

Respecting Other People's Wishes

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 8 September, 2003 - 13:06

This is a slightly modified version of a 17 May, 2000 Debate List post.

Sarah Fitz-Claridge (<http://www.fitz-claridge.com/>)

In discussions about **TCS**, people sometimes leap to the conclusion that TCS involves children being left to run riot in other people's houses, destroying family heirlooms and generally distressing everyone they come into contact with. Of course that is not TCS but permissive, uninvolved parenting. But for those who are unfamiliar with TCS, perhaps it is worth saying something about this again.

In such discussions, someone usually asserts that children must be forced to obey the rules of the house they are visiting:

The fact is that when I stay at someone's house, I defer to a reasonable extent to their rules and wishes

When I go to other people's houses, I try to abide by their wishes in respect of their property and so on. I try to make my visit add to their lives rather than detract from them. I try to be sensitive and (to the extent that I think they will want this) helpful in a non-intrusive way. I avoid violating their privacy, and I try not to 'outstay my welcome'. I do all this not because of any rules as such – I have never been told any rules by people I have visited, but perhaps I move in less militaristic circles than you? 8-) – but because I think that it is *right* and I want to do what is right. I think we all do. Including children.

Let's assume for the sake of argument that my theories above are true – that it is indeed right to respect other people's property and other rights in the way I do.

Of course children are not born with the knowledge of how to be sensitive to other people's wishes in this level of detail and subtlety. Nor are they born with the knowledge of consent-building human institutions like property rights. So one of the things parents should be doing is helping their children to create these forms of knowledge. I'd guess we are all in agreement so far. ? :-)

The question this raises, is how? How do children learn? They will undoubtedly want to learn these things, because they will want to do the right thing and they will not want to wrong people. They won't want to upset people whose houses they visit. Also, they will want their friendships to flourish, not flounder. So what can we do to help?

When you yourself don't have some deep and important knowledge you want, what helps you? For me, being thought ill-intentioned, being frowned at, having someone angry with me, and the other things non-TCS people appear to consider helpful, just aren't. Those things just distress me and make me unable to think. It is only through thinking that knowledge can be created, and while parents have successfully instilled particular *behaviours* through the same forms of behaviourist

conditioning used to get animals to jump through hoops, that is not the same as creating the knowledge. So one of the things TCS parents are always mindful of is the importance of remaining in a good state of mind, a state of mind in which one can think. This applies equally to parents and children. The TCS family members are all trying to help one another to stay in a good state of mind and solve problems. So what no one is doing is using coercion to impose his or her own will on anyone else. That is distressing and sabotages the thinking going on.

What TCS parents do then, to help their children learn the things they will want to know to live in our society, is to *talk* to them – have nice *conversations* with them – give them the benefit of their greater knowledge and experience not through exuding disapproval, much less hurting or confining them, but through conversation. These conversations contain moral content, to be sure, but the expression of the moral content is not through punitive interactions, but pleasant ones. The child *wants* to know what is right and what is wrong. The parents assumes that the child lacks knowledge rather than that the child is fundamentally evil and wanting to do wrong. This enables the child to *think* about the issues in question and to truly change – to drop old and mistaken theories and to create *through her own free will, whole-heartedly* new and better theories upon which to act.

If you think it is right to empathise with other people and to be sensitive to their feelings, the most counterproductive thing you can do is to lose empathy for your children. Think how it feels to you to be thought to be ill-intentioned by someone you love. It doesn't help, it makes you feel bad, and then you can't think. If your loved one thinks that you have made a mistake, even a moral one, then if they talk to you about it without exuding disapproval or being angry, but instead assuming that you were not ill-intentioned and will want to do the right thing, that makes all the difference in taking on board your loved ones criticisms, doesn't it?

And then of course, there is the issue of fallibility. We may well be able to all agree in broad terms about how to be sensitive to other people's feelings, respect property rights, and so on, but we are not infallible. Sometimes, in the details, we shall be mistaken. Sometimes we shall have misinterpreted a child's behaviour. Sometimes we'll just be plain mistaken and the child will have been right. Other times we'll both be wrong.

