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SOCIAL ISSUES

Growing Up Afraid

Nonviolent methods of child rearing remain a distant goal for most overworked mothers

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At times, I confess, I have hit my own son. He would take it quietly, and when everything cooled down, he'd ask me why I had punished him--leaving me totally lost. Had I not yelled at this boy and told him exactly and at length what was his fault and why he was being punished? Only when I calmly explained to him what had annoyed me, and why I had resorted to punishing him, would he understand and correct his mistake and promise me never to do it again. I realized the whole exercise of punishment was uncalled for. I could have communicated to him without the hitting. It would be better for him, and better for myself, too.

But how many mothers have the time, energy or the patience to go on explaining to the child what his mistakes are? I specify mothers because in most households the mother is the villain when it comes to punishments. For most parents and children I spoke to in Bangalore, it was the father who never hit the child. Yet most children seemed to dread displeasing

Dad--"He'll get angry." This notion is often implanted by the mother herself in a bid to discipline children by threatening father's wrath.

The child who is not hit at home will sooner or later most certainly be slapped, caned or otherwise physically punished at even the best schools. I have seen teachers easily use their hands on children for no reason at all--because somebody is not sitting properly during assembly or because a child is whispering to her neighbor. In my children's school I have found teachers beating small children so often for trivial reasons that I wondered how they handled their own kids. When I asked teachers this question, what emerged were little white lies--"Oh no, I never beat my children. I control them so beautifully."

I spent a whole year during 1997 trying to fight this issue at my children's school, where authorities were stubbornly complacent. To them this is no issue at all. Parents prefer not to take up the matter for justified fear of subjecting their child to victimization, fear of nonpromotion to the next grade and manipulation of marks. So far I have gotten them to stop hitting my daughter, age 8, though teachers have subjected her to public humiliation as retaliation. Now I am working to protect the rest of the students. Little do teachers realize that harsh treatment has adverse implications on young minds that will carry forward into adulthood resulting in personality damage.

No easy change: Children can be exasperating at times. What's the hapless mother to do? Some who are blessed with

tremendous patience let it pass or speak sweetly to the child. Some teachers scold mildly, some admonish and others choose to give a spanking or two. "I feel that when children go out of control, they need to be disciplined, and a smack or two is necessary. Children have the habit of getting the mother so agitated that spanking becomes inevitable. I have hit my children occasionally when the situation warranted. At that moment, I felt it was necessary," admits Mrs. Malathi Sharma, a renowned musician.

Rare is the parent who has never struck the children. "My wife and I conscientiously made sure we never hit our children. We always reasoned it out with them, why we did not want them to do something. When they threw tantrums or sat grumpily, we just ignored them and let it pass. After some time, they would realize that acting funny wouldn't pay. It works well to be patient with children," said C.R. Simha, a veteran actor and director.

"I feel children get beaten because of the impatience on the part of the parents," says Dr. Ramakrishna, a senior professor of English. "If children don't meet their parents' high expectations, they begin to chastise them. But why should the child become a showpiece of the parent's expectations? Parents want the children to achieve what they have not been able to. I can expect this attitude from my servant maid who has spent all her life doing menial jobs and wants a better future for her children. But the middle-class, educated parents doing this is just silly. Parents should understand the psychology of the child, assess his abilities and aptitude, be capable of judgment and inculcate certain values by being an example themselves rather than being irrational, regimenting

and beating them," avers Prof. Ramakrishna. "I myself," confides the professor, "was severely beaten by my elder brother when I was a young boy. But I got so used to it that I became thick-skinned."

One victim of unreasonable expectations is ten-year-old Sujit. His father insists that his son get up at five in the morning to attend a cricket coaching camp, but the child is reluctant to wake up so early. The father feels he's providing a great opportunity and that the child ought to know that. He dreams of seeing his son play test matches at a tender age. As a result, Sujit's mornings begin with sermons and yelling.

"What parents do not accept is that they are the very cause for the child's misbehavior. Parents have to first blame themselves for the ill behavior of the child and then find corrective steps without victimizing the little ones," states Dr. Radha, a child specialist.

Here in India, the child for all practical purposes is the responsibility of the mother. It's her duty to take care of their food and daily needs, get them ready for school, sit with them through their studies in the evenings and look after their other needs as well. A working mother spends all day slogging both at home and the office. It's amazing what is expected of her. The husband, in sharp contrast, relaxes at day's end in front of the idiot box, rarely lending a helping hand. Most households in middle-class families function this way. If in-laws or their aged parents are in the home, mom and dad will have to put up with a lot of interference, which has a spoiling effect on the child.

"Sometimes I wonder why I was born at all, when the husband doesn't lift a finger at home, and children just don't listen to me. Every time I have tried to discipline my two sons, my in-laws would instantly jump to their rescue. They have grown up with the habit of disregarding anything I say. Had I given them a whack or two then, perhaps they would have been far better children now," rues middle-aged, overworked Padma who starts the day at 4:00am to end it only by midnight. Sadly, the child is at the receiving end of all this pent-up tension, often getting punished for no fault of his own. And when a spanking comes, it seems wholly unreasonable to the child. The child is the helpless victim of mother's frayed nerves. Later apologies, however heartfelt, never fully erase the fear and hurt.

