

Not Too Soft, Not Too Strict:

A Balanced Approach to Parenting

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There is little less trouble in governing a family than a whole kingdom.

—Montaigne

Stephen and Paula, very caring and involved parents, brought their five-year-old son, Charlie, in for help with his behavior problems. Charlie had been kicked out of preschool and private kindergarten programs because of defiant and aggressive behavior. Now his parents were desperate because their “little angel” had bitten the teacher’s aide.

Charlie was about as cute as they come, but pranced around the office with the same “air” that had been described at school. At our first session, his mother handled his breaking of crayons and hanging out the window by saying in a sweet and tentative voice, “Now Charlie, please don’t do that, OK?” Stephen said absolutely nothing until his son’s behavior began careening out of control, at which point he barked orders, frightening everybody. Paula would then criticize him for being too harsh on their little boy.

During the course of family therapy, Stephen and Paula began to understand how experiences with their own parents had left scars that made it difficult to set limits with their son. Stephen became aware of harsh treatment by his parents, and in a moving session expressed a lot of anger at his dad for beating him. His fear of this pent-up anger spilling out on Charlie had rendered him incapable of being firm.

Paula, on the other hand, realized that she was copying her parents’ lackadaisical style by giving Charlie too much freedom. The youngest of seven children, she had been all but ignored by her parents, who worked long hours and had little time for the children. Her care had been entrusted to her older brothers and sisters who had neither the skills nor desire to discipline her. In therapy, Paula grieved about the lack of parenting she received and her unfulfilled desire for nurturing. Little by little, she became better able to set appropriate limits for Charlie.

Stephen and Paula are not alone. Countless parents are grappling with a child or adolescent who is “acting out” or exhibiting other problematic behavior which is often simply a cry for a more balanced form of discipline. For Stephen and Paula, the solution was two-tiered. They needed to provide consistent limits and they needed to learn to work together as a team. These are two essential goals set by parents who are intent on happy, healthy family-making.

Family researchers have known for years that healthy families create environments that balance large doses of love and warmth with sufficient firmness and structure. Kids thrive in these settings. Without love and warmth they tend to feel abandoned and resentful, and without firmness and structure they will often become anxious and/or have behavior problems. Record numbers of teenagers in the United States are committing more violent crimes at younger ages, using drugs, dropping out of school, and having little or no hope for their future. Most of these youngsters spent their youth in home settings that were either too soft or too strict, and are searching for the acceptance they never received or the boundaries that they were crying out for.

Politicians and pundits ask for a return to “family values,” a phrase repeated by conservatives and liberals alike, but never really address what this means in everyday terms. From a practical standpoint, they are talking about the need for responsibility and respect in our youth. In healthy families, when a parent makes a request, their child or teenager will comply. It’s not always with an instant response or cheery smiles as in TV’s

Leave It to Beaver. No child can be expected to do exactly what mom or dad says the very first time every time they say something. Children are still children, and it is part of their nature to stretch limits, test, and experiment with the world around them. However, parents who are loving and in charge know that they can enforce their requests, and when they “really mean it”, their child will comply.

Families That Are Too Soft

How times have changed; a century ago minding one’s children didn’t mean obeying them.

—Anonymous

Over the past fifty years families of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds have become significantly more soft or permissive than in the past. In part, this shift is seen as a reaction to the overly stern or authoritarian parenting today’s adults received, as is reflected in the often-uttered statement “I’ll never treat my kids the way I was brought up!” Other researchers link today’s increased permissiveness to current economic stresses. Each year, more and more parents are working outside the home, allowing them less time to spend with their kids. The guilt stemming from this shortage of family time, and from divorce as well, often prompts parents to be more lenient—an understandable but unhelpful means of compensating. Although being together as a family is important, the quantity of time devoted to it is not nearly as crucial as the quality of our interactions and the methods of discipline we use. In most families where kids are misbehaving, the hierarchy is upside down: the kids wielding more power than their parents.

When asked why they allow their children to wield so much power over them, many parents say that discipline might injure their child’s self-esteem. In reality, letting children get away with too much can be as damaging to their feelings of self-worth as being too strict. When kids have too much power, they become anxious about the impulses they cannot control, and as a result they feel bad about themselves.

Although parents should be in charge, this doesn’t mean that they deserve respect and their children don’t. Respect should flow in both directions. Children who feel respected and understood for their feelings, in turn, listen to their parents— not like little robots or bushy-tailed people pleasers, but also not like defiant insurrectionists.

Families That Are Too Strict

With a sweet tongue and kindness, you can drag an elephant by a hair.

—Persian proverb

At the other end of the power continuum are families that are too strict. This pattern often stifles a child's spirit and leads to resentment and rebellion, as it did with seventeen-year-old Priscilla.

Priscilla, a bright student, had been "busted" in school for possession of marijuana. To be admitted back to classes, the school dictated that she and her parents had to undergo at least three family therapy sessions. Her parents, initially startled at the request to be involved in these sessions, soon recognized that they could be helpful agents of change.

In the first meeting we learned that the marijuana incident was only the tip of the iceberg. Priscilla had also recently run away from home a number of times and was doing poorly in classes despite her high intelligence. Part way through the second session it was clear that her parents were being far too strict with her. She was expected to baby-sit for her six-year-old sister every day after school without compensation or even verbal appreciation. Moreover, before the marijuana bust, she had been grounded from all social activities for a month as punishment for cutting a class to be with friends. In general, Priscilla's parents were unaware of the kinds of rules and consequences that make sense for teenagers.

In family therapy, they learned to moderate their limit setting by being more positive, less punitive, and providing consequences that were more closely tied to Priscilla's behavior. And the more they respected and listened to their daughter's feelings, the less angry, more compliant, and happier she became.

Working as a Team

When there is more than one parenting figure in the home, it is essential that the adults work together as partners, like co-captains of a team. Directing in a reliable and consistent way, parenting partners must also make some decisions behind closed doors. Although it is helpful to include input from the children at times, parents need to be in charge of the timing and appropriateness of their kids' involvement in the decision-making. This is very different than allowing the kids to interrupt, get in the middle, or dictate the terms of their own discipline. Problems can arise if one parent becomes stuck in the role of "bad guy" while the other takes on the role of "nice guy." Like a seesaw, one parent gets progressively more permissive as the other gets too strict. Although attempting to balance each other, they are actually casting each other as the enemy, blaming their partner for the children's problems. Before long, kids begin playing one against the other, and if the parents are unable to work out their differences, conflict intensifies, and they become even more polarized.

Rather than putting blame or fault on the other parent, the best solution is for parents to compromise a bit, shifting their weight toward the center of the seesaw. The strict parent needs to bring more love and warmth into their relationship with the children, while the permissive parent must learn to provide structure and set firmer limits. In addition, both parents need to agree on basic family rules and expectations. When surrounded by a positive family atmosphere with reasonable, age-appropriate rules and consequences, children naturally learn appropriate behavior and tend to be happier and healthier.

