

THE PARENTING PYRAMID™

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Parents weren't meant to spend most of their time correcting their children. How do we help things go right, instead of react when things go wrong?

“What?!!”

I had just gotten home from work on a Friday night and noticed that my two sons weren't around. They were fourteen and eleven at the time and were usually home on Friday nights. Curious, I asked my wife where they were. “They went over to the pool hall to play pool,” she said casually, as if announcing a baseball score or telling me the time.

“What?!!” I exclaimed. My children off playing pool in some grimy den of iniquity with who knows who? Didn't they know what kind of atmosphere pervades those places? How could my children want to do this?

I was dumbfounded. I knew exactly what this pool hall must be like: kids smoking, hard rock music blaring, girls hanging on boys, boys hanging on girls, kids placing bets with other kids, dark lighting . . . it was Pleasure Island all over again, and my boys were over there turning themselves into vile, cigar-smoking donkeys.

I knew I had two choices. I could either go get my boys immediately and bring them home, making absolutely clear to them along the way that their behavior was totally unacceptable and would not be tolerated. Or I could do the patient thing and wait for them to come home . . . and *then* make absolutely clear to them that their behavior was totally unacceptable and would not be tolerated. Whichever I chose I was sure they wouldn't like the decision. I knew I could make them obey, but I knew they wouldn't be happy. They would likely complain and argue . . . but, hey, what does it mean to be a parent if not that you have to put up with some adolescent complaining from time to time?

Well, I chose the second alternative. I decided to do the patient thing. This was a fortunate choice, because it gave me time to think. By the time they came home, I had discovered a new alternative altogether: I said nothing to them. Instead I said something to my wife. I asked her to cancel all Friday night commitments for the next month. I couldn't go to any wedding receptions, I told her. I couldn't go to any Cub Scout meetings and I couldn't go to any parties. I wanted Friday

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nights open. “Why?” she asked. “I won’t have time,” I answered. “I’m going to be busy playing pool with our boys.” I asked her not to say anything to them, but just to keep them home until I arrived from work the next Friday night.

The next Friday came. As I arrived home, I said to the boys, “How would you like to go play pool?” It was their turn to be shocked, but they took me up on the invitation and off we went to Pleasure Island.

Remember how I envisioned it? How I was sure it would be? Well, I was absolutely right. Loud music, junior high and high school kids smoking, boys and girls hanging on each other, the lights down low. These were kids in desperate retreat from life, clinging to whatever facsimile of reality their adolescent minds could conjure up and create together. It was a sad, sad sight.

Well, we played pool. The boys were happy because I paid for the games and because they each beat me (they don’t know it, but I let them). We had a good time and after about an hour and a half we left. When we got home we discovered we smelled so much of smoke that we had to hang our clothes in the garage so they could air out.

The next week we played pool again. Though we never spoke of it, we also observed the desperate loneliness of the many teens and pre-teens, seemingly parentless, who made this one of their homes. Then we came home and hung up our clothes. Same for the next week. Finally, on the fourth Friday, as we pulled into the garage from our weekly outing, I said simply, “You know something, guys? I don’t think we should play pool anymore.”

Do you remember how, on that first night, I knew they would feel? How I knew they would be unhappy and would want to complain and argue? You know what they said to me?

“Okay, Dad.”

That’s it. “Okay, Dad.” There were none of the hard feelings, none of the hard words, none of the arguing, none of the adolescent complaining I had prophesied and resigned myself to on that first night of shock. Just a simple “Okay, Dad.”

Two Types of Questions

I had re-learned an important lesson. I had thought on that first night that my choice was about how to *correct* my sons: should I go get them and lower the boom on them, or should I wait for them to come home and *then* lower the boom on them? I might also have considered: Should I ground them? Or should I make them do extra work around the house? Or should I do both? All these questions related to correction, or discipline: they asked, “What should I do, now

If I've tried many things and my children just aren't responding, the solution is not to try still more methods of correction. The solution is to do a better job of teaching.

that something has gone wrong?" But the lesson I re-learned is that much of the time this is the wrong question. The more important question is, "How do I help things go *right*?"

All of us know this distinction. For example, when parents are assembled and given a chance to ask questions about parenting, some of the questions we ask sound like this:

*What do we do to stop our children from fighting?
What do we do when our children don't come home on time?
What do we do when our children fail to do their homework?
What do we do when our children don't do their chores?*

And some of our questions sound like this:

*How do we teach our children to be responsible?
How do we help our children love each other?
How do we help our children excel in the things they do?
How do we help our children enjoy family activities?*

The first set of questions boils down to one question: What do we do when things go wrong? The second set boils down to a second question: How do we help things go right? When asked which type of question is *primary*, most of us realize it is the second. But when we are asked which question we actually spend more time on, we typically say the first.

We're right both times. The second question *is* primary, yet we typically spend more time on the first. Now here's the key: Whatever our individual circumstances with our children, *the key to effective parenting is to reverse this order in expenditure of time and energy*. It is to begin focusing our energy on helping things go right rather than on handling them once they have gone wrong.

