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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Chapter 11

TAKING ONE FOR THE FAMILY

Imagine a pond. A pond is in balance. The system is in balance. There is water, air, sunshine, and numerous nutrients. There are a few big fish in the pond. There are enough little fish for the big fish to eat. There are enough insects and other bugs for the little fish to eat, and there are even enough insects and bugs for a nice population of frogs to coexist in the pond too. There is enough vegetation both in the pond and around the pond for the insects and other bugs to sustain their own population. Everything is in balance -- the system is in balance. Imagine then, if suddenly another large fish drops into the pond unexpectedly. The other large fish now find that there is greater competition to eat the little fish. As a result, there are fewer little fish. With fewer little fish for the frogs to compete against, the frogs grow fat eating the insects and bugs. They grow fat and they propagate themselves -- soon there is a frog population explosion! The system is in balance, again. Eventually, since there are fewer little fish for them to eat, over time the population of big fish goes down since it cannot be sustained. The system is in balance, once again! Then, since there are not so many big fish to eat the little fish, the little fish are able to survive and the little fish population grows again; and begins to compete with the frogs again for the bugs and the insects, causing a reduction in the frog population eventually... and so on, and so on. And the moral of the story? Your family is like a pond!

Every family is a system. And in every system, there is a balance between each member of the system. When there is a change with any member of the system, or any element of the system, the entire system reacts to rebalance itself. A mobile hanging down from the ceiling is an example of such a system. If someone touches the moves one part of the mobile, the entire mobile reacts to the touch. If one part of the mobile is removed, the entire mobile also reacts. If something is added to or deleted from a part of the mobile, creating a change in weight, again the entire mobile responds. Every family is a system where each of the members affects each other. Where things that affect any member, eventually affect all of the members. When there is a circumstance or an element that affect the family as a unit, the effect resonates throughout the entire family functioning.

When I was running a preschool in day care, there was a little boy who had been toilet trained for about three months. Inexplicably, once in awhile he would wet himself. We could not figure out what was going on. He wasn't getting so involved in his play, that he forgot himself. In fact, after a few accidents, we put him on a schedule and sent them to the restroom regularly. That didn't work. We checked to see if he was getting sick, since many young children when they are getting sick may have toilet accidents. He was healthy as an ox. He was three and a quarter years old -- his toilet training was stable. Some children when they have just become toilet trained have a rather tentative stability about using the bathroom. He was okay. As we (and his parents) were surprised and perplexed about what was causing him to wet himself, we consulted with each other. I asked a simple question -- "Is there anything different going on at home?" "Well," said the mother, "my mother is visiting and staying with us." Bingo! Little John was absolutely thrilled to have Grandma on visiting. He was so thrilled, that he couldn't keep himself dry! The system had a new element in it -- Grandma. She wasn't a negative element -- everyone adored her, but she was a new element in the system. And, the system needed to rebalance. Little John was affected and his imbalance was expressed in wetting himself.



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Sometimes the change in the system is not the addition of something new, but the removal of something. A more obvious example is when parents separate and one of the parents no longer lives in the house. It takes a significant amount of time, and energy, and also often stress for the system -- the family to rebalance. Each member of the family still in the household, the other parent, the children, and even the dog has to reconcile the absence! The change may actually be for the good (the ending of toxic conflict and anxiety in the family system) but nevertheless, it will take time to adjust. This is when otherwise well-behaved children may act out, become depressed, developed school phobias, or somatize their disruption with upset stomachs or headaches. A more subtle example -- but in the same vein, would be one parent changing their work hours in a way that he or she is somewhat less available than previously experienced in the family, or more available! It could be a teenager taking on a social activity or sport that has him or her away from the family in the early evening or part of a weekend. The system has been altered, and needs to rebalance. Somebody else may need to take out the garbage or wash the dishes. Another time for communicating about activities may need to be found.

Eventually, the system will rebalance. One of the big questions, however, is whether it will rebalance in a healthy manner or in a dysfunctional manner. What kind of energy... or even what kind of pain will it take for the family stay in balance? Will it be a stable balance? Or will it be a tenuous balance? Will it be healthy for each member of the family in this new balance? Or will there be severe physical, energy, emotional, or psychological cost for certain members of the family to maintain this new balance?

THE CLASSIC FUNCTIONAL FAMILY SYSTEM

Imagine a platter balanced on a point. This platter is the family system. In the middle of the platter, stand the parents. In the classic nuclear family, it would be two parents -- a husband and wife. In other family systems (also functional), it could be a single parent, a pair of same-sex parents, a grandmother, uncle, or other extended family member, a foster parent, and so forth. What is important is that there is someone or are someones that are "centered" in the family system -- the platter. The centered people, who are emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and (usually) physically healthy people provide stability for the entire system. They are like the child who stands in the middle of a seesaw. There might be a bigger child on one end of the seesaw, and a very active energetic child on the other end of the seesaw, but the child who stands in the middle of the seesaw with a foot on either side of the center can shift his or her weight this way or that way to create stability to make the seesaw work well.

The parents have this responsibility. If someone is sad in the family, the centered parents can shift attention and energy towards that person to meet him or her needs. If one of the children is particularly boisterous and has very high energy that needs to be expressed without getting in trouble, the centered parents can shift resources and time and perhaps provide this child an outlet in sports or dance. If the noise and energy level in the house has gotten out of hand on a rainy winter weekend day, the centered parents can provide an activity to direct the children and the family into a more productive interaction. From the children's perspective, the centered parents allow the children to be children. In many ways, this is the gift of being an American. Or, the gift of being stable enough to address the fundamental family needs as parents without involving the children to meet those needs. An American ideal is for children to enjoy being a child -- to enjoy the developmental process of being a child, to play and explore, to grow and develop. In many



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societies, including poorer communities or families in America, children are not allowed the luxury of being a child in this sense. They are required -- needed as active members of the family economy.

THE CLASSIC DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

On the other hand, the classic dysfunctional family (of which, the classic example is the alcoholic family system) needs the children to maintain the functioning of the family. Imagine again a family system as a platter. This time, however, the parents instead of being centered in the platter are "off-center" on the edges of the platter. One of them because of emotional, psychological, or drug or alcohol problems is "out there." He or she is unable to provide balancing -- the responsiveness to the children's needs that the centered parents provide. This dysfunctional parent is preoccupied with dealing with whatever emotional, psychological or drug or alcohol issue. In addition, there are other behavioral issues, particularly workaholicism, which may appear positive, but are also harmful. If there are two parents, the other parent has to deal with the irresponsible behavior of the first parent. Since the first parent is under-responsible, the second parent has to be over-responsible. The first parent cannot be counted on to do the simple things: pick up the laundry, pick up the kids from school, remember an appointment, deposit a check, and so forth. Therefore, the second -- over-responsible parent has to anticipate how the first parent will screw up. Instead of informing or just reminding the first parent to pick up the laundry, pick up the kids, the appointment time, or to deposit a check, the second parent also has to have contingency plans for when the first parent forgets or messes up. He or she has to have an alternative wardrobe, set aside time to rush and pick up the kids, handle the appointment by him or herself, or have an excuse ready when the check bounces. Ironically, it is the dedication of the second parent that "allows" the first parent to be irresponsible. If the second parent didn't make up for the flaws in the first parent's personality and behavior, the family would fall apart. As long as the family is maintained, even though at great cost to everyone especially the second parent, the irresponsible parent does not have to pay the complete consequences of his or her actions.

One time, I was very direct with the wife of an alcoholic. I told her that she helped her husband stay an alcoholic. In surprise, she asked, "What do you mean?" I told her, she helped her husband stay an alcoholic when she called in on Monday mornings to tell his boss that he was sick when he was actually hung over; when she made excuses to her son about why Dad did not come to his baseball game; when she dropped everything and raced across town to pick up her daughter's dress that she needed for her recital -- a dress her husband had promised to pick up; and when she picked him up off of the kitchen floor, clean him up, and put him into bed after he had passed out and had fallen asleep in his own fluids. She responded, "Oh."

THE HERO

In this family setup, the parents are so involved in their respective addictions -- in the example above: he with his addiction-his alcohol and her with her addiction-him, that neither one of them really performs their essential role -- to be parents! As a result, the children take up these roles. A very common role is the role of the Hero or the responsible one. This child makes sure that the daily life of the household goes on. He or she makes the dinners and the lunches, cleans the house, and makes sure the other children get their basic needs met. The Hero child is often well respected in other settings including school and later on in work. Football quarterback, CEO, successful businessperson... a real achiever. He or she can be counted on to get things done. Unfortunately, he or she is not allowed to be a child and never really internalizes a sense of self-worth. He or she



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tends to be a well educated, financially successful, well respected, but secretly unfulfilled and depressed person.

THE NURTURER

Another role in the family that normally is handled by one or both of the parents is that of the Nurturer. The Nurturer takes care of the emotional needs of the family: soothing the sad child (even though he or she is a child him or herself as well), being caring and vigilant about everyone and their feelings. Everyone likes the Nurturer. Some Nurturers grow up to be professional Nurturers... professional caregivers such as teachers, therapists and counselors, social workers, nurses or other medical personnel, and so forth. Social gender stereotypes and culture make this role even more likely for girls becoming women. Sweet, kind, and considerate, the Nurturer is valued by everyone -- except him or herself. He or she nurtures everyone, but is unable to take care of his or her own emotional needs. Both the Hero and the Nurturer do their roles so that the family does not fall apart. Unfortunately, each of them pays a terrible price emotionally and psychologically inside. And, the family and its members may seemingly make it day to day, but will suffer and be damaged anyway.