Being fallible *means* that we shall be mistaken sometimes and that there is no way of distinguishing between the occasions when we are right and the occasions when we aren't. All we can do is be alert for errors, be open to criticism, and take seriously any disagreement we may have with our children or other loved ones. It is partly because we might just be mistaken ourselves that it is so important not to dump anger on our loved ones. If you approach the person with a warm heart and an open mind, you are much more likely to be able to help if you are right, and not to wrong the person (by causing distress) if you are mistaken.

[to post comments](#)

Comments

Moral teachings?

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 9 January, 2004 - 08:00

I enjoy reading your take on teaching morals and respecting other people's wishes. Do you teach through example? What would be your example on guiding a child who is pursuing a married person?

[to post comments](#)

ya

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 15 May, 2004 - 21:40

it was so good, i loved it very much.

[to post comments](#)

Your article, and TCS,

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 2 June, 2006 - 22:17

Your article, and TCS, assumes that children are able to reason, or that they WANT to reason.

Very often, children are interested in satisfying something in themselves. Very often this is more tempting than reasoning or "doing the right thing".

TCS is flawed for that reason alone.

[to post comments](#)

I wanted to add:TCS seems

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 2 June, 2006 - 22:20

I wanted to add:

TCS seems to assume that children are rational beings, indeed, that human beings are rational beings. But the truth is that human beings are not JUST rational. They have many other desires, needs, passions that need to be satisfied. And operating at the rational level is not always going to work for that reason, *especially* with children, who very often cannot distinguish the difference.

[to post comments](#)

Acting to meet our own needs IS rational

Submitted by mammal_mama on 21 January, 2007 - 18:13

When children act to satisfy their own desires, needs, and passions -- they ARE being rational.

For example: people are born with a powerful need to explore the world, and one important way small children do this is by touching, tasting, and handling things, and making jolly big messes as often as they can.

When adults just say, "No, no!" and prohibit the messy explorations, THEY'RE the ones being irrational. A child in this situation, if s/he's determined enough, learns, "The only way I can meet my needs is to simply take whatever opportunity I can to make messes/take stuff apart, and do as much as I can before it gets taken away."

A child with less self-determination might just give up, but have anger s/he expresses in a variety of ways -- maybe even by hurting himself. And the child who has lots of self-determination will keep finding ways to explore, but may also be angry because of the constant disapproval and punishment, and that anger may exhibit itself in destructive behaviors (the "explorations" may take the form of intentionally ruining the parents' property).

All of the above are highly RATIONAL behaviors in response to the IRRATIONAL behaviors of adults who try to inhibit children, and make them feel guilty, when they're just endeavoring to learn in very developmentally appropriate ways. It's no mystery why Erik Erikson described one of our early inner conflicts as that of "autonomy vs. shame and guilt."

A rational response to exploratory behavior that's dangerous or destructive is to redirect the child to safe, non-destructive activity that meets the need the child is trying to fill.

For example, a toddler wanting to play with kitty litter can be redirected to sand, dirt, cornmeal, or even be given her own container of clean kitty litter if it's a non-toxic wheat-based variety. Toddlers also enjoy mixing and playing with their own playdough and helping knead bread dough.

A four-year-old wanting to smash pottery can take a spade (or use hir hand) and help you break up clumps of dirt in the garden (or do hir own projects in the dirt). S/he might also enjoy opportunities to build things with old boards using a hammer and nails (with the option of pulling hir buildings apart to rebuild new things as the urge takes hir). And you can invite hir to help with remodeling projects (ripping up old carpet and tiles, pulling old wallpaper off walls), s/he can help you rip up old clothes to make rags, and of course you should give hir hir own clay to work with.

When we assume our children's "inconvenient" behaviors are simply rational responses to important underlying needs, we can work with them to identify the needs and brainstorm about ways to meet the needs that also show respect and understanding for the needs of others.

Susan

to post comments

More articles

- [Housework Help For a Harried Mother](#)
- [Parental Aversions](#)
- [Positive Interpretations](#)
- ["Time Out" — Time Off or Serving Time?](#)
- [The Cognitive Capacity Argument](#)
- [Supporting a Child's Choice to Go to School](#)
- [Who Wouldn't Be 'School Phobic'?](#)
- [Unschooling and Academic Education 1](#)