

Nasty behavior or pain

Monday March 16, 2009

Dr. Miller,

I come from a background of mostly emotional abuse and rejection (only a little slapping, spanking etc have been done to me). I have done a lot of personal growth work, Core Energetics (a body-oriented psychotherapy), meditation and so on. But I have found my son's toddler years extremely challenging. I struggle with rage and an inability to recognize a healthy, functional response to his questionable behaviors. He is almost 4 now, and I struggle daily with dealing with "limit-setting" and discipline.

He exhibits destructive behavior, throwing, sometimes hitting, and lashing out at the computer keyboard, say, if I've told him he is not to play with it while I am typing on it. I occasionally "blow up" and yell at him, though I try hard not to. He won't stay in a chair for a "time-out," so I have recently tried to close him in his room for a few minutes for a time out, but then he kicks the door or kicks me when I open it. The last time this happened, I grabbed his feet or hands to stop him, and we both escalated the struggle, where I held his hands and feet really tightly and hurt him. If I speak with other parents, my husband, or look to resources about Waldorf education (my son goes to a Waldorf school), they all agree that "limit-setting" and discipline are necessary, and what could be more blameless than the "time out?" There's no hitting involved, right? It's the supposedly "kinder, gentler" modern method of discipline.

However, I don't agree that time-outs are a healthy or positive way of behavior modification. But what is a healthy way of dealing with inappropriate behavior, where breaking and harming things is involved? I don't know what that looks like. I've never experienced it or seen it. I feel that now some of his behavior issues may arise from anger at my misguided attempts at time-outs. With an older child I could try to talk things out, but I feel that's really lost on a 3 yr old.

He was a very attached baby, always held when he cried and so on. And when I "lose it" and say or do something I wish I hadn't (never striking him), I never restrict his expressions of pain or rage. I apologize and tell him I was tired and frustrated, but that I didn't have the right to shout. I am respectful and kind, except when he "misbehaves."

What is the best way to move forward? How do I process his rage and mine from the past negative incidents? Now that he has anger, what is a healthy response when he tries to strike or break something?

I appreciate so much all the work you are doing for children and our world. It is powerful and courageous and desperately needed. I have read many of your books, but I wish you could say something specifically to those of us who are on the path of personal consciousness, but still struggling with the internalized poisonous pedagogy-- the voice that says children should always obey, etc. Many of us, like me, have high ideals to never speak harshly or be rough with our children, to always respect them, only to fail. And I feel so isolated in my attempts in finding support for something better. Is the solution for we parents to continue doing our own

work, not restrict the child's expression, and always try to do better? But how do I react now to the hitting and breaking, without time outs? Should I just talk to him and let it go? Is the inner voice that I have that I must teach him not to hit, break, name-call etc part of the poisonous pedagogy I've taken in? I really feel like I need guidance and don't know where to look. Please help.

A book on raising healthy children for children of abused parents would be most welcome. Much more is needed on that. You have such a large body of work about the problem, but what is the solution? Also, if you could host a forum for parents on this website who are doing this work, it would be a great way to find support. Thanks so much, MD

PS By the way, I've long since recognized my rage at my parents for what they did to me.

AM: You write: I come from a background of mostly emotional abuse and rejection (only a little slapping, spanking etc have been done to me). Then you write a long letter that shows your despair caused by your child but besides the sentence above you NEVER mention HOW you suffered from the LITTLE SLAPPING, SPANKING etc when YOU were a child. Only in the PS you mention "by the way" your parents. Eventually you ask me to write a book for you so that you can teach your child to behave. But in all of my books you can find the information you actually do need: Your child triggers in you the old pain, caused by your parents that you obviously fear to feel in spite of your long therapies, which gave you probably only the intellectual knowledge. Otherwise you would know that "the time out" is a cruel way of refusing contact, even if it may be recommended by a Waldorf school and by many ignorant authors. When a child behaves in a way that you judge as nasty he is suffering. Instead of finding out why he suffers you send him away. Would you do this also to a good friend ? But you can't find out what makes him suffering as long as you don't know what made YOU suffer as a child. Your own old pain seems to remain still denied or dissociated and it is THEREFORE blocking your empathy for your child. You may want to read my book Free From Lies coming out in June 09 at Norton, NW. But it is NOT about "discipline", not at all.