

TCS Theory and Practice

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 22 July, 2003 - 08:28

Alice Bachini

TCS is an educational theory. It **asserts** that, “it is possible and desirable to raise children without intentionally coercing them.” But it doesn't say that such a thing is easily or immediately available to all parents who want to translate this theory into practice in their own homes. Wanting helps, but it needs to be the right kind of wanting, and it needs to be sustained with the right kind of critical input.

Many people are attracted to the idea of non-coercive parenting. Hurting our children hurts us too. Many parents do not at all want to feel obliged to hurt their children, and feel sad and depressed that “treating them like crap seems to be the only way to get them to behave decently”, (as I heard a parent say the other day). They don't understand why things are like that. They can't see why what appears to them to be their own reasonableness doesn't ‘work’, i.e., produce the results they want it to produce.

They don't realise that more good ideas *do exist out there*, some yet to be invented and others pre-tested but perhaps unconventional, and that, as parents, we can seek and create those ideas rather than giving up to compromise and misery. They don't realise that what seem to them good outcomes may actually be objectively undesirable, and that in failing to differentiate between truth and their own idea of it, they are ironically setting themselves up as infallible non-learning beings before the children they wish to see learn. In trying to contain the chaos they perceive their children as embodying, they surrender their confidence in the world, in problem-solving, in good *possibility*. Life becomes an uphill struggle with good bits, rather than a great and wonderful gift. Better to make a person your friend than to imprison and anger him, even for five minutes a day.

Parents are trapped in the conflicts of conventional parenting dynamics almost as badly as their children are. Surely all of us would take a magic pill tomorrow if it transformed us from being fallible flawed people with a mixture of good and bad ideas, to being parents with the power to transform ourselves and our offspring into moral reasoners so great and good that we nevermore came into conflict, caused damage to ourselves or others, or encountered any other painful obstacle to learning! Who would be crazy enough to reject that? Does TCS offer such a utopian Brave New World as the magic pill, if only we try hard enough?

It does not. TCS is just a theory asserting that coercion-free parenting is possible in principle. Where? How? For whom? Under what circumstances? It has some ideas about those things, but no mechanical answers. When? “Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but some *days*” is about the best we can do. Compared to other theories of parenting which (falsely) promise eternal stability and control, which advocate (false) mechanical solutions and (false) absolute moral rules, TCS can seem a bit, well – unsatisfactory. Nobody knows for sure where, how, for whom or under what circumstances: all they can advise is to start the search forthwith. Because, if it *is* possible to treat your children like real rational caring human beings, then it is also certain that hurting them instead will work against that, and against you and your family relationships into the bargain. And we can see the results of that everywhere we look.

The theory of knowledge is not science or mathematics; nor is moral philosophy. But where a controversy boils down to how good humans are *capable* of being, it makes practical sense to come down on the optimistic side. Those who think that TCS is wrong if it can't be demonstrated to 'work' in practice are missing the point: that practical TCS is nothing more than good parenting. Solving problems rationally characterises good parenting (and people), and command and control and punishment characterises the opposite, and this was true long before anyone invented such a thing as educational theory. To argue that there can never be such a thing as parenting and people so good that they don't ever resort actively to hurting *their own immediate family(!)* is rank pessimism. Wherever we are on the scale of moral evolution today, we can always go up a rung tomorrow. Unless we prefer to turn away from growth and start claiming there are no more rungs, of course.

to post comments

Comments

We all like the sound of non-...

Submitted by Pokemamma on 25 July, 2003 - 10:16

We all like the sound of non-coercive parenting, but let's be realistic, whether it's possible or not has got to depend on the kid. If your kids are little angels, sure, TCS is great, but if they're little devils, it would be damaging. It's a case by case basis, the parenting should fit the kid. If I'd heard about TCs when my first kid was young, I'd have thought great, this is for me, but when my son came along I was routed out of my illusions. Some kids are **difficult**, **angry**, and won't listen to reason. Maybe it's a gender thing, I don't know.

to post comments

Depends on the Kid?

Submitted by Elliot Temple on 25 July, 2003 - 18:33

There is a method of parenting, for every child, under which he will act like a 'little angel' and will not be coerced. TCS does not claim the method is exactly the same for all children, but does say it exists. Given that it exists, for anyone who's learned of TCS, **intentional** coercion is always a form of intentional failure -- it's known to be the wrong answer but chosen anyhow.

-- Elliot Temple <http://curi.blogspot.com/> (<http://curi.blogspot.com/>).

to post comments

terrors

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 24 August, 2003 - 07:20

It is the terrors who need TCS the most. Or should I say their parents. Some kids seem to not respond to Anything. These same kids respond beautifully to TCS. I think it is the fear of the terror that makes it hard to use TCS on them. It is the fear of not having control, (which we all know with a terror we don't have anyway). But we find it hard to deliberately give that up and trust the terror. Try it. It works.

to post comments

Angels

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 24 August, 2003 - 21:59

There is a method of parenting, for every child, under which he will act like a 'little angel' and will not be coerced.