THE LOST CHILD

Often times, there is a Lost Child in such a family. The Lost Child somehow realizes that this family cannot meet his or her emotional needs and decides to no longer be disappointed... to no longer have hope that his or her needs will be met, and spends his or her energy trying to be an invisible person. The Lost Child will exist in classrooms, church, and at work and will be barely noticed... rarely even missed. His or her experience with attention in his or her dysfunctional family is that attention brings on negative experiences. Avoiding attention -- becoming invisible is the safest and surest method for survival. When he or she is encouraged, the Lost Child will not take encouragement and risk any challenge. Survival is the best that he or she thinks he or she can have. Such a person will not cause problems in their communities or workplaces -- causing problems would bring unwanted attention upon him or herself. However, this does not mean that he or she is happy or fulfilled. The Lost Child is usually quietly and desperately depressed. And so is the adult Lost Child.

THE DISTRACTERS

In the dysfunctional family, despite the efforts of the Hero and the Nurturer tension will inevitably arise and increase with eventual eruptions that can be very painful. The Distracter in the family will then sometimes save the family from the tension by distracting them. There are two kinds of distracters. One is the Mascot. The Mascot, often the youngest, is adorable. Everyone loves the Mascot; he or she is often the sunshine of the family... just about perfect. In this family with so much pain and dysfunction, there is a powerful need to have some positives -- some sunshine, and the Mascot is it. How wonderful is the Mascot! How sweet... how smart... how wonderful! However the Mascot must stay perfect... he or she cannot mess up -- ever. Or else, the sunshine of the entire family will be eclipsed. The Mascot performs his or her role and usually is well liked and even adored by everyone, including those outside of the family. The Mascot will seek out situations and people who will continue to find him or her special and who will continue to heap praise and adoration upon him or her. However, in the real world, not everyone will find him or her adorable. Or, the Mascot may find him or herself in competition with other Mascots from other families. And be rejected (in Hollywood, for example) and be devastated.



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The other Distracter is the Clown. I believe that many of the great comedians of our and previous times were Clowns in their families. There are some comedians who have a very positive and wholesome energy (my favorite, Bill Cosby is such a comedian). However, there are many other comedians who despite their great talent... their great wit... their great success in status and monetarily, have a very deep dark and painful energy that shows through the laughter and humor. I believe that as children in painfully dysfunctional families, that yes... they had the intelligence and the wit to be funny, but more than that, they had to be funny. They had to be funny to distract the family from the intensity of the pain that it suffered because of the dysfunctionality of the family due to alcoholism, drugs, and/or other craziness. And despite their later success as comedians, the deep dark inner pain still eats at them. As in all of these roles, the Distracter Clown can serve the family or the system. There are often times when a classroom, meeting, or workplace has had its level of tension rise to an unbearable level and when the release of tension because of a well-spoken joke or wisecrack is greatly welcome. On the other hand, the Clown will keep on making wisecracks even when it is not welcome or needed.

THE REBEL

Then there are the Scapegoats... the Rebels... the Bad Ones. Each and every one of the other roles, except for the Lost Child functions to save the family from its pain. The Hero and the Nurturer try to save the family by taking care of the functional needs and the emotional needs, both as prevention and also as repair. The two Distracters: the Mascot and the Clown try to save the family by pulling their attention away from the dysfunction and pain with adorable behavior or with humor. The Lost Child, on the other hand doesn't try to save the family; he or she has quit and is just waiting his or her time until he or she can get out of there. The Rebel tries to save the family from its pain by acting out... by being bad... by failing. Despite the efforts of the other members of the family system, eventually in a dysfunctional family a crisis will inevitably arise. The checks start bouncing. Child Protective Services shows up. The heat gets turned off. Someone gets fired. The parents who have been avoiding trying to be a couple, are forced to deal with their issues... and they do it extremely poorly. As they do it extremely poorly... as they fight... as they get more and more intense and it gets scarier and scarier for the children, the children begin to fear that the family will self-destruct. Each of them except for the Lost Child, will activate in their roles to do the best they can to save the family: the Hero takes care of the household so there won't be any dirty dishes for the couple to fight over, the Nurturer nurtures so the distress of a child does not add to the distress of the couple, the Mascot shines and the Clown tells jokes to draw the attention away from the battle, and the Rebel finds some cat to light on fire, or begins to get into fights at school, or starts to fail in school, or becomes defiant at home. The Rebel creates an alternative crisis. This alternative crisis draws the couple from the fundamental crisis of their not knowing how to be a couple! Allows them to stop being a couple, and forces them to take the new role of being... parents! They show up together at school to meet with the teacher. To figure out why the Rebel is acting out. To work out a plan to "help" him or her out. With their attention now focused on the Rebel, the implicit danger that the family will fall apart because of their incompatibility as a couple goes away. All the children relax. The family has been saved. Unfortunately, the Rebel's reputation is destroyed in this process, and his or her self-esteem is also diminished. The Rebel feels compelled to taking one for the family. Then as the crisis fades (the Rebel's behavior improves), the parents go back to being a couple (a lousy couple), and the tension increases again. When it reaches the crisis point again, the Rebel has to go look for another cat... or if he or she is older act out with drugs or alcohol, or sexual behavior, or delinquent behavior. Or, it is another child's turn to be the Rebel. Or, the Rebel may get it. Get what the Lost Child



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figured out a long time ago -- that there was nothing he or she could really do to make things better. And, the Rebel may say "The heck with this, I am outa here!" Unfortunately, just like the other children's roles, the Rebel may continue with his personality and this behavior pattern throughout his or her life.

BALANCING THE INNER HERO, NURTURER, LOST CHILD, DISTRACTERS- MASCOT & CLOWN, & REBEL

These roles, in of themselves are not negative per se. The Clown at the right time, like the Hero and the Nurturer can be a very positive element in the system. The danger occurs when the need to perform the role is constant and without discrimination. The Hero always fixes and the Nurturer always nurtures whether or not there is anything that needs to be fixed or nurturer. And, the Clown just won't shut up! Just won't stop making the jokes or the wisecracks even if they are disruptive or rude. Sometimes, is even best to be quiet and invisible like the Lost Child. Sometimes the better part of discretion is to recognize that it would not be beneficial to anyone to confront and issue or person at a given time. While the Rebel seems to always get into trouble, his or her energy is also very strong. The Rebel is the one who is most likely to fight back... to refuse to accept the status quo, including that he or she is the bad one. And in the dysfunctional family, the status quo sucks! There are many times in life when it is important to be assertive and to speak out rather than to be passive and to accept how things are. In society, Rebels often provide the impetus for important social change. Each of these roles in balance can be part of an overall healthy personality. The ability to choose which of these roles is appropriate at a given time results in a healthy personality and successful social interaction and relationships. These roles become dysfunctional when the individual no longer has the ability to discriminate when the role is appropriate, and when the individual no longer has access to the different roles.

Does your child get stuck into one of these roles? Were you stuck in one of these roles as a child? Are you still stuck in one of these roles? In some dysfunctional (and functional!) families, the children rotate through these roles -- each taking a turn as the Hero or Nurturer and then even becoming a Rebel at some point for instance. If you noticed your child is rotating through these roles, it may be a good thing! Even if that means he or she is a Rebel sometimes! As your child is rotating through these roles, you need to support him or her in all of them. But also to help him or her recognize both the positive and the negative consequences of being in and especially, staying in the role without the freedom to move to another role. If on the other hand, your child seems to stay in a role including the ostensibly "good" roles of Hero or Nurturer, then it is important to examine the overall family dynamics and family system to see if their role serves the family at cost to their own individual emotional and psychological health. Disciplining for behavior that comes from these roles can orient to specifically changing the behavior, but will not address the underlying issues that may be causing both the roles and the behavior. When parents query me about or bring their children to me for therapy, I am very straightforward in asking them how they are doing as a couple and how they are doing overall as a family. They may not realize it, but the children's so-called "bad" behavior may be their attempt to "save" their family from its pain. Then it becomes important to find out what the family needs to be "saved" from.



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Chapter 12

THE UNOFFERED CHOICE CHOOSING TO BE REASONABLE VS. UNREASONABLE

Okay, before dinner, you decide what to do. We're going to eat at six o'clock and you have a lot to do. Just make sure you do everything you're supposed to do before dinnertime. You can

a) do your chores first, do your homework next, practice your piano and then play video games, or

b) do your homework first, practice your piano, do your chores next, and then go out to play with your friends, or

c) finish your piano practice and do your chores, do your homework next, and then watch TV, or

d) make sure you finish your chores, your homework, and do your piano practice before you go play around.

Any of these choices are okay for me. You just need to take care of your responsibilities before you start to fool around. So, what do you want to do?

I choose e) to watch some TV first, then go out and play with my friends, and then to play video games!

Hey!! That wasn't one of the choices! You're not going to get to go out this weekend.

Whaat!?! That's not fair!

A MULTIPLE-CHOICE WORLD

Somehow, in a multiple-choice world, some children seem to always choose the choice that is not on the list. As a parent or adult, we offer children a series of reasonable choices that we come up from our experiences in life that offer both decent options and are respectful of the child's needs and desires. Unfortunately, children often fail to realize that these are decent options and that we have been respectful of their needs and desires. Their focus is often on the here and now and for immediate gratification. They choose "e" when that choice is inappropriate in the larger context of discipline and personality development. We wish for children to learn how to be responsible, so we encourage and require them to take care of their responsibilities to the household, to their schoolwork, and to others. However, many children experience this as ignoring their own needs. And so they choose "e." As adults, we often have our own form of choosing "e" despite it not been on the "list" of choices. Instead of choosing a) forgoing the trinket or treat as unnecessary; b) waiting to buy it when there are more discretionary funds; c) looking or waiting to find it at a better price; d) adapting what one already has to fill the need. All such choices are prudent given limited income and other more demanding financial needs. Unfortunately, we often choose "e" because our desire or cravings become too compelling, and then we also pay the price later on with credit card debt. Sometimes the choices are not having dessert, having a less fattening dessert, taking a very small portion, or sharing the dessert with someone else. And then there's "e"... again!



