



Parental Authority and the Criminal Justice System

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For six years I assessed the mental health treatment needs of adults who were caught in the revolving door of a state criminal justice system in New England. To piece together the histories of these clients, I spoke with inmates' parents whenever possible. These interviews showed me how parents had lost control of their children: victims of parental indifference and abuse were primed to demand reparations from a community that was about to pay dearly for what these children felt robbed of growing up. One doesn't behave in respectful ways as an adult when fed a steady diet of disrespect as a child.

The abdication and/or abuse of parental authority incubates the development of antisocial traits. The antidote to the behavioral viruses these traits spawn is a parenting philosophy built on a bedrock of benevolent authority. Benevolent authority is put into action as consistent and continuous dialogues with our children where we actively listen to and clarify what we hear, reflect back our understanding of what we hear and respond respectfully in our roles as leaders and teachers. This way, our respect and love for our children as separate people comes across loud and clear. Collectively, these interpersonal skills form a diplomatic initiative that opens negotiations to obtain our children's cooperation through motivational strategies designed to get them on board with our vision for raising them. "We" stay in charge no matter how humbly we wear the title, "boss."

This interactive and dynamic process requires a flexible vision. It is rooted in forging an alliance so that we can use our influence to leverage agreements. In truth, it is about as democratic an arrangement as The US Government in their foreign policy negotiations with third world countries who depend on our foreign aid to preserve their sovereignty. Benevolent parents not unlike benevolent superpowers, speak softly and carry a "big carrot." To flaunt superior power is tantamount to baiting an inferior foe into a guerilla conflict. As parents we want allies of our children, not adversaries. Once we turn parenting into a battle of wills we may win some battles but, we will ultimately lose the war with enduring negative consequences.

It is my contention that we as parents must share authority with our children without abdicating the right to make the final decisions. This goal can be accomplished within the context of relationships that honor our children's needs to keep their self respect and dignity intact. If we treat our children as subjects rather than objects more times than not, we will in turn be accorded roles of co-collaborators and editors of our children's story lines as they creatively unfold. To be kept outside the loop so to speak and have this precedent continue into adolescence sets the stage for losing our kids to the streets. I have heard countless times from clients in a million different ways how: "No one has the right to tell me what to do!"

To exercise benevolent authority it is imperative to frame childhood resistance to parental authority as efforts at self definition and not a referendum on the parent's unworthiness of respect. If you're over 40 and/or were raised in a foreign culture, it's easy to have learned that "good children" are seen and only heard when addressed and, to regard willful behavior as signs of "badness" or "inadequacy."

Single parents tend to be most vulnerable to misinterpreting such reactions as they more often than not feel over worked, neglected and unappreciated. If you are a single parent and take seriously the time and energy devoted to raising your children then, "I don't have time to care for my needs is not a bumper sticker you can afford to have adorning your car. The price of doing so is to blame your children for the self inflicted wounds you suffered early on when they are being developmentally and age appropriately self centered, inconsiderate, demanding ingrates. It's never their job to take care of you even if they are the least bit willing and able to do.

My parenting philosophy, borrowed from many sources is based on teaching children to feel entitled to ask for and negotiate their needs, to learn that the satisfaction of their needs may require patience, perseverance and resourcefulness over time. When we fail to care adequately for ourselves it can be unbearably painful to listen to our children ask for the sky and then, unrealistic that we praise them for doing so. We all know how to shame and guilt our children into silence but, this is a victory we and they pay for down the road. It's difficult to take children to places we have never been before. So, make it a priority to learn to care for your needs so that you will find the intestinal fortitude to cope constructively with their resistance to unpopular but, important decisions that you know from experience are in their best interests.

Below is an example of the conditions that shape the process by which a normally benevolent single parent loses empathy for her children. Joan Taylor will tread on thin ice with her kids because fatigue breaks down her defenses and her resultant helplessness draws her into

emotional time warp. Joan momentarily relives moments in time when as a child she felt wounded by her parents' empathic failures. She becomes driven by aggressive demands for reparations and uses self-righteous rationalizations to retaliate for grievances collected years ago. In this emotional space Joan's children become unwitting and reluctant actors on the stage of Joan's morality play. Lost in her own emotional blindness Joan both abdicates and abuses her parental authority. Her children are the real victims and react accordingly.

These are unavoidable normal occurrences. The frequency with which they occur is a yardstick of our emotional courage and commitment to our children. It is also a measure of our capacities to learn about how our past haunts us, make changes to reduce our vulnerabilities to such memories and grow beyond being wounded by them. Children are very resilient to a point. How we deal with such challenges to grow in our emotional intelligence will affect our children one way or another in the long run.

