



PARENTING FOR MORAL GROWTH

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES FOR INDEPENDENT SCHOOL PARENTS

In This Issue

“Exploring Discipline: An Interview with Barbara Coloroso”

page 1

Honor Systems

page 1

Book Review: *The Parents We Mean to Be*

page 2

Two Truths for Guiding Home and Classroom Discipline

by Marilyn Watson

page 5

Steps Before Punishment

page 6

Punish? Rescue? Discipline? Advice for Parents from Barbara Coloroso

Barbara Coloroso is an internationally recognized author and speaker who has investigated a broad range of topics, such as parenting styles, positive school climate, non-violent conflict resolution, grieving, and the roots of genocide. Her books include *Parenting through Crisis*, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, and *Extraordinary Evil: A Short Walk to Genocide*. Her most recent title, *Just because it's not wrong doesn't make it right: From toddlers to teens, teaching kids to think and act ethically*, was reviewed in the spring 2008 edition of *Parenting for Moral Growth*. Ms. Coloroso, a former Franciscan

nun, has worked as a classroom teacher, a special educator, and a university instructor. She raised her three children in Littleton, Colorado, where they attended a high school across town from Columbine High, scene of a tragic school shooting in April, 1999. She urges parents to carefully examine their parenting philosophy and to understand the connection between certain parenting practices and predictable outcomes.

One of the central themes of Ms. Coloroso's advice to parents is to distinguish between discipline and punishment. She points out that

continues on next page

Honor Systems

Transforming Students' Lives and School Communities

“Hello, Mrs. Stevens, I just wanted you to know why Matt will be spending recess in my office this week...”

Parents of elementary school students often receive (even expect) such calls from classroom teachers or counselors to explain disciplinary consequences for their child's misbehavior. Not so routine and potentially much more upsetting for parents is the call informing them that their middle or high-school aged son or daughter is suspected of cheating, stealing, lying, or otherwise violating their school's honor code,

continues on page 6

Book Review

For Parents, For Sure— But Not Just for Parents' Eyes Only

Review by Mike Pardee

Despite its fairly niche-oriented, laser-like book title, Harvard psychologist Richard Weissbourd's *The Parents We Mean to Be* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009) isn't just for parents' eyes only. Rather, its subtitle aptly points toward a broader relevant audience for his important insights about *How Well-Intentioned Adults Undermine Children's Moral and Emotional Development*. There is as much here for educators as parents, in other words. We all have a stake—as well as crucial, complementary roles to play—in facilitating our children's ethical and social-emotional development.

Professor Weissbourd offers here a common-sense, research-based analysis of the policies, priorities, and practices of parents and teachers most—or least—conducive to nurturing our children's character and moral development. He understands the pressures that "the achievement craze" places on kids, their teachers and parents. And he documents how our culture's fetishizing of happiness often deprives both children and adults of the opportunity to learn from adversity, develop resilience, etc. Weissbourd's study is based on field research in representative schools. It is also well-written, and eminently accessible to even lay readers. It is an important new contribution to a burgeoning field. Wendy Mogel's *The Blessings of a Skinned Knee* was one of the seminal contributions to this literature. Weissbourd's *The Parents We Mean to Be* is likely

continues on next page

"Coloroso" continued

punishment is imposed on a child by a powerful external authority. As such, punishment often arouses resentment, or the fear of making mistakes. In response to a punitive environment, kids lash out, hide their misdeeds, or, if they can, remove themselves altogether, which Ms. Coloroso labels as the 3 F's: fight back, fear, or flee. Conversely, says Ms. Coloroso, "Discipline begins with an ethic of deep caring. The Latin roots of the word 'discipline' reveal that its original meaning had to do with giving life to a child's learning. Discipline achieves four ends: it shows kids what they've done wrong, it gives them ownership of the problem, it gives them ways to solve the problem, and, probably most importantly, it leaves the child's dignity intact. It also leaves the parent's dignity intact, because the parent isn't yelling, threatening or the like."

Often messages from the popular culture mistakenly equate punishment and justice. But Coloroso explains that because punishment is frequently judgmental, arbitrary, confusing, or coercive, it can be counterproductive to helping children develop into ethical adults. Furthermore, she points out that punishment does not result in justice. She notes that justice has to do with "righting the wrong and promoting healing, which is necessary when a child's actions,

intentionally or unintentionally, have resulted in serious problems of great consequence. In restorative justice, you must do three things: fix what you did (restitution); figure out how to keep it from happening again, not only by saying, 'I'm not going to do this again,' but by asking 'What will I do next time instead?' (resolution); and determine how to heal with the person or people you've harmed (reconciliation). Children as young as five want to and can go through the process of restitution, resolution and reconciliation."