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GOOD CHOICES AND POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES- REWARDS

In simple terms, a person can make positive choices or negative choices. Of course, we want to encourage children to make good choices. One way to encourage children to make positive choices is to give them positive consequences or rewards for the good choices. Sometimes adults forget to do this. Since the expectation is for a child to make good choices, some people have a philosophy (or take it for granted) that since these choices are what the child should do, that a child should not be rewarded for what is expected. In working with parents and teachers, often the ideal of a reward system comes up to help motivate children to make good choices in their families, school, or lives. A common complaint is that if the children or rewards for doing what they are supposed to do, then they won't do anything unless is a reward. There is some relevance to this concern. Parents who reward profusely do run this risk. Constant toy, trinket, activity, or money rewards tend to focus the child on the gathering of the rewards rather than on the appropriateness of the behaviors. On the other hand, if the parents emphasize that the positive behaviors are what's important... that the child is being a "good" kid... that the positive choice and the positive behaviors are pleasing to the adult, then the verbal reward or praise becomes prominent, eventually leading to a sense of self-satisfaction and fulfillment in maintaining the self-identity he or she has internalized. I have discussed this in more depth in my series on self-esteem archived on this web site.

Material (nonverbal) rewards can be appropriate if they are occasional and clearly presented as symbolic of the appreciation of adults for the good choice and behaviors by the child. When my daughter was being toilet trained, we started to give her M&M candies whenever she used her little potty chair. We quickly realized that this could be creating a problem in making candy the reward. We switched over to little stickers (we found a roll of My Little Ponies stickers which were very popular at the time) that she enjoyed. Each time she used the little potty chair, we with give her a little sticker, which she would take into her room and stick on her kitty poster. Within a very short time, however, she began to forgot to ask for her sticker rewards. In addition to the stickers, she also got one or both parents very enthusiastically praising her for her efforts and success at using a potty chair. It is important to note that our praise was not simply praise for her. If it were merely praise for her behavior, then it is possible that she would become dependent upon praise. Without praise as a reward, then why should she continue to make these choices? There are individuals (not just children, but often the adults) who will not do their work -- fulfill their responsibilities unless there is an obvious tangible reward. In the same vein, there are individuals who will not do their work nor fulfill their responsibilities unless someone is there to praise them for it. They have no internalized sense of self-praise... self-acknowledgment or self-appreciation. Praising our daughter's behavior or choice is not the same as praising her character, values, and identity that led to the behavior or choice. Her sense of accomplishment and satisfaction was created by our enthusiastic and profuse appreciation of her... not just of her behavior or choice. Her feeling good about who she was... about who she was becoming (a big girl) became the true rewarding element. From a developmental perspective, is very important to note that there was no negative choice possible in this situation for her. She was at the point in her development that it was possible for her to become toilet trained, but not essential nor late necessarily.

ATTENTION, APPRECIATION, & MATERIAL REWARDS

It is critical that when a child makes a good choice -- a positive choice, that he or she very consistently (especially in the formative years of early childhood) receives a positive



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consequence. The pleasure or appreciation of the important adults in his or her life is the normal positive consequence. A few years ago I worked with a family where one of the children was acting out with a lot of aggression. It turned out that one of the major issues in the family was that fulfill the parents or so of the sort that in their jobs and other social demands, that they were inadvertently unaware and unappreciative other children's personalities, needs, and accomplishments. The child that was acting out was actually demanding that they notice him. When he behaved, they did not notice him. When he acted out or presented a crisis, then they noticed him. The attention that they gave him was negative attention -- anger and punishments, but to him it was a rewarding attention nevertheless. As we were able to identify this dynamic, we were able to break the negative cycle. As the parents learned to notice and attend to him for both positive and simple things, he no longer had to act out in order to get rewarded with attention. Material rewards are less important. Material rewards, however, are often easier for adults to present. They are more concrete and tangible than being consistently aware of your child and consistently sending them positive messages and presenting positive models of behavior. Many parents are driven by the demands of surviving in our society economically (or of following societal expectations) and are aware that they are not giving their children attention that they need. To compensate for this deficit and two soothe their own guilt, they provide frequent and even extravagant material rewards to the children. When children receive material rewards in lieu of attention and appreciation (what some people would call "loving attention") they can become acclimated to desiring, expecting, and seeking the material rewards. In effect, they decide to get what they can get -- material rewards, because of what they can't get -- parental attention and appreciation.

When our oldest daughter finished her first grading period in high school, we noted that she had done extremely well. She had done well because of her own sense of excellence, her work ethic, and the skills that she had acquired and developed over the years (with the help of the teachers and parental support). We were very pleased and praised her for her efforts and for her accomplishments. We directed her to appreciate herself. We also decided to reward her financially for her grades. She had accomplished these grades without the financial reward in front of her. The financial reward was symbolic of our appreciation. And, it made it all a little bit more fun. It became a part of her (and later on, her sister's) academic reward system while in high school. This type of reward can be appropriate, but by itself it often falls flat unless there is an ongoing system of appreciation and attention for all the period of time leading up to the and results. This meant, our noticing and commenting positively on her work ethic and work effort during the school year. Even more so, there needed to have been ongoing system of appreciation and attention in the early years when young children need it the most. If parental appreciation and attention is internalized, the maturing child becomes more and more self-sufficient in giving him or herself the praise and support needed. As this develops, parental attention and appreciation becomes more supplementary and helping to maintain rather than to create the confidence and identity of a good person. On a practical level, it is impossible for a parent to be constantly present to praise his or her child each and every time they make positive and productive choices. Only if the child has internalized such values and has an expectation of performing up to these values, and then is able to praise (or at least self-acknowledge) him or herself for following through, can the "reward system" be successful.



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ESSENTIAL SUFFERING: CONSEQUENCES OF POOR CHOICES

On the other hand, a child makes a poor or negative choice is just as essential that they receive a negative consequence. Children (and adults) do not learn that negative choices lead to negative consequences unless parents (or authoritative and responsible supervisors) ensure that they receive a negative consequence when they make that poor choice. Sometimes adults will "forgive" or make excuses for the behavior and subvert or prevent the natural negative consequences that should follow. There will always be some mitigating circumstances... some consideration for effort... some consideration for motivation... and some consideration for using the circumstances to teach and for the children to learn. However the real world is not forgiving like loving parents. Letting children suffer the consequences of negative choices is important for them to learn about the cause and effect process and their own power and control... and responsibility in the world. Can you stand to see your child sad in not having the dessert he or she didn't earn for not eating their vegetables? Can you stand to experience your child disappointment in not getting to go to the dance because he or she spent the money for it last week? Can you leave your child behind to take care of chores should have been taken care of already? Can you let your child suffer? Being able to let your child suffer his or her natural consequences of poor choices is important to his learning about the realities of the real world. This is not the same as creating artificial punitive and draconian experiences to make your child suffer. The real world also doesn't normally severely punish artificially. If you present harshness that is not reflected in the actual communities your child will live in, you lose your credibility.

BEING REASONABLE... BEING UNREASONABLE

Good choices and positive consequences. Poor choices and negative consequences. Unfortunately, some children want to make good choices and get positive consequences AND make poor choices and avoid negative consequences AND still get positive consequences. That is unreasonable and totally unrealistic (except with insecure and indulging parents). In that sense, the choice isn't between making good choices and getting positive consequences versus making poor choices and getting negative consequences. The true choice is between being reasonable and being unreasonable. Being reasonable is understanding that good choices normally lead to positive consequences, and that poor choices normally lead to negative consequences. Being reasonable is accepting the natural consequences of both types of choices. Being unreasonable is expecting and demanding positive consequences despite poor choices. It is critical to teach your children to be reasonable. Unreasonable people make unreasonable demands upon others and upon society. Unreasonable people are rude and hurtful, yet still expect to be welcomed and included. Unreasonable people are inconsistent and irresponsible, yet still expect to be given another opportunity. Unreasonable people fail to get education, experience, and education, yet blame favoritism and "bad luck" on their lack of success. Unreasonable people get punished their entire lives for their unreasonable behavior, values and beliefs, and expectations. When the parent in the vignette at the beginning of this article presented four reasonable options (reasonable, because they require the child fulfilling appropriate responsibilities, before indulging in recreational activities), he or she was prompting the child to be reasonable. By choosing the unoffered option "e" -- to play without having done chores, homework or piano practice, the child was choosing to be unreasonable. Parents who wish their children to be successful and functional adults (much less, successful and functional students) must not allow their children the choice to be unreasonable. As long as parents themselves, offer choices that are reasonable and are available to reasonable alternatives presented by their children, they can hold firm to the demand of being reasonable. When and if a child chooses to be unreasonable, and insists on staying unreasonable after being



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prompted to make a reasonable choice or to offer a reasonable alternative, then it is absently incumbent upon the parent that the child should suffer a negative consequence. Option "f" then is presented.

f) choose from options "a", "b", "c", or "d". Your option "e" is unacceptable. Choose from options "a", "b", "c", or "d" or be grounded for this week and the weekend as well (or some other appropriate negative consequence).

In addition, are you a reasonable parent? Or, are you an unreasonable parent? A reasonable parent presents a model of reasonable behavior. A reasonable parent is sensitive and attentive and appreciative of his or her child. A reasonable parent is consistent. A reasonable parent understands that his or her good choices will normally lead to positive consequences and that his or her poor choices will normally lead to negative consequences -- including his or her good or poor choices about parenting and discipline. An unreasonable parent ignores how his or her model of behavior influences the child, is inconsistent, and has unreasonable expectations of positive behavior despite a litany of poor choices in life and parenting. The reasonable parent is rewarded by the wonderful child and adult that he or she has helped raise. The unreasonable parent will wonder why... blame... or hold shame. In the Handouts section of this website is a mini-poster titled "On Unreasonable People" that also addresses some of these issues. There will be times when a more formal and organized reward system can be useful with the child and family. The next chapter will discuss the principles and specifics of reward systems.