In the example below the results are predictable. As events unfold inside Joan that shape regrettable behaviors, please notice the opportunities Joan has to gently regain control of the parental reins. Let's see what happens

It's the end of a long three-day weekend. Joan Taylor, a single parent of two children, Amy age 9 and Jason age 6 feels as worn out as the frayed dish towel she holds as the last dinner dishes are washed and placed in the drainer. The kids are parked in front of the television and Joan wryly remarks to herself that the dish towel becomes an extension of her right arm by the end of her weekend with the kids. Joan observes herself and momentarily ponders with puzzlement why she rigidly pushes herself so unnecessarily to wash every last dish after each meal before she moves on to the next activity. She resents the helplessness such compulsiveness engenders.

This is a painful moment for Joan. Joan's quasi-dictatorial relationship to herself is no accident as both of her parents were quite the taskmasters. She envies and resents her children who are relaxing in front of the television set understandably unfazed by their own obliviousness to neglected chores. They are kids still growing in their capacities to retain and follow instructions and lack the strategies adults use to compensate for temporary memory losses.

Joan's understandable weariness with her role as a single parent grows more palpable as fatigue overtakes her. She becomes filled with guilt and self-recriminations in reaction to feeling burdened by her children's dependency needs. Joan's preservation of her identity as a "good mother" requires conscious energy she can't muster to dispute irrational beliefs she hits herself

over the head with. The stage is set for her to play the “blame game” as it’s too painful for her to acknowledge that she is the author of her own misery. All Joan needs now is a flimsy pretext to complete her transformation from responsible parent to self centered, victimized child.

This process is completely invisible to her tired children who are zoned out watching television and predictably oblivious to their mother’s incipient Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde transformation.

Meanwhile, despite their mother’s request they have not packed their suitcases or cleaned up their room in preparation to return to their father’s home for the school week. Joan’s fleeting insight that she is reliving something that may create problems for her evaporates quickly. Instead of calling her own time out to retreat to her bedroom to reflect on and process what’s going on inside of her, Joan’s self righteous anger becomes a moral justification to identify with her drill sergeant father and give her kids a dose of his medicine. Joan doesn’t know what’s driving her in the moment and doesn’t want to know because she wants to gratify her vengeful desires and wouldn’t permit herself to do so if she stopped long enough about what was driving her. Joan will pay in spades as her regression to childhood will leave her depressed the rest of the evening after the kids depart.

Joan barges into Amy and Jason’s bedroom after a perfunctory knock and demands that they turn off the television and pack their bags. Joan’s emotional blindness leads to the misinterpretation that her children’s passivity means they don’t respect her. In truth, this becomes a self fulfilling prophecy only because of the disrespectful manner she approaches her children. These kids unlike their mother who feels very guilty about acknowledging what she regards to be unsavory thoughts and feelings, are very comfortable in their self centeredness and ask in unison with obvious annoyance: “Why are you being so mean? We didn’t do anything. Can’t we watch the end of this show. It’s over in 15 minutes?” Joan is so angry at herself because she knows they are right and yet, her actions that follow reflect that she’s still battling parental ghosts her children now stand in for.

For Joan, Amy and Jason remain confused inside her head with her parents who she still regards as having been unnecessarily punitive and, at the same time passive; leaving her feeling overwhelmed with personal responsibility and both shame and guilt ridden for rejecting personal responsibility as she does now. Joan holds unrealistic expectations that her kids will volunteer to help her get ready to leave. They might have but, it is still Joan’s responsibility to enlist their cooperation with tact, consideration, authority and diplomacy. Joan ensures that they behave in a

manner that is pleasing to her as she wants them to help her mimic the interactions between her self and her parents from decades ago.

At first, Amy and Jason refuse to budge and do their chores. What we witness here is the domestic equivalent of management and labor locking horns at the bargaining table. Then, Joan starts yelling and uses fear and intimidation to force her kids to submit. This is an empty victory as what Joan models she certainly doesn't want her kids to learn in relating to themselves and others. In addition, Amy and Jason are temporarily abandoned as Joan loses empathy with her kids. Their safety and security are ignored.

The moral of the story is that much of the disobedience of our children can be avoided. The buck must stop with us. It's our responsibility to model self respect, relate to our children with respect and consideration for their dependency needs, learning styles, strengths and weaknesses, talents, and to be sensitive and responsive to their difficulties functioning when in crises or just stressed out from their own daily grinds. We must be comfortable asking politely for what we want from them, make sensible and realistic requests we can explain, listen to their responses, negotiate mutually agreeable solutions when possible and, enforce decisions with unwavering resolve, compassion and kindness when negotiations breakdown. If we do we will perform the most important service to ourselves, our children and mankind; to groom generations of leaders equipped to tackle the great social problems of the world. Enjoy this most important and meaningful mission!