Pressured by the sense that they need to protect their children at all costs, parents sometimes vacillate between punishing and rescuing them. Either response might address problems in the short-term, but fails to build a child's good character over time. Says Ms. Coloroso, "Punishment and rescuing are time efficient, but parenting is not an efficient profession. It's a life-long vocation. You're in it for the long haul, and you have to be willing to take the time to discipline. Your goal is to raise children who have self-discipline, so their behavior doesn't depend on whether or not there is someone around to monitor them. They do the right thing because it's the right thing to do, not that they don't do the wrong thing because they're going to get caught. Punishment shifts the emphasis to avoiding getting caught, while discipline is about internalizing

continues on next page

Book Review continued

to become a similarly well-thumbed staple of the genre.

Dr. Weissbourd is a child and family psychologist on the faculty of Harvard's School of Education and Kennedy School of Government. He is a widely-published author who writes with clarity as well as humor. The book is leavened with illustrative anecdotes and incisive, witty observations (like this one from the first paragraph of chapter one): "Pickup basketball provides all sorts of opportunities to shine or regress morally. It is sometimes difficult in these games to distinguish, in fact, disturbed behavior from normal forms of male competitive idiocy."

Weissbourd's main message is that parents, of course, are our children's primary moral mentors. Yet even our best intentions to nurture our children's happiness and ensure their success can go awry. He cautions us to attend as much to our own—lifelong—moral development as we do to our children's. We are their moral mentors and role models in all sorts of ways. But facilitating their ongoing moral and social-emotional maturation requires us parents to walk the walk we talk—to practice what we preach, as well.

The Parents We Mean to Be includes chapters on morally mature sports parenting, promoting happiness and morality, helping children manage destructive emotions, child-rearing similarities and differences among various ethnic cultures, as well as cultivating moral idealism in our youth. At just over 200 pages, however, the book covers all this ground concisely. Readers who appreciate or profit from publications like *Parenting for Moral Growth* are bound to find plenty that appeals to them in *The Parents We Mean to Be*, too. ■

Mike Pardee is the Character Education Coordinator at Kinkaid School, in Houston, Texas.

"Coloroso" continued

what is right, with the help of adult guidance and wisdom."

Noting that ours is a fearful culture and that fear, punishment and violence often go hand in hand, Ms. Coloroso urges parents to look critically at their own world view. She emphasizes that "if we as parents view the world from a perspective of discipline, then we are very hopeful. We know there's a lot of work to be done; it's not as if we're naive. But this will translate into our children understanding that we're all in this world together, as a community, and that we are all intimately connected." She recalls the circumstances of native communities in which small groups of people were bound not only by family ties but by the necessity of acting together for the benefit of all within a natural world that was sometimes truly scary and hostile. Ms. Coloroso points out that "in native tradition, you couldn't just leave the perpetrator of a crime against the community on an ice floe...you had to continue to allow that individual to live with others. Restorative justice was an integral part of their lives."

Ms. Coloroso believes that independent schools have the opportunity to create powerful partnerships in which parents and school staff support the moral growth of children, but she cautions that doing so requires an investment of time as well as the

willingness to take risks and be vulnerable. "Everyone can come up with wonderful ideas – the faculty, the parents, the school board – but to implement those ideas, we must have the creativity and force of will to say, 'This is going to take time,' just as discipline takes more time than punishment. To create a supportive school climate, your mindset and philosophy must be one of deep caring, you must choose to discipline instead of punish, you emphasize sharing and helping, and you are strong academically. Then, you can resist the negatives of the broader culture." ■

“Ms. Coloroso urges parents to look critically at their own world view,”

Julie Stevens is a parent and former school psychologist. She serves on CSEE's Moral Development Team.

Parenting for Moral Growth

is a free publication for parents of CSEE member schools.

PMG is edited by CSEE Trustee Julie Stevens.
Layout is by Jenny Aanderud.

Contributions and comments are welcome.

Please send to <info@csee.org>

The Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education
800.298.4599
www.csee.org

TWO TRUTHS FOR GUIDING HOME AND CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE

by Marilyn Watson

Discipline, an essential part of parenting and teaching, is often seen as a somewhat unpleasant process of controlling children's behavior so that family or classroom life can get back to more pleasant times and more productive purposes.

Good discipline is not easy, but poor discipline can be disastrous: parents and children become alienated from one another, student learning is limited, enjoyment of school is diminished, and teachers are driven out of their profession. I would like to describe two truths that can guide disciplinary actions to be more effective and more positive. I begin with a disciplinary incident that, as clearly as I can recall, caused me to begin rethinking my approach to discipline.