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Chapter 13

INCENTIVE BASED BEHAVIORAL MODIFICATION PROGRAM

Maybe if I give her something, she'll behave better. But if I give her something to go to school, then maybe she won't go anymore unless I keep on giving her something. But she's not behaving now, so what's to lose? My dad doesn't think you should get rewarded for something you're supposed to do anyway. When I got straight A's, I didn't get anything for them. I was expected to get straight A's. In fact, when I got a B that time, I got yelled at. Maybe if I ground her, she'll behave better. But when I ground her, she gets even angrier and fights with me even more. She doesn't seem to care how many privileges I take away. She just gives me that dirty look and goes hides in her room. And, there's no way I can get her a new car like Sarah did for her daughter when she got good grades. Shoot... I'd be happy if she went to school! She wants a car... maybe I can get her grandfather's car that he's not using anymore. She promised that she would get good grades if I got her a car. But once she gets a car, she probably won't go to school anyway. "I'll gladly pay you Thursday for a hamburger today." Isn't that what Wimpy used to tell Popeye all the time? What am I to do?

Many times, when I am working with either parents or teachers I mention that an incentive program can be beneficial in helping motivate children. Their response of that is, "A reward system? We've tried that and it doesn't work." My response normally is, "You didn't do it correctly!" People often have tried reward programs and had very poor results from them. Yet, among the most basic principles about human behavior is that when people are motivated by potential rewards, they are much more likely to change their behavior. Pavlov and his famous dog that salivated at the ring of a bell are well known to many people. Maybe we are not Pavlov and our children are not dogs! However, positive and negative reinforcement, conditioned response, unconditioned response, and reward and punishments are all concepts that whether or not we are conscious of them, are constantly used in our relationships. Unfortunately, what most people call a reward system often ends up being a punishment system. Instead of motivating children to behave more appropriately, a poorly designed reward system that focuses on punishment ends up causing them to be unmotivated.

IMMUNITY TO PUNISHMENT

In fact, punishment as the foundation for discipline can backfire. Often in my work with teenagers and their parents, I will tell the teenager, "I bet that you're immune to punishment." Their initial response is often of slight confusion or surprise. When I continue, "You are so used to being punished... your parents punish you so often... that you've become immune to punishment!" They often burst out in laughter when they recognize the truth to this, "Yeah... I'm immune to punishment!" Sometimes, parents will continue to punish the children in order to motivate them to change their behavior even though the punishment is clearly ineffective. Although it is ineffective, because they are frustrated... because they don't know what else to do, they continue to punish and punish ever more severely. This happened with the parents of a teenage boy. He had many challenges academically and had become increasingly disillusioned about school. The conflict between him and his parents became more severe and entered into a cycle of greater and greater negativity. His parents tried to motivate him by punishing him whenever he did things that were inappropriate in their eyes. This failed to work but they didn't know what else to do. So they continued just to punish him. Over the years, he had developed



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an immunity to punishment. One night, he had not come home by his 11 p.m. curfew. His mother began to worry about him. She waited for a call- none came. She tried to call him on his cell phone- he didn't answer. For the next four hours, she alternated between being terrified that something horrible had happened to him and being furious that he wasn't home or hadn't contacted her. She went to bed but couldn't sleep. She spent the early morning hours listening carefully for a sound of a car... of her son coming home. She lay hoping for a reassuring phone call from him and terrified that another kind of phone call might come. Finally, about 3 AM, he came stumbling into the house. She came out of her bedroom. Before she could speak, he mumbled to her as he brushed past toward his bedroom, "Yeah yeah, I know I'm late. I'm really tired... I got to go to sleep. Just tell me what my punishment is tomorrow." She was stunned and flabbergasted as he stepped into his bedroom and shut the door. She was shocked... and she was all ready to be mad and didn't get to be mad! Her son's immunity to punishment had disabled her. In fact, he knew that he was going to get punished for staying out later than his curfew. However, he had been willing to accept the punishment because he wanted to stay out late. He was immune to punishment.

Since punishment had become the only way that she had to discipline him, the only thing that she could do was to try to punish him even more severely. She had followed this pattern over and over throughout his childhood. Intensification-the intensifying of what has already been tried is often the normal reaction to failure. When pushing doesn't work, sometimes pushing harder does work. When yelling doesn't work, sometimes yelling louder may work. However, when pushing doesn't work and pushing harder doesn't work, often shoving, kicking, and slamming still won't work. When yelling doesn't work and yelling louder doesn't work, often screaming with eyes bulging and veins popping still doesn't work. In addition, the danger of intensification when it comes to punishment and discipline is that it can lead to abusive behavior. If a spank is supposed to motivate someone to change their behavior and yet, it is not enough to motivate change, then intensification suggests more spanks. If a slight sting on the bottom from a spank, isn't enough to motivate someone, then intensification suggests hitting harder or more times or more often will cause a greater hurt that will motivate. And if that still doesn't work, inflicting great pain and suffering becomes the next step. This is why it is so important to have greater clarity about the principles of discipline and the various techniques that may be utilized.

Sometimes parents or teachers come to me to ask for help when they have gotten stuck with dealing with challenging children. They say that they realize that what they're doing isn't working and they want suggestions about something different they can do. They may even admit that they now understand that nagging, intimidating, and grinding the children doesn't work. So they asked me for a new, improved, and different way to nag, intimidate and grind the children into better or different behavior! The key is to do something differently! Ironically, the suggestion of a behavioral incentive plan-or reward plan is often not seen as something different, but what has been tried and has failed previously. Looking at what an incentive plan is about may help people understand that this kind of approach is different.

KEY ISSUES & THE DILEMMA

Many people in general are seeking greater control in their own lives as a means of dealing with the **lack of power and control** they otherwise feel in their own families, school, and the community. Children who become oppositional often want greater power and control in their lives. Anything that allows them (or us) to have greater power and control or a sense of greater



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power of and control in their lives (for us, such as being effective parents!) is highly motivating. The issue for adults is to instill the discipline that they exercise power and control in appropriate ways that are not violating of other people's rights. In addition, many oppositional behaviors are **attempts to get validation** (not just attention) from adults. Validating experiences confirm to the individual that they have value as human beings. The parents and family of oppositional children, for various reasons, are often **ineffective** at giving appropriate validation and attention. They may lack sufficient skills at nurturing a sense of worth of their children. Or, they may be so overwhelmed with stress dealing with the demands of their lives, that they barely keep their own heads above water and can only marginal support to their children. Such adults usually **feel out of control themselves** (and not just with their oppositional children). Obviously, there's nothing to highlight your own sense of being out of control more than not being able to control your own snotty kids! In addition, if you feel out of control about your finances, your job situation, your prospects, your weight, and so forth, you're dang sure a whole less likely to put up with any guff from your kids! As a result, not surprisingly oppositional children and their parents (or teachers) often end up in a **power struggle** where both lose. **Punishment** usually has become the mode of discipline despite its ineffectiveness. Quite often, punishment was the main, if not the only form of discipline that many parents experienced from their own parents when they were children. Interestingly, many parents will admit that punishment was not effective to motivate them to behave as children either!

PLACATING, CONFLICT, AND ANGER

As parents and children get caught up in the power struggle and parents punish more often and more intensely and children get more defiant and sullen, the battles become uglier and more painful. Children (or adults, by the way) don't have to keep throwing tantrums in order to intimidate other people. Once the trauma of dealing with a tantrum has occurred, the tantrum or any subsequent tantrum becomes intimidating. At that point, the very threat of another tantrum will often suffice to intimidate. As the situation begins to escalate... as the child begins to escalate, the adult's anxiety also escalates. Sometimes, the adult is ready to battle... unfortunately, to battle poorly and the feel frustrated and inadequate as a parent. Other times, depending on mood or energy, **placating** the child often seems to be come the only alternative to avoid **conflict**. Unfortunately, placating only gets the adult out of the present situation, and worse, reinforces the child's negative behavior for future conflicts. In addition, to the lack of an authoritative response... the failure to assert boundaries, often causes and insecurity in the children. Children are supposed to test boundaries and are reassured when boundaries are clear, firm, consistent and fair. Placating the child sometimes is not consistent and certainly not firm. Not knowing what will happen each time lacks clarity and is not fair.

Parents recognize their futility and feel more and more inadequate. **Anger (and its close relative, resentment)** usually becomes the predominant emotion, sabotaging the relationship. Children are angry at parents for being inconsistent and unfair... angry at not getting things... angry that they got it last time! Parents are angry that the children are angry... angry at the unreasonableness... angry at themselves for being failures... angry at themselves for repeating the behavior of their parents. And it goes around and around and they can't seem to stop.

PRINCIPLES & GOALS

An effective reward system will seek to:

 Create real (and appropriate) **power and control** for both children and parents.



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Create means for the child to get **validation**.

Defuse the power struggle and create the "**Win, Win**" situation.

Remove punishment as a mode of discipline and replace with **reinforcement/reward** principles.

Remove conflict from the relationship and replace with **contracts**.

Remove anger as relevant to the relationship.

