

Being "In Control" – The Possible and Impossible in Parenting

Parents are expected to stay "in control" of their lives, their children, and themselves. Some major parts of this expectation are impossible to fulfill! But because there is no way to learn parenting skills and truths ahead of time, we parents struggle and worry when we don't seem to be "in control," or when being "in control" means being harsh with our children. Let's first outline the things no parent can fully control.

- **We don't have full control over our lives.** Hard things can happen to us and to our children, and societal oppressions can force us into inhuman circumstances. There are things we can do to try to keep our families healthy, but we don't have full control there. There are things we can do to be able to pay our bills, but job security and earning worthy wages for working class jobs are not things we alone have the power to determine. We work at building good relationships, but many of us don't begin with the tools, support, information, or time to solve critical relationship problems. We are also up against racism, drugs, violence, and harshness on the schoolyards and the streets. By ourselves, we and our children are vulnerable to hurt and unforeseen difficulties. To blame ourselves for lack of control makes no sense. The influence we can have when we face these oppression-based or health-based hard times lies in our ability to organize with others to do what's necessary, **WITH LOTS OF HELP.**
- **We don't have control over our children's behavior.** We do have deep influence on them. How we love, cherish, and treat our children affects them moment by moment, and for the rest of their lives. But our influence doesn't mean that we can exert control over how they behave and feel. Nor does it mean that a child whose behavior is difficult comes from a parent who is not trying hard enough, or is not doing the right things. Our children are subject to difficulties because of circumstances beyond our control--their health, accidents, unforeseen encounters with people who don't care for them well, enormous stress on us, frightening incidents that couldn't be anticipated. When children are hurt by these kinds of circumstances, their behavior does reflect their fears, and they may be perceived as "difficult." But this is not the parents' fault! What's more, **this "off track" behavior is a necessary signal** that the child gives that she's been wounded and needs attention. As difficult as their behavior may be, we parents can be grateful that our children refuse to suffer silently when they feel too isolated or frightened or angry to think.
- **In the short run, we sometimes don't have control over our own behavior.** It's one of the great shocks of parenting to find ourselves yelling at or

hurting our beloved children, when we never ever intended to do so. There are things they do that drive us nuts--whining, making messes, fighting with each other, using street language, "talking back" when we're trying to gain control. We each have our personal thresholds, past which lose power over our own behavior. Usually, we become very like our own parents when they were lost in reaction.

- **Finally, we don't have full control over how other people feel about us or our children.** We parents try hard to get our children to meet some unwritten standard of conformity, hoping that if they "act right," people will like them. In fact, we live in a society in which grownups are taught to see children as "trouble," "a problem," "extra work," "in the way," and more. This training is widespread, and no matter how fully a child may conform, those attitudes lie under the surface in many people, waiting to be triggered. We as parents need to decide, on our children's behalf, not to attack our children to please grownups who only accept children if they act like little adults. Even a child's best behavior can't cure that kind of hostile attitude. So if your child is having a healthy tantrum in front of a relative who is loudly demanding that you be harsh to her, you can simply move to a back bedroom to handle the situation, taking the time you need. Being harsh to your child on someone else's demand won't help your self-respect, it won't change that grownup's bias against your child, and it sets you against the child you love dearly.

The Goal of Being a Learner

I think goals that we parents can reasonably set for ourselves are:

- To enjoy our children
- To learn something every day
- To treat ourselves and our children like learners.

Deciding to be a learner can help take the internal pressure off of us, and off of our children. Learners have permission to make lots of mistakes, learners get to ask for help, learners often don't know what to do or how things work. Best of all, learners get to laugh (or cry) when their project turns upside down and flops in front of everyone. We understand. This is learning.

If we are learning, then we know how to be in charge of some things, and we are figuring all the rest of it out in a sometimes messy, haphazard way. As parents, some "I'm learning, not controlling" strategies can be immensely helpful.

- **Actively notice what's fun, what's good, what is working well.** Our minds get so fixed on the tasks at hand that we lose sight of who we like, what goes well, and the little things we learn. It may help to put a list on the

refrigerator or the bathroom mirror, where a few words of what was good each day can be written down for all to see. Some families start dinner with a round of "what was good today?" so that the children get to join in, and have the chance to have the whole family listen to their experience.