In doing this it may help to ask four basic questions about parenthood. Together they help form a hierarchy of concerns, the most important being the most fundamental, and deepest. Seen in their proper relationship, these concerns form a pyramid.

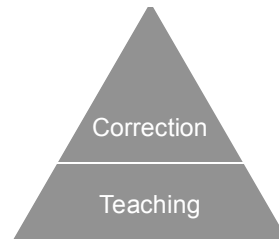
Am I Correcting My Children Without Teaching Them?

Many books have been written about the best way to discipline children. Some emphasize the value of applying reinforcement and appropriate punishment, others the importance of employing natural and logical consequences. Most approaches have something to recommend them, but the most important fact to understand about correction is this: the effectiveness of our correction of our children, whatever method we use, will always depend on the effectiveness of our prior *teaching* of them. Indeed, much of the time we spend disciplining our children and studying how to discipline them could be saved if we just spent more time teaching them. The reason is obvious:

No matter how much time I spend teaching my children, they are unlikely to learn much from me if they don't like me...

other things equal, the better we teach our children the fewer mistakes they will make. Moreover, the more effective we are at teaching our children, the *easier* it is to correct them when we have to. This is because the better we teach our children, the more our correction of them will be merely an extension of our teaching. The particular method of discipline we use will then matter less because (1) we will be doing it less often, and (2) because, whichever method we use, it will always be more like teaching than retribution. Far from seeing our children as irritations, or as disloyal and ungrateful burdens who require correction, we will be seeing them instead as children who have not yet learned. The emotional character of our correction will be loving and helpful rather than impatient and angry.

So the most important thing we can learn about correction is its dependence on *teaching*. We can represent the relationship between the two in this way:

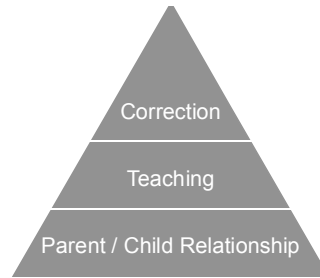


What is the Quality of My Relationship with My Children?

No matter how much time we spend teaching our children, however, they are unlikely to learn much from us if they don't *like* us. I finally realized, on the first night of the pool episode, that I needed to build my relationship with my sons before I tried to teach them. I knew that in my current state of mind, and given my recent distance from them due to work and other obligations, that they were in no condition to learn from me. What could I teach them about the undesirability of going to this pool hall that they wouldn't automatically resent? So I knew I had to play pool with them. I needed to strengthen our bonds of affection so that I could teach them. Correction, then, would be easy. And it was. Indeed, as it turned out, my correction was not separate from my teaching. Once I had the right relationship with them, all I had to say was, "I don't think we should play pool anymore." That was all the teaching *and* all the correction that was needed.

We can represent the relationship between teaching and the parent/child relationship this way:

Had my wife and I not been getting along, my ability to recognize what I needed to do with my boys would have been impaired. I might have punished them to show her how wrong she was.

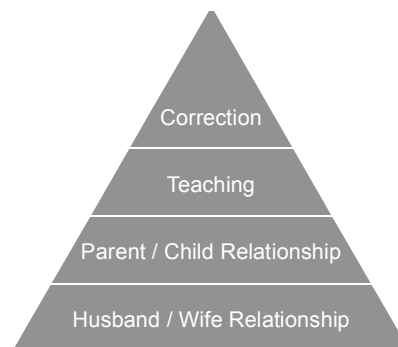


This tells us that the effectiveness of our correction will depend on the quality of our teaching, and the quality of our teaching will depend on the quality of our relationship.

What is the Quality of My Relationship with My Spouse?

It doesn't end there. The quality of my relationship with my children depends largely on the quality of my relationship with their mother. It is tempting to think that the one relationship can be separated from the other, but in practice this separation is nearly impossible to achieve. If parents have difficulties with each other, one way or another children will get sucked into them. Some parents may punish their children harshly, taking out their marital frustrations on them. Other parents may indulge their children, seeking to prove they are loved by *somebody* or at least to prove they are the children's favorite. There are many possibilities, but somehow or other, when there is conflict, children almost always get used. The marital relationship is the central relationship in the family; in significant ways it colors all the others. This is why someone once said that "a woman happy with her husband is better for her children than a hundred books on child welfare." And it is why another was able to tell fathers: "The most important thing you will ever do for your children is to love their mother."

So we can add the marital relationship to our pyramid:



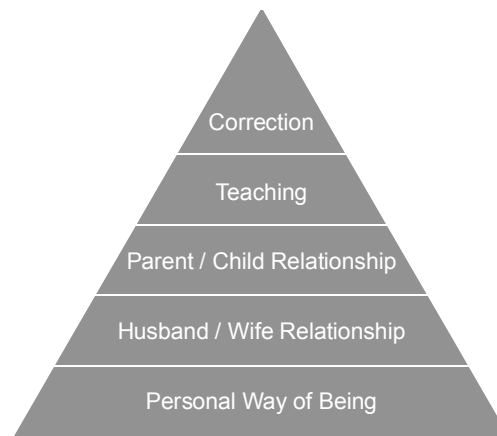
The roots of effective parenthood lie deeper than anything we DO; the roots of effective parenthood lie in how we ARE.

