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Ouch! That Hurts!

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BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Recently, I was sitting in a restaurant when a young boy, four or maybe five years old, walked by, softly crying. Behind him came an older brother, his mother and grandmother (I presume). When he sat down, I had direct access to watch his tearful face. He continued to whimper quietly until his mother got right up in his face and threatened not to let him eat, and pulled a sandwich away from him. When he became more alarmed, she slapped him. *Ouch!*

The next day I was eating in a local restaurant when two little girls sat down with their mom and dad. The older child, maybe seven, was quietly upset by something, and her dad threatened that if she didn't straighten up they would leave the restaurant and none would have supper. Yes, she straightened up, but there was no joy on her little face throughout the meal. She was, I suspect, hurt and embarrassed.

Why do parents do that? I was infuriated both times (and I fully realize I don't know the whole story). But why do parents and other adults often think they need to make a child feel worse before he will do better?

My faith was somewhat restored when we sat next to two couples last night, with five little girls between them (the oldest maybe seven and the youngest 20 months). Waiting for their orders, which didn't come for a long time, the parents were involved with all the girls. They had fun playing little games with them, let them explore the small canisters of cheese and chili peppers on the tables, and kept them engaged. When the littlest one became restless, the mother got up from the table and let her active, little self explore a bit. Everyone in the group left the restaurant unscathed, happy and well-fed.

In his book, *Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World*, H. Stephen Glenn identifies five distinct behaviors that undermine self-confidence and block trust from forming in relationships with our children — directing, assuming, expecting, rescuing or explaining (instead of allowing them to experience the consequences of their behavior), and putting forth demands such as "Why can't you ever..."; "How come you never..."; "Surely you realize..." and "You'll never learn."

The first two incidents illustrate directing, assuming and expecting. Briefly, the antidotes for these are encouraging/inviting cooperation, substituting dialogue and patience for assuming, and recognizing and celebrating incremental successes. Sadly, these barriers all reduce the capacity of a relationship to support, affirm and encourage the less-mature person, and diminishes his or her self-confidence.

Young children often are overwhelmed by their emotions. They know what is expected of them, but they are powerless (at least for a few minutes) to get their feelings in check in order to act as their adults expect. What they need is encouraging responses, not punishment!

When his children were young, a friend told me, "I think the major job of a parent is to civilize their children." There's a lot of truth to that! We want our children to observe and follow the rules of decorum of our culture. It is our responsibility to help them learn how to be successful in our society. We want them to act civilized, so we won't be criticized as well.

My plea to parents, and other important adults in children's lives, is to stop and ask yourself, "Is this the best I can do for this child?" Remember, he or she is God's child, too!

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