- **Welcome your children's feelings.** Feelings are a big part of children's lives, and expressing these feelings is how children recover from the hard things, big and small, that happen to them. Crying, tantrums, and laughter all are deeply healing for children. Expressing these emotions at length gets rid of children's feelings that their lives aren't good enough. When they're finished, they regain their sense of loving and being loved. It helps if you can get close and listen to them through the stormy upsets, but if you can't, see if it's possible to keep from criticizing, shaming, hurting, or blaming them while they get the sad or the mad feelings out.
- **Find a listener for your own feelings.** We mothers and fathers have lots of feelings, too, which we have been taught to tuck away as if they didn't exist. Matter of fact, tucking away feelings is equated to being "in control" of our lives! The problem is that feelings don't tuck well forever. Our worries, our frustrations, our angers mount, we spend more and more effort tucking them away, and finally, they burst out when some small thing goes wrong. Often, they burst out at our children in ways we regret later. Finding another parent and setting up listening time over the phone or after the children are asleep can help relieve the burden that our feelings create. A good laugh, a good cry, a good rant about how many expectations we're trying to meet can do a lot to lighten our step and help us remember that we are good, no matter how many mistakes we make or how many answers we don't have at the moment.
- **Notice what you can't figure out, and talk to others about it.** There are probably 50 things a day that happen in a parents' life that he or she doesn't understand! Why won't your child willingly brush her teeth? Why is she scared of the dark? Why does your pre-teen suddenly think you're the dorkiest person he ever knew? Being open about what we don't know is an excellent learning strategy. It makes us active seekers of information and understanding. And it's also fine to be open with our children when we don't know what to do. "I don't know what to do about you refusing to help around the house. I'm thinking about it. Can we talk about it tomorrow, after I've called a couple of people to see if they have any good ideas?" is a fine approach to a problem with a child.
- **Organize help.** We are trained to believe that asking for help is admitting weakness. However, there are many kinds of work which are not designed for one person to do alone. Building bridges, operating a supermarket,

providing intensive care nursing, and raising children are the kinds of work that can be done well only with several people organized to work toward a common purpose. When we gave birth to our children, most of us had no idea that organizing help was part of a parents' job description. We learn this, usually, by getting burned out trying to do it all ourselves, then feeling badly that we've had to "stoop" to asking for help. But any experienced parent can reassure you that every parent needs time away from their children, every parent needs others to care about their children, every parent needs people to think and talk with about the details of life with children. Every parent needs help!

- **Throw expectations overboard.** When you're working too hard to appreciate yourself or anyone else, throw an expectation overboard. Let the house be a mess for a couple of weeks or months or years, or don't worry about serving hot meals, or let the relatives be grumpy because you decided not to visit this month, or sleep during your lunch break, even though people at work will talk. You get to decide what's really necessary and what's not, and keeping up appearances while parenting is often a joy-killer. You have permission to let things get ragged, and still be proud of yourself, your family, and your decisions.
- **Set up play that includes laughter.** Children love to laugh, and when we are willing to play with them so they can laugh (without tickling them!), they become buoyant and hopeful. It's infectious. We see them wriggling with enjoyment, coming toward us for fun and lots of contact, and we can't help but be pleased. Our empty cup meant for hope begins to fill again. We have lots to learn from children about how a really good life has time for play, wrestling, chasing, where the grownups may "lose," but everyone wins back their sense that it's good to be alive.
- **When you're at your wits' end, lie down on the floor for awhile.** When we're frazzled, the things we do aren't usually very successful. Our children's tensions and our tensions make a knot that keeps tangling tighter. At times like these, if we "give up" for 10 or 15 minutes, and lie down on the floor, it provides enough of a contrast to the previous tense situation that we and our children can take a fresh start with each other. Sometimes we can give ourselves permission to cry, which helps release tension. Sometimes, our children come around and decide they want to be close. They sit on our tummies, or crawl under our legs, or start jumping over us for fun. Having given up the effort to be in control, we can begin to pay attention to how things are, rather than the way we want them to be. Without the effort to stay in control, it's often more possible to make workable decisions, and to like the children we have again.

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