

In Loving Hands

By

William A. Palmer, Jr.

A heavy box arrived at our office a couple of weeks ago. Inside was a shipment of refrigerator magnets we had ordered to promote our Head Start and preschool programs. Each magnet displays an assortment of multicolored flowers, an open hand, and the message, "In loving hands kids blossom!" Sadly, the experience with open hands for too many kids is not the kind of thing that promotes blossoming. Therefore, while we mark April as National Poetry Month, National Garden Month, and National Kite-Flying Month, we also must acknowledge the unhappy necessity for National Child Abuse Prevention Month.

It's not hard for us to deplore criminal child abusers when we read their stories in the papers. Some children die at their hands. Others carry bruises or broken bones. The survivors bear scars, both physical and psychological, that they will carry throughout their lives. Yet what parent, in a moment of frustration or impatience, has not been at the place where the line between discipline and abuse might have been crossed? Every parent would like to exemplify the tolerant cheerfulness of June Cleaver or the kindly wisdom of Robert Young in "Father Knows Best," but nobody believes that '50s-era sitcoms were reality shows. Kids learn very quickly how to push our buttons, and they have no compunctions about doing so. As parents, we must be prepared to respond rather than to react.

In regard to discipline, one of the most important things for a parent to consider is the age of the child. As children grow, they will vie for attention, challenge authority, and test limits. This is normal. The effective parent is one who anticipates these developmental phases and responds to them with

consistency, patience, and love. A “terrible two,” for instance, is relishing his emerging autonomy. He walks, runs, climbs, and already has added the word “no!” to his vocabulary. His brain, however, simply has not developed to the point where he can follow rules consistently. Not until the age of four can he be expected to follow directions, obey authority figures, put away toys, or treat things carefully without prompting. Even then, the four-year-old’s brain does not yet have an adult’s capacity for self-control. The parental frustration and impatience that can lead to child abuse often are rooted in unrealistic expectations.

More than once I have heard someone say something like this: “My father used to bat me around and I turned out okay.” I can think of two responses to such a statement. One would be, “Congratulations. You are one of the fortunate few who has not carried some physical or psychological scar into your adult life.” The other would reflect a concern for this person’s offspring: “Do you believe that this is an effective approach to child-rearing?” The tragic truth is that victims of child abuse frequently become abusers themselves. They have learned to inculcate fear instead of love because they simply do not know there is another way. A mother once justified the approach she used to discipline her daughter by saying, “I had to break her spirit.” I shudder to think what this mother must have gone through as a child as much as I shudder for the daughter whose spirit was being broken by her.

Children blossom in loving hands. Hands that are quick to strike or hands that wield a switch, a flyswatter, or a slipper are unlikely to promote the kind of blossoming we might like to see. The parent who is unable to distinguish between discipline and punishment is apt to see a flowering of resentment, aggression, and low self-esteem. In loving hands a child will bloom into an autonomous, responsible, and confident adult. At PCDC, we’re eager to partner with parents who want their children to blossom.

Contact us to receive one of our free refrigerator magnets, and put it in a place where it will remind you that the power of love resides in your hands.

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