Lasting consequences: "The child is left defenseless by a beating," states Dr. Radha, "and this feeling can be extremely damaging. What if the child decides to hit back--is the parent willing to take it? It's unfair to use physical power against someone weaker and younger than you. Even if you insist an occasional whack on the rear is necessary, still it should be as a warning, not a routine."

An eminent journalist friend of mine, whose name I do not wish to disclose, ran away from home at the tender age of nine. His father would routinely hit him with a stick or iron rod "for no reason or fault of mine. I think he hated me," he confessed chokingly. "Getting hit every day made me so stubborn and defiant. I developed a strong hatred for my family. My mother would silently watch me being hit and at times even supported my father rather than stopping him, because she wanted to be a devoted wife. I decided to leave home to get away from this

torture. I have slept on the pavement, done sundry jobs. I have been ill-treated by people. I have seen so much bitterness in life. But I was determined to succeed. I educated myself the hard way and became a journalist." Today he represents an international news agency and is a very successful journalist. He dotes on his six-year-old daughter and ensures that she has a good life. But past experiences have left a terrible bitterness in him.

"Seeing an adult lose control can have a devastating effect on the child, who learns an unintended lesson: this is how to correct others. When he or she grows up, they will tend to behave the same way because they think that is the way to discipline," said Dr. Ajit Bhide, a renowned child psychiatrist.

Recently an educated middle-class mother, in a fit of rage, slashed and killed her five-year-old child with a kitchen knife for mispronouncing the word "forty." Similar reports of mothers unwittingly killing a child in a fit of anger are all-too frequent.

Instances of child beating appear to be more pronounced in the lower strata of society, commonly called the labor class. Besides a socio-economical dimension of it, their psycho-sensitivity is low and frustration levels are high. "They work like machines. It's a matter of survival. Talking psychology and personality makes no sense to them. Whether the family can have both their meals in a day is what matters. They simply don't have the time or the environment to think of the psychological development of the child, working so hard all day. Where do they have the time to sit and think?" notes Mrs. Chakravarthy, a social worker.

During my interviews, many said today's children are more prone to be disrespectful and rude. Elders comment that today's children lack discipline, bhaya-bhakti as they call it--literally, "fear-devotion." "Our elders had a way of disciplining through devotion and fear of God. When they said bhaya, it did not mean fear of the father or elder at home, but of doing wrong, the dangers of erring. How many parents today have the moral courage to inculcate the values of right and wrong in their children when most of them lack this quality?" queries Simha.

School discipline: Earlier this year, a case was filed in the magistrate's court in New Delhi against a teacher who beat a five-year-old student. The child had developed school phobia and a wide range of fears. Such reports about school authorities acting high handedly and physically abusing young children, some resulting in the death of these young ones, are plentiful. One teacher made a young boy strip in front of his classmates and paraded him in school for a silly reason, not bringing his book. This resulted in the boy's committing suicide. On April 26, 1998, a Delhi teacher hit a 12-year-old student in the face with a blackboard eraser. It shattered his glasses and blinded him in one eye. The duster was intended for his neighbor, who was reading a comic book. The teacher was arrested, then released on bail.

My friend Aruna quit her job as Head Mistress in a private school because the practice there was to beat the children. "The principal's complaint against me was that I was soft with the children and that I had to be tough. The teachers would mercilessly bang the heads of these little children against the wall and beat them with canes. They wanted me to do the

same thing. I protested and quit the job," says Aruna.

"Teachers have to have emotional control, logic and reasoning. Lack of control over their emotions and the superiority feeling that the teacher carries with her makes her overpower the children, behaving like a bully. The teacher has no right to lift even a finger against a child, she must use more mature forms of controlling children. Unfortunately, commitment, responsibility and love for the work is not present," explains Mrs. Indira Swaminathan, a senior educationist. "In many schools the teachers are paid a pittance, made to work long hours and often treated shabbily by the management. They give expression to their anger toward the management by treating the child harshly. That's unfair," says Mrs. Sreenivasa Murthy.

There is no law in India against child abuse. A provision in the the Criminal Procedure Code applies to such cases in the form of Criminal Assault where a complaint can be filed before the police or a magistrate. It is extremely rare that parents use this recourse for fear of reprisal by the school against the child. "These issues get camouflaged. The statistics don't come out. The schools maintain that child abuse does not happen at all, but handling children violently is there in almost every school. It's a known fact," says Mrs. Swaminathan.

"When parents take up the issue of ill treatment towards the child by the teacher, the teachers tend to humiliate the child in the classroom. This can have very serious implications on the child's psychology and personality. It can be more damaging than physical abuse. We need a lot of laws to stop child abuse

in schools," says Dr. Bhide.

Laws are not essential for adults to behave like adults who are expected to be more mature and logical. What is needed is a reasonable amount of common sense, a humane outlook and a whole lot of honesty.

You need a license to drive a car, but not to have children. There are no prescribed ABCs about child rearing and precious little training or preparation. Even though there is concern here in India for beating children in school, there is yet little attention given to the home. It is time for that to change.

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