I don't think there is. Kids do things that are inconvenient for their parents sometimes, and they are often right to do so. A perfect little angel doesn't want an xbox when it is hard to afford -- but a real kid is likely to, and it's likely that they're right to.

Life is hard, and complicated. No method is going to make that go away.

to post comments

For those who think they have it licked

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 3 October, 2004 - 08:34

What if you have a naturally coercive *kid*?

I keep reading all these little vignettes and thinking "Okay. I recognize this problem" Yes, I *like* that parental-response"

"Erm. No. My child categorically *never* responds in anything that even *remotely* resembles the sample child-response there."

Now I *think* I've been attempting non-coercive parenting since my eldest was born.

I have failed *a lot*. I still fail constantly.

Interestingly... Non-coercive parenting has *always* worked very well with my second child.

So I have become schizo-mom who tries to have Rational Conversations with one child whilst simultaneously trying to do something, *anything*, to prevent utter mayhem by the other.

It's not working well.

I wouldn't say I've given up on the *idea* of being able to coexist non-coercively. It's just that the individual instances of failure to *find* an acceptable solution are really beginning to wear on me after years of trying.

I feel like I have *some* objective evidence for my ability to find good solutions (and increasingly, to negotiate toward them and even get solutions *from* a child,) but I also have this Other Kind of experience which seems to

tell me I'm still a crappy mother.

I still end up yelling, ranting, lecturing, threatening... In short, barring hitting, I do **all** of those things which I loathe because I **repeatedly** hit these brick walls.

I also end up playing the martyr because sacrificing self to the greater cause of family peace is the only way to **get** any family peace sometimes.

How the hell am I supposed to **FIX** this when one person does NOT negotiate? Our ability to formulate great ideas and compromises is excellent when there is calm but once upset, all good intentions vanish and no powers of reason left. The only thing to do is await the passing of the storm and pick up the pieces or to YELL loud enough to create from shock a temporary silence, into which some other guidance may be inserted. That has about a 50/50 success rate in terms of resolving the immediate issue, but it a 100% failure in parenting, IMO.

I'm just stuck, here.

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the fundamental thing

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 27 October, 2004 - 10:20

surely the fundamental thing to all parenting, is that the child is fully aware, that they are indispensable, wanted, liked and above all loved. As a child myself I was made to do lots of things I didn't want to and my creativeness was definitely suppressed to a place I feel it difficult to get at now! However growing up and realizing now that my Mum was really doing the best she could and knowing that she really likes me, needs me and enjoys my company, leaves me with only sadness over our situation then. She was basically entirely coercive, (although never cruel), but she thought she was doing the right thing to make our lives their best as adults. Her motive to me is the most important thing, and hers was for our good. As far as I can see, all parents on this site are here for the intent purpose of doing the best they can for their children and that is going to be blatantly obvious to their children, however many mistakes they make. As for myself I don't fully believe that absolute non coercion is possible, in that children naturally look for the opinion and example of their parents as a priority; and that they will voluntarily be coerced in this way. Also my son has diabetes and in certain areas I do not have the luxury of non coercion, we had to hold him down and hurt him with injections at 3 1/2 or he would have died. And now at 7 everytime I tell him it's time to do his blood test he says no for the sheer tedium of it, but I still have to coerce him to do it. It has made me think about the other aspects of coercion, and if we truly believe absolute non coercion, can we still have absolutes of justice and right and wrong? Because if we haven't the right to make anyone do what we want, can my children feel secure, that, if someone is ready to push them into a busy road I won't stop them. Who's freedom of choice do I choose, that person's or my children's? Where is the line drawn. Well I've completely let my thoughts run away with my fingers! Better stop now.

From a 'thinking about everything a lot at the moment' Mum.

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I like the focus on possibilities and improvements

Submitted by mammal_mama on 8 January, 2007 - 16:01

Ms. Bachini's post is uplifting because of the focus AWAY from kicking ourselves as failures if we end up coercing sometimes.

Her focus on our need to remain open to learning a better way -- even if we feel all tangled up in our past and don't know how to fully implement it yet -- is like a burst of hope to keep us from wilting under disappointment in ourselves.

In the post about "what TCS is and what it isn't," I read that coercion is always harmful but it's not always immoral, that sometimes coercion is our only moral recourse (i.e. if our child's harming/coercing someone else, we'd be wrong to stand by and just try to persuade our child to stop and let the harm continue until the child's ready to stop: we need to take immediate action).

I also read that TCS isn't a command to never coerce. So I don't need to feel I'm a failure if, say, a toddler's pulling my hair and the only way to get her to stop is to pry her fingers loose.

If, as a parent, I find myself in a situation where coercion seems the only recourse to preventing someone from being wronged -- later I reflect and ask myself: WAS there anything else I could have done? and, how can I prevent this from happening in the future?

If my child's old enough to talk with me, we can brainstorm together about why it happened and make a plan together.

Susan

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