Many behavioral incentive plans include both rewards and punishments. Life is about both rewards and punishments. Many families have effective behavioral incentive plans that include both rewards and punishments. If you already have such a plan-an effective plan that is, then you should maintain it or perhaps only tweak it to improve it (but if you had an effective plan, you wouldn't need this article!). However, many families cannot institute an effective behavioral incentive plan with both rewards and punishments, because they have already taught their children to be immune to punishments. And/or, have intensified their punishments to a degree where they have become unfair and hurtful, and/or become highly inconsistent with their administration of punishments and the degree of punishment. In such situations, the behavioral incentive plan must be a reward-only behavioral plan. Absolutely no punishments. Absolutely no penalizing children by removing already earned rewards- or making up new punishments. Removing already gained rewards or "points" serve to discourage children from trying. In addition, usually the removal of rewards or points (which is symbolically, if not also functionally, the same as a punishment) occurs when the adult is angry or frustrated about something. The adult removes the rewards or points in response to an unexpected transgression not discussed or included the behavioral incentive plan.

For example, the plan may focus on the morning routines necessary to get out of the house on time. Each element (getting up by a certain time, washing up, getting dressed, eating breakfast, and being prepared to leave- backpack, lunch, etc.) successfully executed gains the child one or more points that he/she accumulates which can be exchanged for some predetermined rewards (extra TV or computer time, video games, ice cream treats, playtime with friends, money, and so forth). I set up such a plan with a father and his son. The child had been successfully following through and earning points throughout the week. He was excited and looking forward to "cashing in" his points for a video game rental. Late in the week, the boy got into an argument with his teacher at school. Dad, furious and embarrassed that his son had argued with the teacher, wiped all of his points off the ledger. Despite doing exactly what they had agreed upon (the morning routine issues), the boy was denied his reward. His son's response was basically, "Screw it! I quit! There's no point in even trying. Dad will make up some other excuse and I won't get any reward... ever!"

A behavioral incentive plan has to be specific. It cannot be a "be a perfect child" plan. It cannot be an "anything else that I might not like" plan. It cannot be an all-inclusive plan. It is critical that it be a practical plan that focuses on a particular relatively confined and concrete area of life. Once one particular area has been stabilized-the behavior has evolved to a more tolerable or acceptable level, then another area can be focused on or perhaps the first area can be expanded. Some people are not satisfied with this approach, since it appears to be working on areas that are too insignificant. They want bigger change in more substantial areas. However, more substantial change may be unrealistic and serves to set up everyone for failure by asking for too much too soon. My experience with simpler and less dramatic approaches is that both the child and the adult cannot be successful with a more complex approach. They both have too much negative energy, too many bad habits, and too little skills. On the other hand, there is a fascinating transfer when there is success in a "simple" behavioral plan into other areas of the child's behavior. Having an



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area of success often breaks the relentless cycle of negativity and failure that had come to define the adult-child relationship. Everyone feels much better about him or herself. On several occasions, the positive energy and sense of accomplishment motivated the child to improve in attitude and respect- in areas that had not addressed specifically in the behavioral plan.

STRATEGIES & PRACTICALITIES:

Define **GOALS** and **REWARDS** as different but related. Goals are defined by parents as behaviors that are productive in short-term and also in the long run. The short-term goals may serve to increase the functionality of the household routines and reduce conflict and increase cooperation (less hassle and less fights!). The longer-term goals are developing attitudes, values, and behaviors that will have positive consequences in the child's personality and life. Parents choose the goals while children are allowed to have input about them. For example, behaviors that make up the morning routine, behaviors that make up a late-night going to bed routine, behaviors involving chores, involving homework and so forth are goals that might be chosen by parents. It is important to choose goals that can be achieved in a concrete manner. The goal of being good or of being respectful, or of not being bad or not disrespectful, while being worthwhile long-term goals, are not concrete enough. The child may be "good" or not fight for virtually the entire day but may misbehave in the last half hour before bedtime, which would disqualify him/her from achieving the goal. Respect is hard to quantify and disrespect can be very subjective. Although, these are the greater goals of discipline, these are too complex for a behavioral incentive plan. **Quantify and define** children's behaviors desired by parents/adults. Avoid subjective definitions of behavior- for example: "Be good- don't be bad", "Be more helpful around the house." Clear definitions of desirable behaviors would be, "Do all your homework before any TV," "Get to school on time or early every day," "If you are going to be half an hour late or more, call and let us know," "Put away your laundry before going to bed," "Do all your chores before you go out to play." Quantify means **yes** or **no**, not "sort of" or "later" or "intend to." Kinda, almost, sort of do not work as quantifiable behaviors. Either a behavior is done or not done. Either a behavior is completed by a certain time or not.

The **ADULT** (through negotiation with the child) **sets the short term, mid-term, and long-term goals**. If a clean room is attractive to him/her (if not a miracle!)...if chores are...if homework is...if school attendance is...if attendance at family functions... The principle is that the goals are meaningful to the adult now, and will have meaning for the child in life as he/she integrates them into his/her lifestyle and expectations. The adult should pick minor **frequency & consistency** behavior goals, more substantial goals, and major goals. For example, the initial goal may be a successful progression through the behaviors of a nighttime routine to being put in bed. The set of behaviors would be made up of taking a bath or shower, washing up, changing into pajamas, laying out the clothes to be worn tomorrow, and being in bed by a certain time. Unfortunately, if the bedtime is 8 p.m., up until 8 p.m. the bath, washing up, pajamas, clothes can be delayed and argued over. Quantify these behaviors and set up reasonable expectations so that there isn't a rush in the last 5 minutes to accomplish what needs a half hour to do, by setting aside deadlines for each of the behaviors. Specifically, the bath has to start by 7 p.m. and be done by 7:30 p.m. If it is done by 7:30 p.m., then the child is credited with achieving the goal and gains a point. If the child is not done by 7:30 p.m.... in other words, is done at 7:31 p.m., then he says she has failed to achieve the goal and does not get credited a point (be merciless!). Yes-no, made it or didn't make it. Washing up and pajamas has to be finished by 7:45 p.m. Yes-no, made it or didn't make it. Clothes chosen and in bed by 8 p.m. Yes-no, made it or didn't make it. If the child achieves some of the goals,



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then he/she gains some of the points. If the job achieves all of the goals, then he/she gains all of the points plus a bonus (to be discussed later). If this plan motivates the child to improve the evening routine, he/she will also be developing habits that will benefit him/her in the long-term. Once this goal has been stable, then another goal- a more substantial goal may be set. An extension of the bedtime routine to include all the after school activities and chores may be an appropriate new goal. Or, homework may be isolated as a goal in of itself.

Punishments are not a part of this plan. Goals are behaviors that must occur in frequently and consistently, that once achieved result in rewards. Never take away any achieved "points." In this plan, children never lose credit for achieved goals for misbehavior. Misbehavior results in the lack of progress toward goals (and resultant rewards), but does not discredit the children's positive behavior. This avoids the focus on punishment. The negative consequence of not following through on the positive behaviors is that the goals will be achieved slowly rather than quickly and the rewards will be slow to come. The positive consequence of following through is that the goals will be achieved quickly and the rewards gained quickly... and often. Parents picked the goals because of their insight about how the household routines will benefit future life success for children. On the other hand, children are best at telling adults what motivates them now! The **CHILD** (through negotiation with the adult), **chooses his/her own rewards**. If toys are attractive to him/her...if money is...if privileges...if video games...if excursions... The principle is that these rewards have to be meaningful to the child- not to the adult. The child should be encouraged and led to minor, more substantial, and major rewards. When I worked out an incentive plan once with a father, he decided that the rewards should be books, "because books are good for him." Books would have been okay as the reward if books were rewarding to his son. Unfortunately, they were not rewarding to him. He liked Pokémon cards! We presented this plan to his son by saying, "We have figured out a way for you to get on a whole bunch of Pokémon cards. Do you want to do that?" Boy, was he excited! With Pokémon cards as the award, he found that his son was highly motivated and met the behavioral goals readily. Another way to present such a plan is to ask, "Would you be interested in a way to get a lot of the things that you want? And be in control of how fast you get them?"

Rewards have to be age-appropriate and tailored to the individual child. Parents have to put boundaries on the rewards. They need to be reasonable and not extravagant... and also within the budget of the family. Another family attempted to motivate their son into bathing regularly by promising him a new bicycle if he bathed daily for a week. This was far too extravagant a reward for too simple a series of behaviors. If that was all it took to get a new bicycle, imagine the growing demands he would make for other behavior such as doing homework and getting up in the morning. What was worse, was that they gave him the bicycle after only three days. Of course, after he got the bicycle, he stopped bathing again. They sabotaged their own incentive plan.

OCCURRENCE, FREQUENCY, CONSISTENCY, AND BONUSSES

More substantial and major behavioral goals should be matched up with **bonus rewards**- such as more money, more points to redeem, or a special excursion, privilege, or present. For example, each accomplishment- each completed behavior results in one point credited. If all of the behaviors in the set are completed, then there should be bonus points awarded. A certain number of points are gained when the set of behaviors is completed for one day. For a series of days and weeks of successful completion of behaviors, then an even greater bonus should be rewarded. This is based on the principle that each **occurrence** deserves some credit, but greater **frequency**



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deserves even greater credit, and **consistency** of positive behaviors deserves the highest reward. Some people feel the whole idea of rewards has being artificial and inappropriate since the real world doesn't reward you when you just do what you're supposed to do. Quite the contrary, a well-designed behavioral incentive plan does reflect the real world! For example, each time you go to work and do a good job- an **occurrence**, you get some pay. However, if you go to work and do a good job **frequently**, you will get more pay and raises in pay. On top of that, if you go to work and do a good job **consistently**, then you will get not only raises but promotions as well. A well-designed behavioral incentive plan becomes a model for habits and values that will promote success in the adult and vocational world.

