

CONNECTING

Healthy Information from the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center  March / April 2003

Parental Anger: At What Cost to Our Children?

We all get angry with our children. Children—especially young children—frequently misbehave. That is because they are learning. Children frequently make mistakes, and so they should by virtue of their developmental status. It is normal to feel angry—even very angry at times—with children who are misbehaving, especially when the misbehavior is repetitive and frequent. In fact, recent studies have revealed American parents to be quite an angry bunch. Straus and Stewart (1999) reported on the results of a nationally representative sample of 991 American parents who were interviewed in 1995 regarding their use of six types of corporal punishment in the past year. Punishments included slaps on the hand or leg, spanking on the buttocks, pinching, shaking, hitting on the buttocks with a belt or paddle, and slapping in the face. Disturbingly, the investigators reported, “The overall prevalence rate (the percentage of parents using any of these types of CP during the previous year) was 35% for infants and reached a peak of 94% at ages 3 and 4. Despite rapid decline after age 5, just over half of American parents hit children at age 12, a third at age 14, and 13% at age 17” (p.55).

Using data from the same study, Straus and Field (2000) reported that by age 2, 90% of parents reported using one or more of the following forms of psychological aggression within the past year: shouted, yelled, or screamed; threatened to spank or hit; swore or cursed; threatened to send child away or kick out of the house; and called child dumb or lazy or some other name. By age 5, this rate rose to 98% and still continued in the 90% range from ages 6 to 17. An astounding 43% of American parents reported using one or more forms of psychological aggression with an infant. “The near universality of psychological aggression by this national sample of American parents suggests that there are implicit cultural norms that excuse or tolerate acts of psychological aggression when used in response to persistent misbehavior by a child” (p.11). Yet research has clearly demonstrated the negative impact of physical punishment and psychological aggression on psychological health (Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997; Vissing et al., 1991).

In addition to these findings, it is important to understand that children derive their perceptions of themselves, and themselves in relationship to others, in large part from interactions

with their caregivers. To borrow a phrase from Holly Von Gulden, a well-known child psychotherapist and lecturer on the attachment and bonding process, “What’s on the outside goes on the inside.” In other words, children internalize information they receive about themselves and others through their experiences with others. These experiences shape our children’s sense of self, influence how their personalities develop, and ultimately play a major role in bringing our children to the relationships they will find themselves in across life, whether they be satisfying ones or not.

In light of such understanding, we must have the courage to ask ourselves: *What are we really mirroring to our children when we hit them or yell at them? Are we mirroring that we understand that all children make mistakes, misbehave, and inevitably will be disobedient? How does a child “take in” (“what’s on the outside goes on the inside”) a mother’s or a father’s angry face, voice, and body posture when it is glaring, frowning, rigid, shouting? What does that sensory information say to our children about what we think of them and who they are? What does it say to them about the world and relationships? When I ask myself these questions, I find it unsettling. I ask myself, “How much yelling is enough to damage my child? Is there some arbitrary line that dictates an amount tolerable enough to not create damage? Even if there is, how will I know when I have crossed the line? Can I control how my child ultimately receives or internalizes that information? No, that is something I cannot control. Do I want to risk my child’s esteem by affording myself the luxury of blowing up (whether they deserve it or not)? Is it within my own power to temper my anger so that I do have some control over the information I present to my child—information my child will use to form templates about who he is and what he can expect others in the world to think of him? Yes, that is something I can do. And I will make mistakes, as we all do. Yet it remains my choice how I choose to display and manage my own parental anger.*

In this age of violence, with the media’s constant bombardment and frequent glorification of violence, children shooting children all over the country in school after school (not all school shootings make national news), thousands of violent crimes committed across our country daily, and the threat of

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war on the horizon, we may scratch our heads in puzzlement and wonder, Why is our society so angry? Perhaps, “the best way to understand the anger in our society is to understand the anger inside of us. The best way to teach our children is to be role models, by looking at and understanding our own anger” (Holleron, 2003).

We confuse our children when we tell them, “Do not yell at me when you are angry,” “Do not hit your sister when you are angry,” when we yell at them or spank them when we are angry ourselves. Inadvertently, these disparities between our words and actions seem to teach our children, it is not okay for children to yell, hit or otherwise behave angrily or aggressively—you have to wait until you grow up (i.e. have more power) before you can do that. How can we teach our children the language of anger control if we do not know it ourselves? Remember, “What’s on the outside goes on the inside.” When we model yelling, screaming, cursing, or hitting in the form of spanking when we are angry, this is the experiential information we make available for our children to internalize about themselves (i.e. “You deserve to be hit when you make a mistake”) and others (i.e. “It is ok to express anger by yelling and screaming at others as long as you are the person in the most powerful position.”).

I believe it is of the utmost importance that American parents reconsider our use of physical punishment and forms of psychological aggression as acceptable child-rearing practices. If we are to meaningfully address the problems of anger and violence in our society, then we must examine how American families are practicing anger and aggression in their own homes with their children, and ultimately, the cultural beliefs and assumptions American parents have that support the use of anger and aggression as acceptable methods to control child behavior.

References

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C.O.O.L. (Children Overcoming the Obstacles of Life)

Educational Events for the Community – Holistic Medicine

April 1, 2003, 5:30-6:30 p.m.
Eileen G. May, D.O. in Family Practice at the Indianola Mercy Medical Clinic

Dr. May will describe her holistic approach to medical care. She will emphasize the importance of evaluating each person from a mind, body, and spirit perspective, to facilitate their healing.