How Pure is My “Way of Being?”

At the bottom of it all is our fundamental way of *being*—who we *are* as people. Who we are is a function of our deepest attitudes and sensibilities toward others. It is the very way we see and experience the people in our world. It is our way of *being in* the world with them. This means that the key to my relationship with my wife is my personal “way of being”—my fundamental way of regarding her. Is she a person to me, or a mere object? Do I appreciate and honor her as a person—with hopes, dreams, fears, and wants as real as my own? Or do I see her primarily in terms of *my* hopes, dreams, fears, and wants? Am I selfless in our relationship . . . or selfish? Am I self-forgetful . . . or self-preoccupied? No questions are more important for marriage, for what my wife and I enjoy *in* our relationship depends directly on the way of being each of us brings *to* our relationship.

Moreover, our personal way of being directly affects every other part of the pyramid. For example, if I am merely going through the motions in trying to build a relationship with my children, I won’t succeed. The same is true of any efforts to teach or correct them. Whatever my outward show of “acceptable” parental conduct, my children can tell the quality of my heart. They can tell whether I am thinking of them in what I am doing, or whether I am thinking of myself and of my own convenience or reputation.

So we can complete the parenting pyramid by adding its deepest foundation:



Here’s a summary of what the pyramid tells us:

- 1. Although correction is a part of parenthood, IT IS THE SMALLEST PART.*
- 2. The key to effective correction is effective teaching.*

The solution to a problem in one part of the pyramid lies below that part of the pyramid.

3. *The key to effective teaching is a good parent/child relationship.*
4. *The key to a good parent/child relationship is a good husband/wife relationship.*
5. *The key to a good husband/wife relationship is our personal way of being. Indeed, this quality affects every other aspect of the pyramid; that is why it is the deepest foundation.*

Notice that the first four levels of the pyramid are all concerned with helping things go “right.” They focus on our individual goodness, on loving relationships in our marriage and with our children, and on teaching. These are the foundations of parenthood, in that order. They are also the foundations of effective correction when correction is required. If we try to correct our children when the other elements of the pyramid are not in place, *our correction will always be wrong*. This is true no matter how sophisticated and intellectually respectable our method happens to be. Correction is not an isolated dimension of parenthood. The effectiveness of what we do here depends on our effectiveness in doing everything that lies below it.

Using the Parenting Pyramid

An important hint about parenthood follows from this discussion. It is this: *The solution to a problem in one part of the pyramid lies below that part of the pyramid*. For example, if my correction of my children isn’t working—if I’ve studiously tried many things and my children just aren’t responding—the solution is not to try still more methods of correction. The solution is to do a better job of *teaching*. In the absence of more effective teaching my attempts to discipline will always be disappointing because “discipline” is not the problem; lack of teaching is the problem. Similarly, if my teaching is consistently falling flat, the answer is not to teach *more*. That’s often the temptation, but it’s a mistake. When my teaching is failing, the solution is to build better relationships. My teaching will “take” once my children *want* to learn from me, and that is a function of our relationship. And if I seem unable to build the right kind of relationship with my children, I had better look at my relationship with my spouse. Is it all that it should be? Could our children be reacting to *us*? And finally, if my relationship with my spouse isn’t what it should be, what does that reveal about my personal way of being? What softening do I need to do? How could I be less selfish and more loving? The general hint, again, is this: When we seem to locate a problem at one level of the pyramid we should always look below it for the solution.

Of course, there are occasions when there just isn’t time to implement deeper solutions to the problems that arise. What I’ve said

Whenever drastic correction is called for with a child we should begin working on the three deepest levels of the pyramid immediately and simultaneously.

so far will help avoid problems—it's a plan for prevention—but sometimes it's too late for prevention. Sometimes correction has to be implemented immediately. A child might be in trouble with the law or be in need of an extended adolescent treatment program. But this leads us to another hint: Whenever drastic correction is called for with a child *we should begin working on the three deepest levels of the pyramid immediately and simultaneously.* In times of crisis the temptation is to let the corrective action use up all our energy. But this is a mistake. Ultimately, the problem with our child goes deeper than discipline—and so does the solution. This is the time to begin identifying, and doing, the kinds of things that the deepest levels of the pyramid recommend. It is the time for greater goodness, for greater emphasis on our marriage, for any ways—however small—to help rebuild affection. In such extreme circumstances it may be a long time before we are in a position to teach. But that's precisely what the pyramid reminds us: premature teaching will not be effective anyway. As we are patient, and as we do all we can *where* we can, we can make a deep and genuine difference in the life of even the most unhappy child.