and needs." I said, "Wow, am I glad that you thought to do that. What did you hear?"

He said, "Dad, it was pretty obvious. I heard that he was irritated and wanted me to cut my hair." "Oh," I said, "how did that leave you feeling, to receive his message in that way?" And he said: "Dad, I felt really sad for the man. He was bald, and seemed to have a problem about hair."

The "Captain" Game

I had a very good experience with my children when they were three, four, and seven years old. I was then writing a book for teachers about how to create schools in harmony with principles of Nonviolent Communication, in harmony with principles of mutual respect between teachers and students, schools that fostered the values of autonomy and interdependence. And as part of the research I was doing in setting up these schools, I was wanting to learn more about what kind of choices we could trust children to make. And to be able to turn these decisions over to children so that they were better able to develop their ability to make choices in their lives.

At this time, I thought a good way of learning more about this might be to play a game with my children which we called Captain. In this game each day I would appoint one of the children as Captain. And when it was their turn as the Captain, I would turn over many decisions that I would usually make to the Captain to make. But I wouldn't give this decision to the child unless I was prepared to live with however they made the choice. As I said, my purpose in this game was to learn how children could make choices, how early they could make certain choices, and which ones might not be easy for them to make.

Here is an example of how this game went, and what a good learning experience it was for me. Once I took the children with me to pick up some dry cleaning, and as I paid, the woman started to hand me three pieces of candy for the children. Immediately I saw a good opportunity to turn a decision over to the Captain. As the woman handed me the candy, I said, "Uh, would you please give the candy to the Captain?"

Well, she didn't know what I was talking about, but the Captain did. Three-year-old Brett walked over, held out his hand, and she placed the candy in his hand. And then I said, "Captain, would you please choose what to do with this candy?"

Well, now imagine this rough decision for this three-year-old Captain. Here he is, three pieces of candy in his hand, he has a sister looking at him, he has a brother looking at him, how does he choose? Well, after a serious consideration, he gave one piece to his brother, and one piece to his sister, and he ate the other himself.

When I first told that story to a group of parents, one of the parents said, "Well, yes, but that's because you had taught him that it was right to share." And I said to the parent: "Oh, not accurate. I know that's not so, because a week before he was in a very similar situation, and he ate all three pieces of candy. Can you guess what happened to him the next day? Yes, he learned the next day that if we don't take other people's needs into consideration, that our own needs can never really be met. He really got a quick lesson on interdependence. It was thrilling for me to see how quickly children saw this when they really had choices to make. That we can never really take care of ourselves without showing equal concern for the needs of others."

As I said earlier, it's not easy for parents to let go of the concept of punishment. It's deeply ingrained in many parents that this is a necessity. And they can't imagine what else can be done when children are behaving in ways that might be harmful to themselves and other people. And they can't conceive of other options besides permissiveness, just letting it go, or using some kind of punitive action.

The Use of Force

I have found it very important to get across to such parents the concept of the protective use of force, and to get them to see the difference between the protective use of force and the punitive use of force. So when might we sometimes have to use a form of force with our children?

Well, the conditions calling for this would be when there isn't time to communicate, and the child's behavior might be injurious to themselves or other people. Or it could be that the person isn't willing to talk. So if a person isn't willing to talk, or there isn't time to talk, and meanwhile they are behaving in a way that is conflict with one of our needs, such as a need to protect people, we might have to use force. But now we have to see the difference between the protective and the punitive use of force. And one way that these two uses of force differ is in the thinking of the person who is engaging in the force.

In the punitive use of force, the person using such force has made a moralistic judgment of the other person, a judgment that implies some kind of wrongness that is deserving of punishment. This person deserves to suffer for what they've done. That's the whole idea of punishment. It comes out of these ideas that human beings are basically sinful, evil creatures and the corrective process is to make them penitent. We have to get them to see how terrible they are for doing what they're doing. And the way we make them penitent is to use some form of punishment to make them suffer. Sometimes this can be a physical punishment in the form of spanking, or it could be a psychological punishment in the form of trying to make them hate themselves, through making them feel guilty or ashamed.

The thinking behind the protective use of force is radically different. There is no consciousness that the other person is bad or deserving of punishment. Our consciousness is fully focused on our needs. We are conscious of what need of ours is in danger. But we are not in any way implying badness or wrongness to the child.

So this kind of thinking is one significant difference between the protective use of force and the punitive use of force. And this thinking is closely related to a second difference, the intent. In the punitive use of force, it is our intent to create pain and suffering for the other person, to make them sorry for what they did. In the protective use of force, our intent is only to protect. We protect our needs, and then later we'll have the communication necessary to educate the person. But at the moment it may be necessary to use the force to protect.

An example of this would be, when my children were young, we lived on a busy street. And they seemed to be fascinated with what was going on across the street, and they hadn't yet learned the dangers of what can happen to you if you just dart out in the street. I was certain that if we could talk long enough about this, I could educate them, but in the meantime I was afraid that they could be killed. So here was a case for the protective use of force, there not being the time to communicate about this before something serious could happen. So what I said to them was, "If I see you running in the street, I'm going to put you in the backyard where I don't have to worry about you getting hit by a car." Not long after I said that, one of them forgot and started to run in the street. I picked him up, carried him into the yard and put him there, not as a punishment, there was plenty to do in the yard, we had swings and a slide. I wasn't trying to make him suffer. I was only wanting to control the environment to meet my need for safety.

