




# Raising Children *Compassionately*



## *Introduction*



I've been teaching Nonviolent Communication to parents for thirty years. I would like to share some of the things that have been helpful to me and to the parents that I've worked with, and to share with you some insights I've had into the wonderful and challenging occupation of parenting.

I'd first like to call your attention to the danger of the word "child," if we allow it to apply a different quality of respect than we would give to someone who is not labeled a child. Let me show you what I am referring to.

In parent workshops that I've done over the years, I've often started by dividing the group into two. I put one group in one room, and the other in a different room, and I give each group the task of writing down on a large paper a dialogue between themselves and another person in a conflict situation. I tell both groups what the conflict is. The only difference is that I tell one group the other person is their child, and to the second group I say the other person is their neighbor.

Then we get back into a large group and we look at these different sheets of paper outlining the dialogue that the groups would have, in the one case thinking that the other person was their child, and in the other case, the neighbor. (And incidentally, I

haven't allowed the groups to discuss with the other group who the person was in their situation, so that both groups think that the situation is the same.)

After they've had a chance to scan the written dialogues of both groups, I ask them if they can see a difference in terms of the degree of respect and compassion that was demonstrated. Every time I've done this, the group that was working on the situation with the other person being a child was seen as being less respectful and compassionate in their communication than the group that saw the other person as a neighbor. This painfully reveals to the people in these groups how easy it is to dehumanize someone by the simple process of simply thinking of him or her as "our child."

### *My Own Awareness*

I had an experience one day that really heightened my awareness of the danger of thinking of people as children. This experience followed a weekend in which I had worked with two groups: a street gang and a police department. I was mediating between the two groups. There had been considerable violence between them, and they had asked that I serve in the role of a mediator. After spending as much time as I did with them, dealing with the violence they had toward one another, I was exhausted. And as I was driving home afterward, I told myself, I never want to be in the middle of another conflict for the rest of my life.

And of course, when I walked in my back door, my three children were fighting. I expressed my pain to them in a way that we advocate in Nonviolent Communication. I expressed how I was feeling, what my needs were, and what my requests were. I did it this way. I shouted: "When I hear all of this going on right now, I feel extremely tense! I have a real need for some peace and quiet after the weekend I've been through! So would you all be willing to give me that time and space?"

My oldest son looked at me and said, "Would you like to talk about it?" Now, at that moment, I dehumanized him in my thinking. Why? Because I said to myself: "How cute. Here's a nine-year-old boy trying to help his father." But take a closer look

at how I was disregarding his offer because of his age, because I had him labeled as a child. Fortunately I saw that this was going on in my head, and maybe I was able to see it more clearly because the work I had been doing between the street gang and the police showed me the danger of thinking of people in terms of labels instead of their humanness.

So instead of seeing him as a child and thinking to myself, “how cute,” I saw a human being who was reaching out to another human being in pain, and I said out loud, “Yes, I would like to talk about it.” And the three of them followed me into another room and listened while I opened up my heart to how painful it was to see that people could come to a point of wanting to hurt one another simply because they hadn’t been trained to see the other person’s humanness. After talking about it for forty-five minutes I felt wonderful, and as I recall we turned the stereo on and danced like fools for a while.

### *Our Education As Parents*

So I’m not suggesting that we don’t use words like “child” as a shorthand way of letting people know that we’re talking about people of a certain age. I’m talking about when we allow labels like this to keep us from seeing the other person as a human being, in a way which leads us to dehumanize the other person because of the things our culture teaches us about “children.” Let me show you an extension of what I’m talking about, how the label child can lead us to behave in a way that’s quite unfortunate.

Having been educated, as I was, to think about parenting, I thought that it was the job of a parent to make children behave. You see, once you define yourself as an authority, a teacher or parent, in the culture that I was educated in, you then see it as your responsibility to make people that you label a “child” or a “student” behave in a certain way.

I now see what a self-defeating objective this is, because I have learned that any time it’s our objective to get another person to behave in a certain way, people are likely to resist no matter what it is we’re asking for. This seems to be true whether the other person is two or ninety-two years of age.

This objective of getting what we want from other people, or getting them to do what we want them to do, threatens the autonomy of people, their right to choose what they want to do. And whenever people feel that they're not free to choose what they want to do, they are likely to resist, even if they see the purpose in what we are asking and would ordinarily want to do it. So strong is our need to protect our autonomy, that if we see that someone has this single-mindedness of purpose, if they are acting like they think that they know what's best for us and are not leaving it to us to make the choice of how we behave, it stimulates our resistance.

### *The Limitations of Coercion and Punishment*

I'll be forever grateful to my children for educating me about the limitations of the objective of getting other people to do what you want. They taught me that, first of all, I couldn't make them do what I want. I couldn't make them do anything. I couldn't make them put a toy back in the toy box. I couldn't make them make their bed. I couldn't make them eat. Now, that was quite a humbling lesson for me as a parent, to learn about my powerlessness, because somewhere I had gotten it into my mind that it was the job of a parent to make a child behave. And here were these young children teaching me this humbling lesson, that I couldn't make them do anything. All I could do is make them wish they had.

And whenever I would be foolish enough to do that, that is, to make them wish they had, they taught me a second lesson about parenting and power that has proven very valuable to me over the years. And that lesson was that anytime I would make them wish they had, they would make me wish I hadn't made them wish they had. Violence begets violence.

They taught me that any use of coercion on my part would invariably create resistance on their part, which could lead to an adversarial quality in the connection between us. I don't want to have that quality of connection with any human being, but especially not with my children, those human beings that I'm closest to and taking responsibility for. So my children are the last

people that I want to get into these coercive games of which punishment is a part.

Now this concept of punishment is strongly advocated by most parents. Studies indicate that about 80 percent of American parents firmly believe in corporal punishment of children. This is about the same percentage of the population who believes in capital punishment of criminals. So with such a high percentage of the population believing that punishment is justified and necessary in the education of children, I've had plenty of opportunity over the years to discuss this issue with parents, and I'm pleased with how people can be helped to see the limitations of any kind of punishment, if they'll simply ask themselves two questions.

Question number one: What do you want the child to do differently? If we ask only that question, it can certainly seem that punishment sometimes works, because certainly through the threat of punishment or application of punishment, we can at times influence a child to do what we would like the child to do.

However, when we add a second question, it has been my experience that parents see that punishment never works. The second question is: What do we want the child's reasons to be for acting as we would like them to act? It's that question that helps us to see that punishment not only doesn't work, but it gets in the way of our children doing things for reasons that we would like them to do things.

Since punishment is so frequently used and justified, parents can only imagine that the opposite of punishment is a kind of permissiveness in which we do nothing when children behave in ways that are not in harmony with our values. So therefore parents can think only, "If I don't punish, then I give up my own values and just allow the child to do whatever he or she wants." As I'll be discussing below, there are other approaches besides permissiveness, that is, just letting people do whatever they want to do, or coercive tactics such as punishment. And while I'm at it, I'd like to suggest that reward is just as coercive as punishment. In both cases we are using power *over* people, controlling the environment in a way that tries to force people to behave in ways that we like. In that respect, reward comes out of the same mode of thinking as punishment.