

CULTURAL COMPETENCE COLUMN

Parent Effectiveness Training

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Parent-child conflicts are as old as humankind. Today, harsh disciplinary measures to resolve these conflicts are still very common. In a recent online poll (ABC News, 2005), 65% of parents approved of spanking as a means of dealing with unacceptable behavior, and in a just-released study that followed nearly 2,500 parents for seven years, more than 50% reported that they engage in spanking regularly (28% one to two times a month and 26% more than two times a month) (Taylor, Manganello, Lee & Rice, 2010). Children who were spanked when they were three years old were more likely to have screaming tantrums, get into fights, hurt animals, and refuse to share by the time they were five (Taylor et al., 2010).

Many approaches have been developed to resolve conflicts between parents and children, but most parents do not attend such programs because they take time, money, and commitment (Young, Davis, & Schoen, 1996). Nevertheless the effort is well worth it, and one of the earliest programs, Dr. Thomas Gordon's Parent Effectiveness Training (PET), stands out in a unique and critical way (Gordon, 2000). This program has been described as effective because it focuses on resolving conflict without resorting to exercising any form of parental power and recognizes that the needs of both parents and children must be attended to. With this program, parents learn how to resolve conflicts and problems in their family so that no one loses and problems stay solved. Every time a parent effectively resolves a conflict with his or her child, it builds the parent-child relationship. Every time parents resolve a conflict ineffectively, it may take away from the parent-child relationship and chip away at the self-esteem of children.

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RESOLVING CONFLICTS WITH PARENTAL POWER

Communication strategies can help parents resolve parent-child conflicts in ways that strengthen their relationship and build children's self-esteem. Parent training programs based on research of parent-child communication help parents use effective communication strategies. The most popular among these advocate for at least some form of parental power (see Table 1 for contrasting uses of power). According to Gordon (2000), using any form of punishment implies a win-lose strategy of resolving conflict because one party—usually the parent—will perceive that he or she has won in the situation and the other—usually the child—will perceive that he or she has lost.

Parents do have power over their children. After all, they are physically larger and stronger, with exclusive access to resources that children need (e.g., car keys, money, and food). There is nothing wrong with having power. The problem occurs when parents use that power to resolve conflicts with their children. Using power can create resentment, dependence, and fear, and can ultimately damage the relationship between the parent and child and the child's self-esteem (Gordon, 2000).

A second problem with using parental power to resolve conflicts is a diminishing effectiveness over time. Parents run out of exclusive access to resources; parents do not remain physically stronger or larger as children become older. Parents who use power to resolve conflicts with their children will retain less influence when their children become teenagers (Gordon, 2000).

RESOLVING CONFLICTS WITHOUT PARENTAL POWER

How can parents resolve conflict effectively without the use of parental power? As noted, the parenting approaches described above that employ parental power, commonly involve a win-lose strategy of resolving conflict. In contrast, the PET program, first taught in the 1960s by Thomas Gordon, argues for a no-lose method of conflict resolution (Gordon, 2000). This model of conflict resolution is based on achieving mutually beneficial outcomes in a conflict situation in order to create a best-practice prescriptive process (Davidson & Wood, 2004). A number of experimental studies with school-aged children have found

TABLE 1
Parent Education Programs and Use of Parental Power

No Use of Parental Power	Some Use of Parental Power	Predominant Use of Parental Power
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) (Gordon, 2000; Davidson & Wood, 2004) ●Nonviolent Communication (NVC) (Rosenberg, 2003) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●<i>How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk</i> (Faber & Mazlish, 1980) ●Active Parenting Now (Popkin, 2002) ●Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1998) ●<i>Parenting with Love & Logic</i> (Kline & Fay, 2006) ●Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) (Sanders, 1992) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●<i>Dare to Discipline</i> (Dobson, 1977)

significantly improved outcomes in resolving conflict following training in listening, assertiveness, and problem-solving skills identified in the conflict resolution model (Davidson & Wood, 2004). In addition, a meta-analysis of 26 research studies of PET showed that the greatest measureable effect on children was improved self-esteem and the greatest measureable effect on parents was improved attitude—greater understanding of children and increased positive regard, empathy, congruence, and respect for children (Cedar & Levant, 1991).

