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Are you too harsh on your kids?

June 14, 2012

AT HOME



Disciplining is a crucial part of parenting and preparing children for the future, no doubt, but focus on guidance rather than punishment, says Veena Gomes-Patwardhan

"Pinky, What's this?" Neeta yells, holding out the school uniform she has just snatched off the couch in the living room. Pinky, her 14-year old daughter,

is lying on her stomach in bed, nonchalantly kicking her heels in the air, furiously jabbing at the buttons on her handheld video game.

"Huh?" she asks looking up impatiently to throw a fleeting glance at her mother standing in her bedroom doorway. "Err... my uniform?" she adds, realising that her mother is waiting for an answer before turning her attention back to her game.

"Is she being cheeky or was that arrogance I just saw in her eyes?" Neeta thinks, struggling to control her rising temper. Her hand itches to give the girl a tight slap for repeatedly ignoring her instructions about not leaving discarded garments here and there. Instead, she storms into the bedroom, yanks the video game out of her daughter's hands and throws the uniform at her daughter's startled face.

Frustrated parents of teenagers would agree that similarly exasperating behaviour often makes them want to tear their hair out. Their own hair normally.

Recently, a father in Mysore, his patience having been tested to the limit, was reported to have made his adolescent daughter beg in front of a temple so that she would understand the hardships of life and take her studies more seriously. Many were quick to condemn this as an act of bullying while many parents with teenage children empathised with the father. Commenting on this unfortunate incident, Sadia Raval, founder and chief psychologist of Inner Space, Mumbai, said, "The father might not have intended to be emotionally abusive, however the child would have sensed abuse in the situation."

Mumbai-based marriage and family therapist Dr Rochelle Suri expressed a similar opinion, saying, "The experience must have been emotionally traumatic for the girl. The intentions of the father appear to be noble, but they are certainly not justified."

Difficult teenagers, desperate parents

Teenagers who provoke parents into taking desperate measures are an unfortunate reality in many homes today. Agreed, teenagers have the knack of driving parents up the wall or reducing them to tears. But no matter what, it is the

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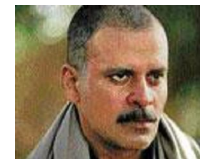
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responsibility of parents to exercise self-control and behave sensibly.

That doesn't mean parents shouldn't discipline children once they enter the tumultuous teenage years. Disciplining is a crucial part of parenting and preparing children for the future. But we don't necessarily have to do it one particular way. Arguing with teenagers that when our parents said sit, we sat, and when they said stand, we stood up, could be a big mistake. Teenagers today are growing up in a different world, a technology-driven world. Today's Internet-savvy 12-year-old is more informed about the world around him/her than we were at their age. Disciplining a more informed generation calls for more tact and a willingness to explain why they can or cannot do certain things. The old "because I say so," attitude just won't work today.

Positive disciplining methods

Psychologists advise what they call 'positive disciplining' that involves focusing more on guidance rather than punishment. Here's an overview:

Before finding fault with your child, do some soul-searching. Often parents are bad role models or their parenting is flawed. Suri says, "Teenagers are a product of their environment and reflect the dynamics of their immediate environment. Therefore, the first thing I ask parents who are dealing with difficult teenagers is: what is going on in the immediate family that may be disturbing the child, that leads him or her to act out in rebellious ways?"

Never get into a confrontational mode with a rebellious teenager. Avoid raucous arguments. Rather, let yours be the voice of reason. Encourage your children to talk to you about their grievances. Then explain that you have set certain rules not to harass them but because you love them, want to guide them about right and wrong, and protect them from lurking dangers (nowadays in the real and cyber world). Talk to them with respect, like you would while conversing with any adult.

Out of a misplaced fear that your children will stop loving you if you discipline them, don't give in to their every whim. This could sometimes have disastrous consequences. For instance, pampered children who are allowed to drive the family car even before they have a driver's licence often endanger their own life and that of others.

Set reasonable limits while establishing house rules for older children. And be a little flexible sometimes, like say when there's a big college event, or when your child is keen on something inoffensive but about which you have reservations mainly because you personally don't like it. For example, your teenage son may want to sport an earring. Ask yourself: is that really something dangerous and worth getting hopping mad about?

Consider this quote from Henry James: The art of wisdom is the art of knowing what to overlook. So don't get stressed out over every little thing.

But be uncompromising about flagrant misbehaviour like frequent rudeness or disrespect whilst speaking to you or serious matters like taking drugs and keeping bad company. Tell your children frankly about pre-determined punishments for certain types of misbehaviour so they know before hand what the consequences of their actions will be.

It is better if you are firm about unacceptable behaviour now otherwise your children may have to learn about this, perhaps the hard way, from others in authority later on in life.

Ensure that any punishment you pick is reasonable and fair. And then enforce it without any hesitation so your children know you mean what you say and that they'd better take you seriously.

Never criticise your children in the presence of others. Don't nag them about past misbehaviour either. Teenagers tend to be extra-sensitive and any form of embarrassment impacts them negatively.

The celebrated philosopher Rousseau had suggested that sometimes, letting children suffer the natural consequences of their actions is a more just punishment. For instance, letting a child, who needs several wake up calls every morning, oversleep and miss his regular train or school bus would be a smarter way of teaching him a lesson as compared to other punishments or repeated rebukes. Suri says, "Sometimes you have to just let your children fall to let them

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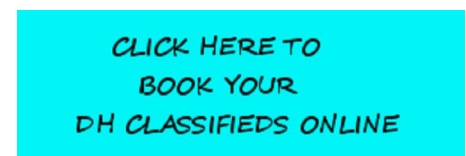


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learn how to get back on their feet again." Raval too concurs with Rousseau's viewpoint saying, "Parents need to realise that they cannot control their children completely. Beyond a point, it is important to let the child learn his or her own lessons."

Whenever you're on the verge of losing your cool, instead of giving vent to your anger and hitting your child or saying hurtful things you'll regret later, take a break till you're in a calmer frame of mind. But being human, parents are bound to err sometimes. If that happens, a simple "I'm sorry" would put your relationship back on track and also set a good example to your children about apologising whenever they offend others. However, if you're losing it too often, seek professional help.

And don't forget to appreciate commendable deeds and give your children a warm hug now and then. Showing you love them will boost their self-esteem and encourage good behaviour.

Finally, remember that the teen years are just a phase. As Raval puts it, "Just because a child is rebellious or careless as a teenager, it does not mean he or she is going to remain that way for life." Nevertheless, if parents play their role as guide and mentor well during those crucial formative years, teenagers will certainly mature into responsible, well-adjusted adults.

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