Homework assignments began for my son when he was in the second grade, but somehow he never seemed to get around to doing them. I explained to Sean that his homework was important and that he needed to do it. But Sean didn't do it. Having failed with explanation, I moved to power assertion. I removed the privilege of going outside to play unless Sean had completed his homework. Sean sat miserably in his room for days before it dawned on me that perhaps my assumptions about why he was not doing his homework were wrong. It made no sense that Sean would willfully risk his parents' displeasure and forego the pleasure of outside play over homework.

I had assumed that Sean was lazy and just didn't want to do his homework. I thought I could change his behavior by attaching a consequence to his not doing his homework. Both assumptions were wrong.

This incident led me to rethink both the goal of discipline and my beliefs about children—their needs, motives, and abilities. That rethinking turned into a lifetime of study.

The Goal of discipline: to develop the skills, understandings, and personal desire to be kind, fair, responsible, and wise

Initially, I was focused on changing my child's behavior. But what I really wanted was for my child to see his homework as important and to value personal responsibility. The goal of discipline is not to simply change behavior; it is to help our children understand the effects of their behavior on themselves and others, and to learn to guide their own behavior in ways that are kind, fair, responsible and wise. To achieve this goal we need to focus on changing our children's understanding and feelings. Using a consequence to get them to change their behavior is not only unpleasant for both parties; it is more likely to lead children to focus on the immediate consequences for themselves

rather than on the harm they have caused others (Hoffman, 2000). And it is more likely to cause resentment in children, especially in the classroom where teachers have relatively little time to build positive relationships with their students.

However, helping our children understand the morality or wisdom of their actions is not enough. Even when they want to behave well, children often fail to do so because they are lacking needed social and emotional skills. For example, children need to learn to manage their emotions, understand the feelings of others, and negotiate fairly. Analyzing our children's misbehavior in order to identify missing social or emotional skills and addressing those skills is a powerful way to enable children to change their behavior. And it does so in a way that is empowering to the child as well as to the teacher or parent.

This truth about discipline makes discipline more about teaching and less about power, even though power will often be involved. Because children are not fully developed, we often need to control their behavior while we engage in this teaching. But if we focus our efforts on teaching, trusting that our children will take our lessons to heart, even if they don't immediately show it, we and our children will find that discipline encounters leave us with feelings that are positive and hopeful rather than negative or resentful. But is this realistic? Can we really trust that our children will take our teaching to heart if we don't accompany our teaching with punishment?

Children can be trusted

In my earlier thinking, I was not only wrong about the goal of discipline, I was wrong about what children are really like—their motivations, needs, and abilities. I held the view that children were primarily motivated by self-interest and that they could behave well if they

continues on next page

Watson continued

just wanted to. This was not a carefully considered view on my part: it was just the predominant view in our society. However, it's wrong. An enormous and growing body of research by developmental and social psychologists has documented that children are born with much more than a tendency to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Children possess inbuilt tendencies to seek caring relationships with their caregivers, empathize and care about others, cooperate, learn and master the tasks valued by their community, and grow toward independence and self-guidance (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hoffman, 2000; Stroufe, 1996). Children, like all of us, are self-interested and their immediate self-interest will at times override their predisposition to be cooperative or empathic or even to consider their own long term self interest. But that is where our guidance and teaching come in.

For many reasons there will be times when our guidance and teaching will be insufficient to gain willing compliance. In the family, such struggles will be more frequent as our children enter adolescence—a time when their developing need for independence is strongly felt. At such times, our past teaching and the strong bonds we have built in earlier years will help keep our children's hearts open to hearing us. Even in their push for independence they will be open to compromise, to looking for mutually acceptable ways to approach the inevitable disagreements that will arise with their growing need for independence.

In the classroom such struggles will be most frequent with students who do not trust us. Most students will enter our classrooms trusting that we care about them and generally predisposed to be cooperative.

However, for a wide variety of reasons, some of our students will be focused on doing battle with us. These are usually children with the toughest life circumstances. While these students will need the same teaching and guidance as more trusting students, they will be less open to that teaching. These students will seem to respond only to the threat of punishment or the promise of reward. But these are the students who need our teaching the most! With these students, our only hope is to maintain acceptable behavior through power assertion while simultaneously working to build a trusting relationship. This is no easy task, especially if students have a history of untrusting relationships with adults. But working to build a trusting relationship with such students is a more uplifting experience than simply working to control them. It may help our resolve to remember that the resiliency research has demonstrated that fifty to seventy percent of children living in difficult circumstances will overcome them if they have the help of just one caring adult (Benard, 1993).

