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When Good Parents Hit Their Kid

by Joyce Maynard

Here's a confession: I have hit my children!

I was angry when I did it--out of control, even. It scared my kids, and scared me too. It also filled me with shame.

This may be the worst of all the dirty little secrets of parenthood--worse than the times we've bought our son a candy bar to keep him happy at the supermarket, the times we've let our daughter watch cartoons all morning so we could talk on the phone. As much as we may share with friends our irritation over socks and toys scattered on the floor or our discouragement over piles of laundry that never go away, this is one trial of parenthood that many of us suffer alone. I believed for years that if I ever told a friend how I sometimes yelled at my kids--let alone that I slapped my son--she'd think I was a bad mother.

It isn't only our children who become overtired, overstressed, and out of control at times. We do, too. In fact, few experiences are more likely to bring about these feelings than the 24-hour-a-day job of raising young kids. But where we all recognize and accept that now and then our children are going to act out, few parents afford themselves any margin at all for similar frailties.

It's been years now since I slapped my daughter or my younger son. I made a promise to myself, and to my kids, that I'll never let it happen again. For me, a crucial part of learning how to avoid surrendering to that impulse has been to understand the way it develops, and--most important--to talk about it with other parents.

Surprisingly, nearly everybody I spoke with had at one time or another hit his or her child. And for nearly every one, it was a source of shame. The parents I'm talking about aren't the ones who habitually smack their kids or who can't make a trip to the supermarket without yelling at them, yanking their arms, and calling them names. I'm talking about the kind of parent who would look with horror and shock at those who abuse their children, the kind of parent who has probably even made a conscious choice not to spank.

There was a lot of comfort for me in the simple discovery that I was far from the only such mother who'd raised a hand in anger to her child. Most important, there was a lot of support in the experiences of parents who'd confronted the issue of hitting a child, and learned how to avoid it.

From the time he was an infant, my son Willy was the most challenging of my three children. My daughter, Audrey, would voluntarily send herself to her room when she'd misbehaved in some minor way (even as a toddler), and you had only to say the word "no" to my first son, Charlie, and his lower

lip would start to quiver, he was so anxious to please us. But Willy revealed himself early as a fighter. Almost from the moment of his birth, he seemed bent on locating the boundaries we set and venturing past them. Tell him to keep his food on the plate or in his mouth, and he'd throw a handful on the floor. Tell him to stay away from his sister's dollhouse, and he'd make a beeline for it.

I tried the calm, rational approach: two warnings, with consequences clearly described and carried out if necessary. When that failed to have any effect on his behavior, I decided to alter my no-spanking policy.

The danger with spanking, I learned, may have less to do with the act of spanking itself than with the spirit in which it's done. In my case, it worked when I was totally under control and delivered no more than a couple of quick, firm pats on the bottom. But if I was upset, instead of being about regaining control and order, the spanking became another out-of-control behavior. He hit his brother; I hit him. Was that really the message I wanted to send? I decided it wasn't. But, of course, even when a parent makes the conscious choice not to spank her child, the kinds of situations that may bring it about don't disappear. Neither do the feelings a parent may experience that moved her to lash out at her child.

"I'd read many books on child-rearing and firmly believed it was wrong to hit a child," says Shelly Whymer, a mother of three, in Pasadena, California. "But the stress of hurrying kids off to school and myself off to work on time, or my anger over the children's inability to play peacefully together for three minutes, sometimes made me into a monster." One time, she admits, "I was so angry from trying to drive in heavy traffic while the three of them fought in the backseat that I broke my front tooth from clenching my jaw."

Where that mother bottled up her frustrations tightly enough to hurt her mouth, many women find the opposite happening. "I used to hold everything in for a long time," says Jennifer Catrell, a full-time mother of five, ages 2 to 8, in Nashua, New Hampshire. "But it kept building up, like water against a dam. One of the kids would start ripping wallpaper off the walls, and then the others did it too. All of a sudden, it was as if the pressure reached critical mass, and I'd just explode. That's when I'd spank one of them."

She always regretted it. "Hitting only made me feel worse," she says. "I hugged them and apologized afterward and spent extra time with whomever I lost my temper at."

Dennis Fielder, of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, says the one and only time he hit his son, now 7, came when he was putting his aging mother in a nursing home and selling her house. "Tim made this comment to me about how he did not really like being around his grandmother, because she was always complaining and telling the same stories over and over," he says. "I didn't even think-I just smacked him. It only came to me after that Tim was actually saying, out loud, all the things I'd been feeling myself, things that I felt incredibly guilty about."

Of all the parents I've spoken to about this, none have done any real, physical harm to their child. The damage lay in the feelings that surrounded the violence and in the potential terror to a young child of seeing his parent and primary protector turning on him.

We all know our children are going to exhibit inappropriate, frustrating, and even, crazy--making behavior now and then. In other words, they're going to act like children. So the questions parents need to ask themselves are:

What do I do when that happens? And which situations are most likely to precipitate an inappropriate response from me?