The theory underlying the PET program is that children do not “misbehave.” According to Gordon (2000), children’s behavior is motivated by their underlying needs. In other words, children behave in ways to get their needs met, and that behavior may be unacceptable to the parents. Parents must learn how to communicate to their child that his or her behavior is unacceptable to them and at the same time guide the child to find alternative behaviors that are acceptable to the parents instead of focusing on punishing “misbehavior.” Punishment does not provide any information to the child on how to meet recurring needs nor does it deal with strong emotions (e.g., powerlessness, frustration, disappointment, sadness) that result from unmet needs. With PET skills, parents can help children become proficient at meeting their own needs using behavior that is acceptable to the parent. This approach preserves the child’s self-esteem and fosters a healthy parent-child relationship (Cedar & Levant, 1991).

The PET method of conflict resolution focuses parents on communicating the needs of both the parent and the child rather than imposing their solution (authoritarian parent) or giving in to the child’s solution (permissive parent). Parents, as well as their children, have the right to get their needs met. Needs are not negotiable. Solutions to meet those needs are negotiable. When parents model for their children how to communicate and assertively get their needs met without the use of power, their children are more likely to learn how to communicate effectively and to satisfy their needs even when in conflict with others over whom they do not have power, such as teachers and caretakers.

Many current programs agree with the PET contention that most children’s behavior is too complex to shape simply by using punishment and rewards (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1998; Faber & Mazlish, 1980; Kline & Fay, 2006; Popkin, 2002; Rosenberg, 2003; Sanders, 1992). However, PET and Rosenberg’s (2003) non-violent communication approach are unique in promoting a complete absence of parental power when solving conflicts, including all forms of punishment and rewards (see Table 1). Even logical consequences—supported in many popular parenting programs today—are considered a form of punishment in PET. Any use of parental power to resolve conflict between children and their parents (e.g., physical punishment, threats, logical consequences, time-out) fails to make children aware of how important it is to take other people’s needs into account. Children might change their behavior because they are afraid of the consequences, not because they care about the needs of others.

CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Parenting programs might not agree on the use of parental power to change children’s unacceptable behavior. (It should be noted that in last month’s column on effective discipline and parenting, both the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the Center for the Improvement of Child Caring (CICC) include in their discipline strategies praise and positive reinforcement of acceptable behaviors as well as time out, withdrawal of attention, and social disapproval; both organizations advocate against physical punishment and verbal criticism (AAP, 1994, 2004; CICC, no date). Most parenting programs (including AAP and CICC) do agree, however, that effective parents facilitate their children’s ability to solve their own problems and meet their own needs instead of solving children’s problems for them. This strategy is considered the key to raising responsible and independent children in most programs.

Building on this idea, Gordon (2000) argues that the child also should participate in suggesting, evaluating, choosing, and

implementing solutions throughout the process of resolving conflicts. Even if the resolution meets the child's needs, children left out of the problem solving process will be less likely to accept the final solution or abide by the new rule.

THE CHALLENGE TO PARENTS

Learning to resolve conflict without the use of parental power requires major attitude changes for most parents. Parents need to become aware of their own needs and learn how to communicate these needs, become proficient at recognizing and listening to their child's needs, and be willing to negotiate solutions with the child that benefit both parent and child. These changes are challenging because they require a substantial investment in time and energy and change happens gradually. The quick fixes promoted in today's pressured society are unlikely to help parents persist in the step-by-step changes they need to make, sustain the changes they have learned to make, and achieve the success they need.

BENEFITS FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Learning how to meet both children's and parents' needs is a dynamic, challenging process. However, Cedar and Levant (1991) found that parents were able to learn the PET concepts and that the positive effects on children increased over time. While changing attitudes and behaviors and sustaining such changes requires patience, awareness, practice communicating, and practice learning how to implement strategies, these changes are worth the effort. The benefits are many (Cedar & Levant, 1991; Davidson & Wood, 2004; Gordon, 2000):

- Healthy development for children
- Building and preserving children's self-esteem
- Increased self-efficacy and independence of children.
- Teaching children how to communicate their needs appropriately when in conflict with others
- Building the relationship between parents and children
- Personal fulfillment for parents as individuals and as couples, and
- Increased democratic ideals.

Such an investment can create a nurturing family environment that provides the foundation for children's psychological health, and for helping both parents and children fulfill their potential as happy, purposeful, and confident human beings.

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