

TCS Parenting Is Self-Improving

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 19 August, 2003 - 20:44

Alice Bachini

TCS parenting is what TCS parents aspire to and manage to pull off sometimes. In practice, TCS parenting is nothing more or less than *good* parenting. We are trying to do the best we can for our kids. We happen to think that doing the best we can does, potentially at least, happen not to involve coercing them, but other than that, we have few specific ideas about what's involved. And many of those we disagree about.

TCS parents emphatically do not claim to be the exclusive monopolisers of good parenting or never to do bad things themselves. They do not claim that “Never coerce!” is the secret of good parenting. Nor do they think that driving along fast motorways (freeways) with a load of unrestrained kids in the car, living on nothing but crisps (chips),

chips (fries),

Irn Bru (strange Scottish soft drink) and deep-fried Mars Bars (even stranger Scottish delicacy) followed by giving everybody in the household loaded guns is the path to parenting enlightenment. In fact, TCS parents do not all share the same ideas about what is right! There are vegan TCS families. There are Republican TCS families. There are TCS families who go to church and TCS families who don't believe in nuclear families at all. Human beings are individuals with different unique problem-sets, so it's not surprising we diverge on all sorts of moral issues which are relevant to parenting.

TCS does not pretend to set out a morally complete handbook on how to be a good parent. How can any parenting philosophy do that? It would have to include information on how rightly to live almost every single aspect of life once one has children, and would become out of date as soon as it was penned. There is no formula for good parenting. If anyone ever writes “How to be a moral parent”, the growth of knowledge will overtake their method before it hits the bookshop shelves. The best we can do is draw on each other's knowledge and ideas in useful ways, and continue to grow more of both. TCS does not tell us *how* to do what is right (although the articles [here](#) contain a few ideas!); but the point of TCS is to get on the road to finding out what it is, to be committed to going as far as we can on the journey. And to have some kind of vision to aim for and be inspired by; harmonious, fighting-free family life seems a valid part of that vision to us.

Doing what is right by your kids is not just different from *not doing what is wrong* by your kids: the second one is, on its own, impossible. You can't parent by avoiding wrongness (deliberate coercion being only one type of wrongness anyway). Parenting is a full-time active job. Kids need help, ideas, support, input and attention. Those things don't happen by not-ignoring or not-hurting: they are activities one must undertake to the best of one's ability. They need to be informed by detailed knowledge in their own particular spheres. You can't help a child find friends very easily if you've never spoken to another human being yourself, for example. You can't immediately teach knitting if you're phobic about wool (yarn). Yes, there are ways round, but finding them requires creativity, and many of us find creativity immensely difficult to develop. TCS parents are well aware that their abilities may be really very limited and damaged by their own

learning-errors, many of which were (largely mistakenly, and with the best of intentions) instilled in them by their own parents, and the worst of which is pessimism-related lack of creativity, or, the tendency to feel hopeless and give up.

So, TCS parents are notable not for not-coercing but for not *believing in* coercion (among other things),

even if they fail by their own lights and hurt their children's feelings occasionally, sometimes or often. They don't think that coercion is the thing that *in itself* helps, even if the only way they can think of at some time of ensuring safety or getting an urgent message across happens to *involve* coercing someone (e.g. for two seconds, while shoving them out of the path of a moving truck). And they believe that other ways can be found, and their explicit commitment to seeking out those other ways is what characterises their own desire to learn, to develop their creativity, to become better and better at problem-solving, so that their family relationships can develop in good ways rather than becoming stuck round learning-dead, perpetually repetitively coercive obstacles.

So, when I say "TCS is nothing more or less than good parenting", I do not mean "Never coerce = good parenting". What I mean is, the answer to the question "What do TCS parents consider to be good parenting?" should always be "Whatever our best theory tells us to be good!" Nine times out of ten, this is the same thing as what most non-TCS people consider good parenting. It is families getting on harmoniously together, doing good things, and not (in the eyes of the non-TCS) *requiring* the extreme measures of coercion in the first place. Good parenting results in families doing good, right things. TCS parents don't all agree on what is good: but at least TCS parents *try* (like many others) to work out what is good: we haven't given up learning about the world and how to parent. We know our own ignorance, and try to grow!