Every time I've hit my son or daughter, they've been wired up and out of control, and I've been under unusual stress," says Clara Rechnitz, a mother of two in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. "Realistically, they're

going to be wired, up and out of control now and then. And I'm frequently going to be under stress. So what's to keep me from behaving the same way next time?" There's no magic solution, of course, but the risk of hitting a child is substantially diminished once you've made a conscious decision to pursue an alternative response to anger. When my own children were small, and I'd feel myself becoming dangerously worn down (usually at the end of an afternoon), I'd announce I was having a quiet time. For me, that meant sitting in a particular chair in our kitchen, with a cup of tea. Maybe because I used quiet times sparingly, and saved them for when I needed them most, my children nearly always respected them.

Another mother actually sits in her closet with a cordless phone and calls her sister. "She and I have a code we use with each other," says the fulltime at-home mother of two preschoolers in Pensacola, Florida. "I dial her number and say "red alert," and she goes into gear. It's not that she has anything new or surprising to tell me--it's always "Fix a cup of tea and put on some soft music." But just hearing the sound of her voice and getting to talk about how I feel is usually enough to calm me down.

For some parents, putting distance between themselves and the child or children who've been driving them around the bend is the essential element in regaining control. Others head for the eye of the storm, embracing their child rather than separating from him. One mother says she takes a walk with her son and daughter when she feels she could lose it. Another gets in the tub with her daughter or takes a nap with her. One father of two says that when he senses he's in danger of losing control, he piles everyone in the car and heads to the children's room of the town library: "I guess what I'd looking for, when I do that, is partly the calm that comes from reading books together. But partly, I want to be surrounded by witnesses."

One of the most helpful things I did with my son Willy was to stop everything (which once meant abandoning an overflowing cart in the supermarket and heading out of the store) and get into our car. Sometimes, we'd end up talking. Other times, I'd hold him. Other times, we'd just sit there. I'd close my eyes. He might wail. But sooner or later, maybe out of sheer boredom and lack of stimuli, he'd quiet down. Then we'd get up and resume our lives. Realistically, even the most sensible strategies won't always work. I slapped my daughter two or three times when she said things to me so deeply disrespectful I felt as if I'd been stabbed. I slapped my younger son twice, both at moments when, more painful than if he had defied me, he ignored me altogether.

The times I've struck one of my children have taught me why I don't ever want to do so again. I want them to grow up believing they can trust me. When a child experiences the sensation of his larger, stronger, more powerful parent raising a hand to him, he may not feel wholly safe with her.

There is another unfortunate thing that happens when you strike your child in anger: You significantly undercut your ability to challenge inappropriate behavior effectively. Each of the times I've struck one of my kids, my actions have come in response to actions of theirs that did, in fact, deserve to be challenged. But each time I've ended up apologizing, instead of extracting the apology their actions warranted.

What's to be done, if that happens? What does a parent do even when she's hit her child, and she knows she should not have, and she is sick with guilt and regret and shame about it?

Talk to your child about it. This will not undo the experience. But where hitting him tears the two of you apart, hugging him, telling him you are sorry, and letting him tell you how he feels can bring you back together.

My son Willy was 7 the day I slapped him hard enough to leave a red mark on his cheek. Afterward--after the angry words, the apologies, the tears--we lay on the couch together, just holding each other, not saying anything for a long time. I knew I wanted to promise him it would never happen again, and I wanted more than words to seal my promise. So we went outside and took a walk. We went down our

street to a stream where some wildflowers grew, where we sailed boats a few times when he was younger. We still didn't talk. "Let's always remember this moment," I said to him, and I froze it in my head: the sound of the water, the sun on the trees, the smell of the air, the memory of my son's tears and my own. Because sometimes, I think, the best insurance you can have against repeating a mistake is to remember how it made you feel the first time.

I do remember. And I have never hit my son again. I know he remembers too. And he believes my word is good. He knows his mother makes mistakes sometimes (what else is new?), but he also knows I learn from them: He has seen me change. And he has changed his behavior too.

I know he may always carry, in his head, a picture of me slapping him. But he will have another picture too--a picture of the two of us, vowing to do better in the future.

How to Keep Your Cool

by Tracy Eberhart

Even the most mild-mannered parent might lash out in a way that frightens both her and her child. Don't worry if once or twice you have expressed anger by hitting your child, says Susan Heitler, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Denver-but it should not become routine. Heitler's has suggestions for keeping calm in heated moments:

- Address misbehavior when it starts. It is better to address your child immediately at the first thrown grape than to explode after the floor is littered with fruit pulp.
- Learn to recognize situations that get you riled time and again. Try to avoid them or to rethink the way you do things. Change your routine if one part of the day always leads to an outburst.
- Be aware of how easily and quickly you can become enraged. If you find yourself becoming angry on a regular basis, seek professional help to avoid acting on your anger if it is already at the boiling point:
- Distance yourself. If you are losing control, send your child out of the room or leave the room yourself.
- Do not discipline while you are upset. Go back to the problem when you are calm. Addressing the situation once you have cooled off will keep you from acting rashly.

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