Once the adult and the child agree on the rewards and goals, then a **CONTRACT** can be made (writing it up and having it signed may be useful). With the contract, the adult does not need to be angry at the child or punish him/her; the adult only has to adhere to his/her part of the contract. The adult can be honestly regretful that the child has not completed his/her set of behaviors... the adult can be honestly regretful that the child will not receive the rewards that the child had selected. Often, anger from adults is used to punish the child. Unfortunately, anger often distracts the child from his/her responsibility in not completing the behaviors and gaining the rewards. If the child holds up his/her end, then he/she accumulates the points, achieves the goals, and gets the rewards. If he/she doesn't, then he/she doesn't! Whether or not the child achieves the goals well or poorly, the behavioral incentive plan is reflecting how the real world works. Initial indifferent success does not mean the plan has failed. Getting angry at the failure of the child to wholeheartedly embrace the plan is counterproductive and unnecessary. Expect him/her to fail initially and save yourself the anger! The plan will give the child the appropriate feedback depending on what he/she does. Failure to follow through will not be rewarded. Mediocre achievement will be rewarded in a mediocre manner. Exceptional compliance or achievement will be rewarded exceptionally. The adult has to do nothing, except to follow through as the contract had been established. And, to not sabotage the contract. Sabotaging the contract, would be finding ways to save the child from getting the consequences of not behaving (no points, no goals, no rewards). Oppositional children can be very manipulative and tend to be experts at getting adults to change the contract to save them from the choices they have made. **DON'T DO IT!** If the adult "saves" the child from his/her choice, the adult effectively undermines him/herself and any possibility of the child learning a sense of responsibility. Sabotaging the contract would also happen if the parent brings in some violation of some new condition that has not been previously discussed, and takes away previously earned points or rewards.

This plan can be very effective, but it depends primarily on adult following through (so don't mess up!). In addition, not all children are oppositional because of their need for power and control. Sometimes, they are oppositional because of the adult's controlling behavior. And, sometimes, they are oppositional because of profoundly adverse family issues. A behavioral incentive plan is part of a larger process of discipline. It normally will not work in of itself. Sometimes, it is just the tool to shift the balance of negativity that has existed for years within families. Sometimes it is part of a larger approach. If you are going to use a behavioral incentive plan, it is critical that you understand the underlying principles and use them correctly in designing it. Most behavioral incentive plans fail because people do not understand the underlying principles and subsequently, fail to design them correctly. Good luck!



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On my web site at www.RonaldMah.com if you use the link to Handouts, under the section on "Understanding Children and Discipline" is a link to the file "Incentive Based Behavioral Modification Program for Children." In the file is an example of a behavioral incentive plan with the goals and the rewards for minor to major accomplishments, as well as a briefer summary of the major principles discussed here.



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Chapter 14

THE DEFAULT CONSEQUENCE

Mom, a single mother came home after work and finds her 14-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son sitting quietly in the living room and reading books. Something is clearly wrong! Watching TV, in an argument, playing video games, listening to very loud music, and so forth would be normal. Doing what they are supposed to be doing -- that's not normal! She asked, "What's up?" "Nothing," says one. "Nuthin'," says the other. Fortunately, they haven't learned how to be good liars yet. Mom looked around. Everything looks OK. She walked toward the kitchen. There's a funny smell. It's coming from the kitchen -- it's a burnt smell. Something had been burning. She asked Matt and Annabel what happened. "Nothing," says one. "Nuthin'," says the other. Mom isn't that stupid! It took a bit of time, but more gradually came out.

First, Annabel lied saying she dropped some egg on the stove and it burned while she was cooking. When Mom asked Matt, if that was what had happened, Matt with a quick wide-eyed look at Annabel before answered, "Yes." Matt really doesn't know how to lie well! Taking a cue from NYPD Blue and Crime and Punishment (her favorite shows!), Mom worked on the weaker link. Eventually, Matt fessed up -- Annabel had been playing around with the houseplants. She had taken leaves and burnt them on the stovetop. She had threatened him to get him to stay quiet. However, under pressure from Mom and with the golden opportunity to get Annabel into big trouble, Matt sang like a canary. Confronted with the damning testimony of her alibi, Annabel confessed. The evidence was in. Now what?

Mom, not surprisingly was furious. She thought he had gone through all this before with the not playing with fire stuff. If anything, she might have expected it to be still be a problem with the 8-year-old, but not with the 14-year-old. Many times, when a parent is extremely frustrated and angry, he or she will come up with a very severe consequence. The point of a severe consequence is that a negative consequence is to get the attention of the child so that he or she does not do the negative behavior again. If the earlier simpler and less severe consequence didn't get his or her attention, then a truly draconian overwhelmingly severe punishment -- a massacre is needed! Frustration is understandable in dealing with life -- especially in dealing with children. However, making decisions in the midst of intense frustration is not ordinarily when people make the most astute decisions. Outraged, thinking quickly (but not necessarily, thinking clearly), Mom came up with the first thing she could think of that would be severely disappointing and punishing to Annabel. Annabel had been looking forward to spending the weekend with her friend at her friend's grandmother's house. They had been best friends since they were in the third grade up until last year when her friend moved 200 miles away. She was coming to spending a few days with her grandmother, and Annabel and her had arranged for Annabel to visit and stay with her next weekend. There was a whole year of catching up to do. Annabel had been looking for do this for the last two months. Since Mom's instinct was to emphasize how big a deal and how dangerous it was to be playing with fire... since Mom really wanted to get her attention... since she felt that punishment was the only way to get her attention... since she didn't want to beat her... since she was furious... since she didn't know what else to do, Mom told her, "You can't go over to your friend's grandmother's house to visit this weekend!"



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YOU'RE WRONG!

Later in the evening, when grandma (Mom's mother) called, the conversation quickly turned into, "You can't believe what happened today!" And, Mom proceeded to tell her mother the ugly details. When she told her, that she wasn't going to let Annabel visit with her friend next weekend, she was stunned that her mother snapped at her, "You're wrong! That's not fair! That's too much. She's been looking forward to seeing her friend. That's too mean, if you don't let her go." Grandma didn't think that it was an appropriate consequence! Her ally... her confidante... her MOTHER disagreed with her! This, of course turned into an argument between her and her mother. They already had issues between them about parenting, about her been a single Mom, about how supportive (or not) her mother was to her. Fortunately, after the initial surprise with her, they were able to hang in there long enough (get through THEIR issues) for Mom to begin to reconsider whether the consequence was appropriate or inappropriate.

Annabel was way... way... way too old to be playing with fire. It was very scary for the Mom to think that Annabel was out of control. Being a single Mom was hard enough. Being a single Mom of a crazy kid would be too much! Without a doubt, there were deeper issues as to why Annabel at 14 years of age would be playing with fire. Many kids play with fire at some point during their childhood. However, it is usually at a much younger time and a simple boundary and admonition is sufficient to quell the behavior. That Annabel had still experimented with such a thing at her age was alarming. Getting to the bottom of that was essential. However, it is important to remember that in all discipline issues, setting and asserting boundaries is the first step to resolving them. You cannot get a car fixed, until you get it into the garage. You can't get your toddler his or her immunization shots, unless you get him or her into the doctor's office first. You can't get your toddler his or her shots, until you catch them in the doctor's office! Boundaries come first in discipline. Boundaries come before the possibility of growth and change.

UNACCEPTABLE IN THE CONTAINER OF THE RELATIONSHIP

I once worked with a young couple in therapy. They loved each other dearly and wanted to stay together desperately. However, every once in awhile, he would get upset and he would revert to the angry young man of his family and neighborhood. When he got upset, he would say cruel and hurtful things to her. Never would he physically hurt her or physically try to intimidate her. However, still the words would be devastating to her. She would feel betrayed and destabilized. It shook her to core. Afterwards, he would be sincerely contrite, totally apologetic, and would do anything to make amends. It would take a while for her to recover, but his sincere loving and caring for her allowed her trust to build up again. And then, it would happen again, and she would be devastated all over again. And again... and again. She was terrified that this was going to be the pattern of their relationship forever. She tried very hard to look at the good side. And there was a lot to the good side. Other than this one issue, he was a great guy. Other than this one issue, there was nothing that she had any complaints about. Other than being psychologically massacred once in a while, it was all cool. She tried very hard to accept this. She tried very hard to find a way to live with his occasional eruptions. And, as she continued to try, she continued to give permission for him to emotionally destroy her once in a while. She allowed his rage to be within the container -- the boundaries of the relationship. Only when she finally decided that she could not... that she would not live with the fear of and the experience of periodic verbal assaults, did anything change. She finally told him that as much as she loved



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him, that as much as she wanted to be his partner forever, that she could not and would not tolerate this behavior. She set the boundary not to change him, but to protect herself. She asserted that he had to expel this behavior from the container of the relationship or there would not be a relationship. There was a very real possibility that he would not be able to do this, and that they would not be able to stay in a relationship. This is why she had been so reluctant to set this boundary. At one point, she did end the relationship because of his verbal abuse. To his tremendous credit, once this boundary was clearly set and he knew that his behavior was absolutely unacceptable in the container of the relationship -- that she would follow through, he resolved never to explode upon her like this again. As he placed this boundary upon himself, he took the first essential step towards change. Initially, he tried to restrain his rage and explosions through his willpower. That turned out to be insufficient. The depth of his personal issues from his childhood experiences fed the rage within him. These were the deeply painful personal issues that he had tried to avoid dealing with for years. However, because he did dearly love his fiancée and was completely committed to making the relationship work, he chose to face his personal demons. He dealt with these issues successfully. He was able to do so only because he started with the boundary of no violent verbal outbursts. Her boundary set the context that he responded to with the setting of his boundary; both of which eventually lead to growth and change.

