

## Good Parenting or Effective Parenting, What Is The Difference?

By Tammy Cox, LMSW

Good parents control their children. Right? When a child is throwing a temper tantrum at the supermarket everyone is thinking, if not saying, "If they were good parents they'd control that kid!" Well, perhaps not everyone thinks that, but when it's our child and we are the ones on center stage it usually feels like it. Unfortunately all too often this feeling or fear of being judged gets in the way of effective parenting.

"Good" parents feel the need to control their children in the immediate situation so they can avoid being judged by others or judging themselves harshly. They are also afraid that unless they control their children in the little things, they'll lose complete control over the big things. From this perspective it's easy to see how "good" parents are more in danger of being abusive, because they often have to take extreme measures to gain that control, especially if they have a strong willed child.

The more difficult the child, the more the parent feels compelled to control the child's behavior, no matter what the cost. This places a heavy burden on parents. As anyone with a strong willed child could attest, the more they try to control the child, the more out of control the child becomes. They find themselves doing and saying things they later feel terrible about and their self-esteem as parents plummets. That's just one of the costs of trying to control children.

The decadence and violence we now face in this country stems from our mistaken belief that it is possible and even necessary to control others, especially children, and our willingness as parents and as a society to use violence, fear, intimidation and humiliation to accomplish that goal. It's an unrealistic goal with no chance of true success!

In order to change this paradigm, it is important for parents and society to first recognize and then understand the high price tag attached to controlling children. And make no mistake about it! There is always a price for control.

The bill is often presented immediately in the form of uncontrollable tantrums, rages, destruction, aggression or other acts of revenge. Sometimes it is delayed and we all pay the price

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with rebellious teenagers on drugs, in gangs and in many other ways 'out of control.' Or it can even be delayed until children become adults with a myriad of problems, who are estranged from parents and society.

At the extreme the price can be exorbitant to society as a whole in the form of our most hardened criminals. In the best of cases it can still cost closeness in families. Attempting to control others always builds walls in relationships.

Most of us recognize that controlling children really just teaches them how to be controlled (and ultimately more subject to peer or gang pressures) or pushes them even more to avoid being controlled by rebelling against all authority. Even though we intuitively know that no one likes to be controlled and most of us admit it is virtually impossible to really control another person, we still keep trying to control our children. Why?

Perhaps the most significant reason is that we just don't know what else to do. The only tools we have are those handed down to us through the generations. These tools were forged for a very different time and place. Another important reason is that society as a whole is not willing to take responsibility for the cost (or effects) of control.

In fact, parents and school officials are constantly being charged with the job of controlling children. The main function of both is really to teach, guide and nurture so that we can raise generations of emotionally healthy adults who can function successfully in our democratic society. It is time for all of us to recognize that control doesn't work and start looking at more effective ways of dealing with our children.

The good news is we don't have to look far. The corporate world has been teaching such skills and techniques in management training for some time. One parent told me, "I've been using these tools as a supervisor at work for years with lots of success. It never occurred to me to use them with my children!" The tools he spoke of are based on mutual respect, empowerment, negotiation and encouragement instead of the old carrot and stick (reward and punishment) approach most of us grew up with.

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Effective parents draw on the knowledge that children really do want to live in closeness, cooperation and harmony with others – especially their parents. This attitude fosters working to gain cooperation instead of trying to control a child's behavior. Just as corporations are interested in long-term results, effective parents are more likely to look at the lessons they want their children to learn from any given situation and how that lesson will affect them in later years.

Effective parents have a kind and firm approach: kind in that they do nothing to hurt or disrespect their child and firm in that they do not allow the child to disrespect or infringe on the rights of others.

Some specific techniques are: speaking to their children as they would an adult, allowing them to have input in family decisions, taking responsibility for their own part in disagreements and promoting an atmosphere where all family members are held accountable for agreements in nonjudgmental and non-punitive ways.

Effective parents also enjoy the whole parenting process more, because they recognize it is a process and allow for their own, as well as their children's mistakes. They usually view mistakes as valuable learning experiences instead of failures.

There is more help for parents who are tired of trying to control their children and want to learn more effective tools to win cooperation. It is important to remember, however, that change in behavior is a process and will require time as well as commitment and desire. Once you have decided to become a more effective parent be gentle with yourself and get help. You don't have to do it alone!

There are several parenting classes that teach non-punitive methods of discipline. (Avoid those that teach ways to manipulate or punish your child – that's still control!) A couple of good books on practical and non-punitive parenting are *Children: The Challenge* by Rudolf Dreikurs M.D. and *Redirecting Children's Behavior* by Kathryn Kvols.

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