides, and everyone felt greatly relieved to have more understanding and open communication. And with the reduction of hostilities, all family members were able to shed a great deal of personal stress and anxiety.

Other areas where parents can sometimes be too dominating and create great resistance include heavy regulation of food (when to eat, what to eat or not eat, how much to eat), television, internet, texting, social activities, exercise, sleep, and family participation. When children feel too many rules are forced on them, they tend not to cooperate fully with parental authority. Flexibility, not rigidity is key. If children see you trying to be fair, and if they feel their point of view is considered in decision making (even slightly), they are more apt to go along with your agenda.

At the same time, parents who are too lax in providing structure and rules at home often create confusion, lack of self-discipline, and other difficulties for their children. If you are unsure whether or not you are providing a good balance for your children, it is important to seek guidance. Don't wait until your child acts out, especially since some forms of resistance can be hidden at first.

Another example of finding middle ground is in your reaction to your child's performance, accomplishments, and the mere fact of his existence.

Current research on the use of praise for children recommends praising them occasionally for their specific behaviors and skills, rather than using frequent, more general praise. In this way, the praise is meaningful as well as motivating, and can help a child feel strong and capable.

One very well-intentioned mom I work with is divorced with a 9-year old child. She shares custody with her ex-husband and his new wife. Because Leah must work full-time and juggle single-parenting, she often feels inadequate as a parent. As a result, she constantly tells her daughter, Maddy, how wonderful she is, how much she loves her, and how she's the most important person in her life. This is nice for Maddy to hear, but not necessarily several times per day. What has happened is that Leah is actually reassuring herself that she is being a good mom every time she says these things to Maddy. For Maddy, the message loses its value when it is constantly repeated and seems to be

Be moderate in order to taste the joys of life in abundance.
- Epicurus

As parents, we need to ask ourselves continually whether any of our approaches or methods is too extreme. Unlike the philosophy of "Tiger Mom," finding some kind of middle ground with our children is usually the most effective way to keep communication open and respect for each other in place.

For example, we don't want to be too authoritarian, but we also don't want to be too permissive. Parents who act too powerful and all-knowing often provoke rebellion from their children. Substance abuse, eating disorders, underperformance in school, cheating, and stealing are some of the ways children may react against too much parental control.

One family I worked with had a high school junior who was failing two courses and was constantly tardy for class. He also resisted doing chores at home and spent his time holed up in his room playing video and computer games. Upon further examination, it was obvious that Ethan was furious at his parents. According to him, both parents criticized and nagged him incessantly. They were quick to find fault with him and didn't seem to notice when he did anything positive. The parents admitted they were outraged that Ethan refused to talk to them or cooperate. A stalemate of negativity had developed in this family

Ethan was willing to come in for family therapy once he realized that he could benefit in some ways. He let his parents know how their anger and attitudes were affecting him. He was actually stuck because he did have goals for himself, but didn't want his parents to think that their

stated more for her mom's own needs than for Maddy's sake. Leah needs to let Maddy know specifically and more occasionally why she is proud of her and why she is special to her. In this way, Leah's comments will be more meaningful and empowering for Maddy.

Achieving balanced parenting is an ongoing effort and one that can never be quite perfect. But it is heartening for children to see their parents trying to be fair and responsive while they are determining limits and expectations.

Reach the reporter at: margieryr@yahoo.com

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