Setting a boundary is the first step. However, you must also assert and defend the boundary. When the young woman set her boundary with her fiancée, by itself it was not going to be sufficient. In addition, she was willing to stop talking to him, stop being with him, and to end the relationship. These are not threats that she verbalized -- these were consequences that she was willing to follow through on. With great sadness, she had become willing for him to take the negative choice and evoke the negative consequences. Of course, she preferred for him to take the positive choice and evoke the positive consequences of maintaining the relationship. In this situation between Annabel and her mother, her mother was trying to create a relationship of trust between the two of them where Mom could rely on Annabel making appropriate choices when not under direct supervision. She was willing for Annabel to be mad at her too. In addition, she wanted to facilitate a relationship between Annabel and her own conscience that would manage her behavior appropriately. It was important for her to give Annabel a severe consequence. However, the consequence still needed to be appropriate.

SO, WHAT THEN?

The grandmother didn't like Mom's consequence, thinking that it was too severe, but she didn't offer an alternative either... "So, what then?" In a couple, often one of them puts the other in a bad situation by dropping a very severe consequence on the children that the first one finds unreasonable. The second parent often doesn't want to contradict the first parent, but at the same time finds the consequence unfair. The desire to maintain the alliance with the other parent comes into conflict with the desire to protect their child from unfairness. Then, the second member of the parenting couple puts the first parent into another bad situation by criticizing the first consequence -- saying "No," without offering an alternative to consider. If the second parent finds the consequence too severe, what would be less severe? If it were inappropriate, what would be more appropriate? By the way, in the above example, Annabel's friend would also be punished as Annabel is punished. And, Annabel's friend didn't do anything. Being critical and telling someone that what he or she is doing is incorrect, does not tell him or her what IS correct. In the above situation, when Mom asked her mother was she should do instead,



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grandmamma didn't have an alternative. Mom came to agree that her initial consequence may have been too severe, and certainly Annabel felt that it was too severe as well. Annabel admitted that what she had done was wrong and committed not to do it anymore. However such apologies are cheap when you are busted and want something or want to avoid a punishment. She really wanted to visit with her friend. There were clearly THREE votes against the initial consequence, but still no alternatives.

THE DEFAULT CONSEQUENCE- A WAY OUT

I suggested to the Mom, that she tell Annabel that the consequence as Mom had initially presented still stands, unless Annabel can offer her a better and more appropriate alternative consequence. In other words, she CANNOT go to visit with her friend unless she comes up with an alternative consequence that Mom feels is appropriate. If this were a situation with two parents, then BOTH of them have to accept the alternative or else it won't be acceptable. I warned the Mom to make sure whatever Annabel proposed was concrete and enforceable. This gave Annabel a chance to be responsible. Mom needed to be adamant that she WOULDN'T offer Annabel any alternative consequences. She was not to make it easy for her. Mom would either agree to something or turn them all down. This made Annabel responsible for her behavior AND her consequences. Mom was to be very clear that not being allowed to visit with her friend would still hold, unless she (Annabel) came up with something. If Annabel went dumb on her ("I don't know...")... if she refused to come up with something better... if she just couldn't, then the "default" decision would be enforced- no visit with her friend. Mom was giving her the chance to be reasonable and responsible. In such situations, if the child is used to having the parent come up with the solution, or make a series of offers until the child picked one that he or she is willing to follow through on, it may be very difficult for the child to come up with a reasonable alternative. In addition, the parents need to be aware that promises are not actually alternative consequences. A promise to behave a certain way can easily be forgotten or dismissed when the child has gotten what he or she wants. "I'll gladly pay you Thursday for a hamburger today," promises Wimpy to Popeye. Be sure the alternative consequence that is accepted is one that you as the parent can make it happen. It was critical that Mom didn't cave in! And, Mom had to be absolutely willing to let the default consequence take hold.

Unfortunately, Annabel was not able to come up with a reasonable and appropriate alternative consequence that was acceptable to her mother. She made promises that she could not keep or were too easy to later avoid. Mom didn't fall for these false promises. Then Annabel went "dumb" on her mother and kept responding, "I don't know." Every once in awhile, Mom would prompt her that she was waiting for an alternative proposal. However, as Annabel did not come up with one, Mom did not work hard to come up with proposals. Normally, Mom will work really hard to try to come up with reasonable alternatives -- reasonable alternatives that Annabel would shoot down with derision. Mom could be firm and clear, secure that the default consequence was always there, ready to be enforced. She could also be comfortable with herself because she knew that she was still being available to a reasonable offer. For two weeks, up until the next weekend, her mother was reasonable and receptive to any offer that Annabel may have come up with. Annabel had ample opportunity to be a reasonable person and make a reasonable proposal. As a consequence, come the next Friday, her mom did not feel like a horrible insensitive tyrant of a mother when she enforced the default consequence (they had already notified Annabel's friend, that it was a possibility that the visit would not happen so that she would not be surprised). Annabel did not get to visit with her friend. Very sad. Very sad



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that the two girls did not get to visit. But even sadder and even more alarming, was that Annabel wasn't able to come up with an offer and was unable to be reasonable. That became the focus of the work between Mom and Annabel. As I had said earlier, there were deeper issues. The setting of the boundary -- the reasonable boundaries, and Annabel's failure to stretch and change exposed these deeper issues.

The default consequence gives you something to fall back upon. And, it gives children ample opportunity to become responsible. Even better for some of you, when you have been unreasonable with a punitive consequence, it gives you a way to turn it back around to create a positive learning situation for your child!



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Chapter 15

RIPS, THE FOUR KEYS TO GREAT PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

The situation:

- *a mother in ongoing conflict and distress over the behavior of her 17-year-old son*
- *in therapy with a sullen 5'11" 220 lb. young man with a sweatshirt hood pulled as far over his face as possible*

The approach – RIPS. I say:

- ***R-** it must be hard to hear and feel disrespect from your mother all the time. She doesn't realize how it hurts you. Here's the person that you looked to most of your life for caring and respect, and yet you feel disrespect from her all the time;*
- ***I-** and it seems like she's always puts you down as a stupid teenager -- like you don't know anything. She makes it sound as if you aren't... and can't be a decent human being. That your morals and your values are so screwed up;*
- ***P-** and the stuff she does... it feels like she's always trying to control you with manipulations and threats. She told you all during your childhood that you needed to grow up and eventually make your own choices, but now she tells you your choices are all wrong! It's like you can't make any choices and don't have any power if she could have her way;*
- ***S-** and on top of it all, she seems to be saying that if you don't act "right"... do what she says... be what she wants you to be, that she won't love you any more. That she will reject you and abandon you. I know you're a big guy and maybe believe that you can make it on your own, and maybe you don't believe you need to have her there to back you, but in a perfect world -- in a better world, don't you want to know that she will always be there for you? It's tough, isn't it?*

There are times when the situation gets so out of hand, that a parent does not know what to do. It may happen when the child is very young, or it may happen when the child has become a teenager. The child's behavior has become so severe, that the parent fears for not only the child's future but for his or her present. Children can become very hostile and negative towards parents and other adults if they are not raised properly -- which also means disciplined properly -- which also means guided and supported properly.

Several years ago, I had predicted in the workshops on discipline I presented, that my wife and I would not have any severe parent-adolescent problems with our two children who were in elementary school at the time. I boldly pronounced that we knew what we were doing. That there was a logic to the process of parenting that we were aware of, and although there might be some issues, there would not be the severity of conflict that parents are so fearful of when their children become teenagers. I asserted that children that are loved, supported, and respected do not suddenly become social deviants just because they watched a little MTV or listen to a little bit of hip-hop. They may dress funny! They may pierce parts of the body -- over and over! They may be attuned to music and entertainment that makes your skin crawl and your earwax melt! However, well-loved, supported, and respected children do not suddenly drop all that has been given to them from their parents just because of hormonal changes. Several people who had attended the workshops several years ago when I had so boldly predicted the positive parent-



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adolescent relationship we were to have, have come up to me and asked me, "Well... so how are your kids doing?" with a mischievous glint in their eyes. "I remember you saying that your kids were going to turn out well. So, how are they?" And, my answer would be, "They're great! I told you so!" Not only are both of our children (both girls, one a junior in high school and other a sophomore in college) doing very well, they are both superlative individuals with outstanding character. In all honesty, they are way more mature with way more integrity than I ever had at their ages. In fact, they scare me to death! However, they don't scare me to death because I think they may abuse drugs and alcohol, engage in dysfunctional relationships, indulge in criminal behavior, associate with toxic individuals or causes, or otherwise disrespect others or themselves emotionally, socially, spiritually, or physically. Both of them scare me to death because they have a sense of values, a sense of self, a sense of responsibility to their communities and to society and the world... and worst of all, they have courage and integrity! They scare me to death because when they see that something is not correct, that someone is being abused or harmed... that something is wrong, they often have the courage to speak out and to act (far more courage than I had when I was their age). And that, unfortunately even in our democratic society, can still be dangerous. This does not mean that they are impulsive, judgmental, and intrusive. Being prudent, being respectful, and being practical are still expectations they have of themselves. To speak out and to act when you feel that something is not correct... when someone is being violated is in many ways, the essence of what Americans seek to be. And what we as parents seek to raise our children to be. However, that still scares the heck out of me! And, makes me so proud of them -- and of ourselves as parents. "Oh, you're so lucky that you have such wonderful children!" No, it's not about luck; it's about appropriate parenting.

There are four keys to appropriate parenting -- parenting that does not ensure that your child will obey you, parenting that does not guarantee that your child will be the best academically, parenting that does not guarantee that your child will make the most money, but parenting that does strongly predict, if not guarantee that you will have a child that you can still communicate with in a mutually respectful manner whatever their developmental age or eventual situation. I use the pneumonic, RIPS to remind myself of these four keys. When they were younger, children tended to make moral choices pretty much along the value system that they were given by their important adults: parents and teachers primarily. Pleasing these significant adults is essential to most young children. However, as they reach adolescence, the influence of peers and the peer culture becomes much stronger (especially, among children who have not been able to please overly-critical adults). Counter-balanced against values acquired earlier are newer values reflecting his/her adolescent society. There are four basic themes from the adolescent struggle that help define the adolescent's response to choices in his/her life. These four themes are RESPECT, IDENTITY, POWER & CONTROL, & SECURITY. When any of these themes are activated either positively or negatively, they strongly direct the adolescent towards his/her eventual choice.