Not all TCS parents are good parents all day every day; sometimes we horribly mess up. But we don't call the resultant disaster/ coercion/ upset "a normal inevitable part of life", or use it to argue that "coercion is necessary" or argue that it was not bad but good. We say, "We messed up!" And then we make the effort to learn how not to make the same mistakes again. As parents, so we take responsibility for the family dynamic, rather than blaming our kids. We help our children find ways of solving their problems that don't involve antisocial extremes of behaviour. We are not perfect parents, but we try to be good parents. We do this by taking parenting seriously, having lofty ambitions and working steadily towards them. Talking to other TCS parents helps us. Talking to people who hit their kids, frankly, does not give us a whole load of ideas about what to do if the teenager murders the family cat, or whatever. Deep, real, lasting solutions are what we want, not temporary holding-mechanisms. Second best is not TCS.

In fact, it is a commonplace among those people some of us are fond of dissing who call themselves "child psychologists" that *bad* parenting is characterised by a *combination* of extreme coercion and extremes of neglect. Parents who hit their kids round the head one minute quite often don't seem to notice the next whether they are indoors reading Harry Potter or out till 2am robbing off-licenses. So it makes sense that TCS, our most advanced parenting philosophy so far, would have identified a combination of low/ non-existent coercion plus careful, sensitive, ongoing supportive close involvement, as the characteristics of good parenting.

But far, far more important than what TCS says at any one time is the fact that TCS is the only parenting philosophy that criticises itself. It is the only parenting philosophy explicitly all about learning, finding newer better ways of doing things, seeking truth and finding out what is morally good and what is not. We started out with the simple assertion that deliberately hurting your kids is bad for them; which means nothing other than *we can do better*. And the way to do better is to become better parents and better people, in our aims and intentions, and in the practical realities of what we do every day. TCS parenting is good parenting because we are determined that it will be: we are committed to good parenting over and above every single characteristic of what that is.

And when we find out how good parenting works, we expect that it won't include anything about deliberately hurting our kids. That's our best theory so far, and we're still waiting for someone else to better it.

to post comments

Comments

trucks, roads, kids

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 24 August, 2003 - 18:32

shoving people out of the ways of trucks is, barring very strange circumstances, or attempted suicide, NOT COERCIVE

- Elliot

to post comments

Being shoved can lead to a state of coercion in the shovee

Submitted by Alice Bachini on 24 August, 2003 - 21:13

Actually, whether or not this action leads to coercion depends on the mind and ideas of the individual being shoved. They may or may not experience coercion. If they do, the act is, rightly or wrongly, coercive. If they do not, then it is not coercive.

It is more helpful to consider whether acts are right or wrong, and whether individuals rightly or wrongly experience coercion as a result of those acts, than whether acts are inherently "coercive". In fact there is no such thing as inherent coerciveness, only greater or smaller probability of coercion being caused by a certain act, which may or may not be moral.

In the case of the truck, perhaps another factor hitherto unconsidered is the relationship between the shover and the shovee. For example, I might feel very frightened if a stranger rushed up in front of me, grabbed me and pulled me onto the floor, before I realised it was an act of rescue. Whereas if an intimate friend acted similarly, I might merely be puzzled and taken aback. The degree of trust and the precise nature of the expectations, including the moral expectations, attached to the detailed of the situation, all contribute to the probability or otherwise of coercion.

Another similar example: an old lady is suddenly pushed to the floor by an unseen person from behind. He could be saving her from a bullet, or mugging her. This happened to a relative of mine: she was being mugged, and she certainly did experience traumatic and severe coercion right as she hit the ground, despite the fact that she did not yet know that the unseen person was mugging her rather than saving her life.

to post comments

question

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 24 August, 2003 - 21:43

how do you know she was coerced *when she hit the ground* rather than when she figured out what was happening?

- Elliot

to post comments

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