Now many parents say, "Well, isn't the child likely to see that as a punishment?" Well, if it has been intended as a punishment in the past, if the child has had a lot of experience seeing people as punitive, yes, they could still see it as a punishment. The main thing, though, is that we, the parents, are conscious of this difference, and that if we use force, we're certain that it is to protect and not to punish.

One way of remembering the purpose of the protective use of force is to see the difference between controlling the child and controlling the environment. In punishment we're trying to control the child by making the child feel bad about what they've done, to create an internal shame, guilt, or fear for what they have done.

In the protective use of force, our intent is not to control the child; it's to control the environment. To protect our needs until such time as we can have the quality of communication with the other person that's really necessary. It's somewhat like putting screens on our house to protect us from being bitten by mosquitoes. It's a protective use of force. We control the environment to prevent things happening that we don't want to happen.

Supportive Communities

Now, the way of parenting that I'm advocating here is quite different from how most people are parenting. And it's going to be difficult to consider radically different options in a world where punishment is so prevalent, and where you are likely to be misinterpreted if you don't use punishment and other coercive forms of parental behavior. It really helps people immensely if they are part of a supportive community that understands the concept of parenting I'm talking about, where they have the support to continue to do this in a world that doesn't often support it.

I know that I was always much better able to stay with what I'm now talking about if I was getting a lot of empathy myself from a supportive community, empathy for how hard it can be to be a parent at times. How easy it is to fall into old patterns. When I had other parents similarly trying to connect with their children as I was, it was very supportive to be able to talk to them, and to hear their frustrations, to have them hear mine. And I noticed that the more that I was part of such a community, the better able I was to stay with this process with my children, even under difficult conditions.

And one of the rewarding things that happened that was very encouraging and enriching, was a message I received from my daughter when she was very small. It was on a Sunday morning, the only time of the week when I could relax, a very precious time for me.

Now, on this particular Sunday morning, a couple called me up and asked if I would be willing to see them in counseling. They had a crisis in their relationship, and wanted me to work with them. And I agreed to do this without really looking inside myself and seeing what my own needs were, and how I was resenting their intrusion on my time to relax. While I had them in the living room counseling them, the doorbell rang and the police were bringing in a young woman for me to see. I had also been seeing her in counseling, and they had found her down on the railroad tracks. That was her way of letting me know she wanted to see me. She was too shy to call up and ask for another appointment. This was

her way, sitting on the railroad tracks, of letting me know she was in distress. She knew the train schedule better than anyone in town, so she knew the police would pick her up before the train got her.

So then the police left, and I had this young woman in the kitchen crying, and the couple in the living room, and I was going back and forth trying to lovingly counsel both. And while I was doing this, walking from one room to the other, looking at my watch, hoping I would still have time afterward to have some time to myself, the three children upstairs started fighting. So I bounded up the stairs, and I found something fascinating. I might write this up in a scientific paper some day: the effect of altitude on maniac behavior. Because you see, downstairs I was a very loving person, giving love to this couple, giving love to the young woman in the other room, but one flight of stairs up and I was a maniac.

I said to my children: "What's the matter with you? Can't you see that I have hurting people downstairs? Now get in your rooms!" And each went in their rooms and slammed the door just loud enough that I couldn't prove it was a slam, and when it happened the first time I got more outraged, and the second time even more. But fortunately the third time it happened, I don't know why, but it helped me see the humor in the situation. How easy it was for me to be loving of these people downstairs, but how quickly I could get brutal with my own family upstairs.

I took a deep breath and I went first in my oldest son's room and told him I was sad that I was taking out some feelings on him that I was afraid I really had in relation to the people downstairs. He understood, he just said: "It's OK, Dad. Nothing big." I went in my youngest son's room and got a pretty similar response from him. And when I went in my daughter's room and told her that I felt sad at the way I had talked to her, she came over and put her head on my shoulder and said: "It's OK, Daddy. Nobody's perfect."

What a precious message to hear. Yes, my children appreciate my efforts to relate to them in a caring way, in a compassionate way, an empathic way. But how relieving it is that they can understand my humanness and how difficult it can sometimes be.

So in closing I offer you that reassuring advice given to me by my daughter, that nobody's perfect, to remember that anything

that's worth doing is worth doing poorly. And the job of parenting, of course, is extremely worth doing, but we're going to do it poorly at times. If we're going to be brutal with ourselves when we're not perfect parents, our children are going to suffer for that.

I often tell the parents that I'm working with that hell is having children and thinking there's such a thing as a good parent. That if every time we're less than perfect, we're going to blame ourselves and attack ourselves, our children are not going to benefit from that. So the goal I would suggest is not to be perfect parents, it's to become progressively less stupid parents – by learning from each time that we're not able to give our children the quality of understanding that they need, that we're not able to express ourselves honestly. In my experience, each of these times usually means that we're not getting the emotional support we need as parents, in order to give our children what they need.

We can only really give in a loving way to the degree that we are receiving similar love and understanding. So that's why I strongly recommend that we look at how we might create a supportive community for ourselves among our friends and others, who can give us the understanding we need to be present to our children in a way that will be good for them and good for us.

I hope that something I've said here has helped you grow closer to becoming the parent you would like to be.