RESPECT

In many ways, adolescents do not feel respected by adults: parents and teachers. Adults are always criticizing them as bad, amoral, stupid, and/or strange. Whether they feel invalidated by adults or not, with the rise of the importance of peers, whether or not they are respected by peers becomes more and more important.



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Respected adults (who are usually the adults who adolescents feel gives them respect) are still influential as to the adolescent's choices; their respect of the adolescent's behavior remains important- conversely, their disagreement is also meaningful. However, as teens make choices in life, their perception of their choice being respected or disrespected- accepted or not accepted by the significant peers who they admire or wish to emulate will often be their primary guide, or a primary guide to balance with other and prior influences (such as parents). If they do not feel respected by adults, then peers **will** be the primary guides. If adults are able to constantly convey respect to the teenager, even when they are critical or frightened by the teenager's choices, then the teenager will most probably still be able to consider with adult has to say. If adults are disrespectful, even if they are absolutely correct in their critique of the teenager's choices as being erroneous or dangerous, then the teenager who often be resentful and dismissive of their input.

I work with quite a few teenagers as a therapist. I am extremely confrontive, challenging, and assertive with them. I will disagree sometimes quite emphatically (even profanely!). I will give them my opinions including when I think they are being stupid! (Or when, adults have been stupid). However, I take great care to do it with respect. Honesty is respect. Dishonesty or the dumbing down of information implies that the recipient is unable to understand it, and hence is insulting and disrespectful to the recipient. I respectfully assert my role as an adult with experience and knowledge (and with the wisdom gained from being stupid over many decades and having observed hundreds of people being stupid over decades!). I respectfully assert that they as teenagers, as bright as they maybe, have limited experience and therefore can only have limited wisdom (in other words, they haven't had a chance to be stupid enough often enough to have truly acquired wisdom!). This is more than a technique or some words, it is what I truly believe in. And the teenager's tend to take it very well. The communication is given with respect and taken with respect. They listen to me.

IDENTITY

As adolescents make the transition from being and seeing themselves as children to becoming and defining themselves as adults, they will tend (if conscious of the opportunity) to move toward any behavior or activity that supports their successful identification as an autonomous, competent, and powerful adult. They will, conversely, resist any behavior or activity... and any person that dismisses or her interferes with their identification as adults. At the same time, while adolescents often have insecurities about being immature ("kids"), accusing an adolescent of being immature is experienced as disrespectful- it is not an effective or useful intervention. While adolescents still have a strong instinct to be child-like (playful, desirous of instant gratification), they will behave predictably more "maturely" if they are prompted to be aware of these identity issues. Adults often have problems with this because they still see their teenagers as children. Their caution and vigilance is interpreted as distrust and a message that the teenager is somehow deficient. This is insulting and repels teenagers. Each person has internalized an ideal self who completely lives up to the set of values and morals that he/she believes in. There is also the real self, which is what the person actually does. The more the real self acts and lives up to what the ideal self has defined as good, the better someone feels about him or herself. Parents often attack the teenager's ideal self -- they belittle the values and morality of the adolescent. This **never** works! It serves only to insult the identity of the teenager and destroys the possibility of the teenager being receptive to the person who is insulting him or her. It is important to affirm the identity of the teenager as someone who is wanting and trying to become mature and be successful. It is appropriate to affirm that the struggle



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is difficult and a normal dynamic process that will continue to evolve over time. With this kind of understanding and compassion, the adult will be more likely to be well received by the teenager.

Many times, I will tell teenagers "You're supposed to be trying to figure things out. You're not supposed to have it all figured out! You're supposed to be trying things out. And, you really not supposed to be able to have it right, right away. You're supposed to experiment and explore. And make mistakes. That's what being a teenager or young man or woman is all about. The important thing is to minimize mistakes and to learn from your mistakes. I think you're sharp enough to realize that. And hopefully, you're sharp enough to consider other people's wisdom and experience as you make those choices and those mistakes. Let's look at your plan..." As I confirm their identity as evolving young adults, they tend to feel supported and become willing to have me help them examine their plans... their hopes... their dreams... their relationships... their lives.

POWER & CONTROL

Adolescents, like all individuals are very interested in gaining more power and control in their lives. Unlike children who usually accept their lesser power and control due to adult management, adolescents are often no longer willing to accept lesser power and control due to social considerations. Unlike adults who (hopefully) are secure enough to accept the limitations to their power and control, adolescents often strongly resist any indication or threat of loss to their power and control whether real or imagined. Adolescents may engage in self-defeating and self-harming behavior to maintain their sense of power and control.

While it may seem contradictory that such negative choices seem to be against the desire to affirm a more adult-like identity, being in power and having control is such a fundamental part of the adolescent's identity needs, that "immature" choices that give the illusion of power and control are more predictable over "mature" choices that seem to cause a loss of power and control (especially from an adult perspective and in the long term). Parents who have a long history of ineffective discipline attempts with their teenager will often resort to punishment or manipulation in order to control their child. This control and power domination has the effect of taking away power and control from the teenager, which causes them in turn, to become even more defiant and oppositional. Giving the teenager control and power (which they actually **already** have) within clear boundaries is a more effective approach. Negotiation works best if parents are willing to let the teenager take control of his or her life and take both the positive and negative consequences of his or her choices. Quite often, parents try to force their children into making the "right" choice and avoid the negative consequences of a "wrong" choice. In doing so, they take away power and control from the teenager. For some teenagers, they rather be wrong and suffer the consequences than not have even symbolic power and control over their lives.

In the developmental process of adult versus child power and control, the relationship moves from the adult having virtually absolute power and control and the child having virtually no power and control to be eventually, the adult having virtually no power and control and the child having total power and control. In the transition from infancy to adulthood, there needs to be a gradual shift in the balance between who holds the power and control. Theoretically, at a certain point the parent should downshift to having 80% power and control while the child should up shift to having 20% power and control in the child's life (would that be around kindergarten age?). At a later point, the balance should be approximately 50-50 (hypothetically, sometime during elementary school?). Gradually, the balance would move toward the adult having perhaps only 10% power and control



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and the child having 90% power and control in the child's life (adolescence?). Eventually, the child -- no longer a child but an adult will have 100% power and control in his or her own life. However, if the relationship between the parent and the child has been a healthy and respectful one, even as the child has ever increasing power and control in his or her own life, the parent maintains significant **influence** on the child/adult child's life. Unfortunately, some parents find having influence to be insufficient for their own emotional and psychological needs. They have extreme difficulty letting go of power and control over their child's life, even well beyond when the child's maturity has justified passing more of it over to him or her. Such parents are often correctly typified by their children as control freaks. As such parents continue to try to assert power and control, they lose influence in their child's (and adult child's) life that they would have otherwise always had maintained.

SECURITY

As adolescents make the transition into adulthood, they are leaving the relatively secure world of childhood with its easy-going lack of accountability and moving into an adult world of responsibility. And, they do so often without the clear rites of passage and apprenticeships from prior generations, and sometimes, without solid guidance from their parents who themselves may be struggling to deal with current societal demands. This is an anxiety provoking process that threatens their sense of security.

Adolescents will tend to move toward any behavior or activity that supports their greater sense of security. However, as young people still, the security that is more tangible is in the short-term and not necessarily in the long-term. As a result, behaviors or activities that support immediate security needs tend to be favored over those that sacrifice the present for long-term needs or security. Unfortunately, many adults when frustrated by their lack of power and control and influence over their children's choices and behavior, will implicitly and explicitly threaten them with rejection and abandonment if they do not conform. And, sometimes functionally reject or abandon them emotionally and psychologically, if not also physically. The threat of rejection or abandonment is another manipulation that the teenager will sense and often defy to everyone's detriment. With this threat to their security, there becomes little, if any reason for the adolescent to try to remain connected with the adult. Besides, they have adolescent peers who will be accepting of them no matter what; the unconditional acceptance by the peers stands in stark contrast to the highly conditional acceptance/rejection by their parents. It is no wonder that many teenagers turn to their peers as they turn away from and as they are turned away from by their parents. However, if despite all the conflict and differences of opinion, the adolescent is secure that the nurturing caring adult will never abandon or reject him or her, then the conflict and differences of opinion can occur in a safe forum -- an honest and loving forum.

Of these four principles, power & control and respect are the most important. Of these two, power & control is the most important to the teen. Unfortunately, many youth are so used to being disrespected, that the threat or experience of disrespect from adults is not particularly new or impactful. Power & control is so important that keeping even just the **illusion** of power & control is enough to take being disrespected by adults. In actuality, RIPS is a model of positive communication with any person of any age in any situation. The young man in the vignette at the beginning of the article acknowledged my question, "It's tough, isn't it?" with a slight barely perceptible ½ inch nod, signifying "Yes, it is tough." He had been ripped! And connected with. I continued, "I bet your mom, doesn't even know what she does that feels disrespectful. Did you



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know that, Mom?” She shook her head, no. “You should tell her.” For the first time in a long time, he felt that she cared. He turned to her and said, “Well Mom, remember when...” The follow up discussion about what he had experienced allowed for the young man and his mother to actually communicate in a positive manner. There was more to this particular relationship and therapy and to this process, but this was the beginning where there had been no hope. This is not just a process to deal with adolescents; it is a basic healthy communication process for any interaction and in any relationship. It works with adults, it works with partners and spouses, it works with colleagues and neighbors, and it works with little children and babies as well. Rip them all!