This event will be held at Central Presbyterian Church (39th Street and Grand Avenue). There is no charge, but please call the Center at (515) 274-4006 to let us know you will be attending. This event is offered by the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center through a grant from the Community Innovation Fund at the Greater Des Moines Community Foundation.

C.O.O.L. Corner

Parents - Practice What You Preach!
When you are angry:

-  **STOP**
-  **CALM DOWN**
-  **THINK**
-  **TALK IT OUT**
-  **HUG**

Fifth Annual Women Helping Women Luncheon

Date: Thursday, March 13, 2003
Topic: Feeding Your Body, Mind and Soul
Speaker: Susan Roberts, Registered Dietitian and President, Sue Roberts Health Concepts
Location: Hoyt Sherman Place
Cost: \$15 per person
Registration Deadline: March 10, 2003

The food choices we make every day for ourselves and our family make a tremendous difference in the health of our body, our mind, and our spirit. Learn philosophical and practical information about the food choices you make every day. You have the power to make a real difference in your life. Call for details or to reserve your place at this event.

Understanding Different Personality Styles— A 10-Week Course Offered by the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center

This course offers an introduction to an object relations perspective on understanding and working therapeutically with common personality and character styles (disorders). Two class period will be spent on each disorder, with a focus as follows.

Week 1: Symptomatic presentation, developmental theory, ego structure, defenses

Week 2: Psychotherapy process

Dates: March 21-June 6, 2003
Time: Fridays, 8:30-9:45 a.m. (some Thursdays)
Location: Seminar Room of Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center
Cost: \$200 plus optional text
Registration Deadline: March 14, 2003

Instructor: J. Jeffrey Means, Ph.D., is Director of Clinical Services and Professional Education for the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center. He is a licensed clinical psychologist, pastoral counselor, and marriage and family therapist.

The Des Moines pastoral Counseling Center is an Iowa Board of Social Work Examiners approved provider #0087 and Iowa Board of Behavioral Science Examiners approved provider #AS98-13. This course is approved for 12.5 hours of continuing education credit.

For more information or to register, call (515) 274-4006.

New Board Members

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center welcomes seven new board members in 2003. They are:

Tim Diebel • Kyle Gamble
Larry Hartsook • Mark Haverland
Jane Knaack-Esbeck • Robert Mann
Ruth White

MANifest Events

Manifest Workshop: Men and Their Mothers

Date: Saturday, April 5, 2003
Time: 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
Location: Queen's Point, 2793 St. Charles Road, 6 miles west of St. Charles
Cost: \$50, includes lunch

Boys begin life very connected to a woman. They typically are nurtured, cared for, and supervised by women during elementary school years. Boys develop an internalized view of women from all these experiences which Sam Keen, author of *Fire in the Belly*, calls W-O-M-A-N. This internalized image may vary from Goddess (one to be worshipped) to Erotic Temptress (one to be desired). The workshop will explore these images and how they may affect our relationships with the women in our lives.

Manifest Weekend

Date: Friday-Sunday, May 2-4, 2003
Time: Begins Friday evening. Ends Sunday noon.
Location: Retreat center southeast of Winterset (2412 St. Charles Road.)
Cost: \$175 – includes lodging and 5 meals. If you register by April 17, cost is only \$150.

Men talk easily about work, sports, and politics, but there are few opportunities for men to talk about their journey as a man. Manifest weekends provide opportunity for this discussion. Men often grow up with a deficit of masculine nurture. Our culture fails to provide a rite of passage to manhood where older adult males offer younger men affirmation and official recognition as men. Manifest weekends seek to create a sense of community that addresses these issues. Retreats are held in a rustic, outdoor setting that provides a sense of connection with nature. Retreats are limited to 12 participants to provide optimal interaction.

Group size is limited to 20 participants for the workshop and 12 participants for the weekend. Reserve your place early by calling (515) 274-4006. Participants must pre-register. For more information about Manifest, call Lowell Houts or Mike Sears at (515) 274-4006, or visit the Manifest website at www.manifest.themenscenter.com.

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation

A will bequest is one of the simplest ways to remember family, friends, and charitable organizations. Bequests can be made in many ways including:

- A specified dollar amount
- A percentage of your estate
- The residue of your estate after all other bequests, debts, and taxes have been paid

For more information on bequests, talk to your attorney, tax professional, or investment professional, or visit the Leave a Legacy web site at www.leavealegacyiowa.com. To find out more about supporting the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation through a bequest or other type of planned gift, call Stephanie Kuhn at (515) 274-4006.

Connecting Available Through Email

Please let us know if you would like to receive this newsletter through email rather than having a paper copy sent to you. To be added to our newsletter email list, email skuhn@dmpcc.org and indicate in your message that you would like to receive *Connecting* by email. Make sure to include the name and street address to which we have been mailing the newsletter so that we can remove your name from our newsletter postal list.

www.dmpcc.org

Visit the Center's website for information on Center counseling services, Center staff members, support and interest groups offered by the Center, special events taking place in the coming months, and classes the Center offers to mental health clinicians and clergy.

CONNECTING

is a publication of the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center, an independent, interfaith, not-for-profit organization. For over 30 years, the Center has been providing counseling and educational services to individuals, couples, and families for the purpose of enhancing emotional, spiritual, and relationship health. The Center has satellite offices in West Des Moines, Altoona, Ankeny, and Urbandale.

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