If we view children as primarily self-interested, then it might make sense to try to change their behavior by appealing to their self-interest—promising rewards for good behavior or providing consequences for bad. Rewards and punishments often seem to work because children, like the rest of us, are self-interested. But, like the rest of us, children are not just self-interested: they are predisposed to be empathic and cooperative. However, their empathic and cooperative tendencies need to be nurtured and their social and emotional competencies need to be developed. Controlling behavior through rewards and punishments is unlikely to nurture empathy for others and it is unlikely to improve an understanding of the

intrinsic reasons for being kind, fair, and responsible. Rewards and punishments do little to support our children's ability to ethically guide their own behavior. Rather, they are more likely to lead our children to behave in ways that they think will avoid punishment or gain personal reward. Such a behavioral control system, whether in children, politicians, or executives of major companies, is likely to result in choosing behaviors for self-benefit, even if those behaviors harm others, as long as one believes one can avoid punishment. ■

References

- Benard, B. (November, 1993). Fostering resiliency in kids. In *Education Leadership*, 44-48.
- Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Hoffman, M.L. (2000). *Empathy and moral development: implications for caring and justice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stroufe, L. A. (1996). *Emotional Development: The organization of emotional life in the early years*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Marilyn Watson, Ph.D., is the co-author of Learning to Trust: Transforming difficult elementary classrooms (Wiley, 2003), and author of Discipline for Moral Growth (CSEE, 2007). She is a member of CSEE's Advisory Board on Moral Education.

Honor Systems

continued from page 1

resulting in an appearance before the honor council.

For the past twelve years, John Roberts has been the faculty advisor to the honor council at The Westminster Schools in Atlanta, Georgia. In that role, he has modeled for scores of students the ethic of deep caring to which Barbara Coloroso refers. He can also attest to the truth of Ms. Coloroso's insight that discipline, as opposed to punishment, requires much more time and effort. Finally, as co-author with David Gould of *A Handbook for Developing and Sustaining Honor Systems*, and as a CSEE workshop facilitator and consultant to over 130 independent schools, Dr. Roberts is uniquely qualified to affirm the power of student-guided restorative justice in fostering a moral school community.

He notes, "From my 'honor code' perspective, parents and schools ought to be natural allies, for a simple reason—we can teach the structure of DNA or the history of the English Restoration without any input from home, but we cannot teach integrity by ourselves, because parents still have far, far more impact on a child's character development than we (at school) do." Still, while parents might agree that expecting a high level of integrity is good for kids in general, such support is tested when an honor council case results in a serious sanction for a specific student and his or her family.

Under such extreme circumstances as the honor council recommending that a student be asked to leave the school, parents could be hard pressed to view such an action as ultimately

compassionate and character-building. But Dr. Roberts tells of just such an outcome, involving "Jordan," one of his advisory students, who after his third visit to the Honor Council in one year was sent packing: "A few years later, while facilitating a CSEE honor conference at the 'Acme' School in Florida, the dean sought me out to ask if I knew a certain boy, saying he thought this young man had come to Acme from Westminster. It was Jordan. The dean suspected I might be interested to know that Jordan was about to receive the school's award as Outstanding Senior."

Parents might also be skeptical because through honor councils, their child's peers assume responsibility for shaping disciplinary consequences that were traditionally formulated by adults alone. Dr. Roberts points out that a fundamental premise embodied in honor councils "is that students must take ownership of integrity, so 'don't cheat' becomes a community principle subscribed to by kids and not just by adults. It follows logically that there can and should be a confidential role for students to play in passing that moral baton. Further, there's the very practical consideration that teenagers are more likely to listen to each other than to adult authority figures!"

Additionally, those students who early on in their high school experience might face an honor conviction often have the opportunity later as juniors or seniors to serve on the other side of the process, as members of the Honor Council. Dr. Roberts tells of such a student, who wrote in her college admissions essay that being held responsible by her peers for inappropriate behavior had turned her life around, and she welcomed the opportunity later to help fellow students get back on track.

Finally, research is unambiguous in revealing that moral agency is fostered when young people wrestle with and formulate moral decisions in ways that are authentic, directly participatory, and carefully guided by skilled adults. Honor councils, for all the energy, time, and just plain messiness they can involve, fill the bill. ■

Steps Before Punishment

The most effective disciplinarians rarely use punishment. If our goal is to teach children to control their own behaviors and to be sensitive to those around them, a variety of other approaches can be tried first:

- Reminders
Sometimes children have truly forgotten rules, or are unaware that what they are doing could harm someone else. In these cases, a simple reminder often works.
- Guidance
Children, especially young children, do not have the same behavioral repertoires as adults. Sometimes they know only one or two ways to react. Our guidance in other ways to act and react can be helpful.
- Explanations
Some children understand the rules, but not the reasons for the rules. If such is the case, knowing reasons—why some behaviors are harmful, or impolite—can often help them be more willing to observe rules for behavior.
- Requesting Reparation
When a child has damaged something that belongs to another, or has hurt the other's feelings, a request or suggestion for reparation, especially when used with one of the above, is often all that is needed to improve later behaviors.