

*Names are changed to honor client confidentiality*

## **The Bent Twig**

The poet Virgil said, “As the twig is bent, the tree inclines.”

I was reminded of that expression while walking through a crowded department store. I noticed a little girl directly in my path. She was three years old, at the most. As I got closer, her mother abruptly yanked her out of the way and harshly scolded her: “You’re in everyone’s way. That’s rude!”

Still imprinted in my mind is the portrait of that crushed little girl—sobbing as one does when deeply heartbroken. In the fleeting seconds during which that event took place, had I given voice to the heavy, sick feeling in my soul, I would have said to that mother, “Oh, I wish you hadn’t bludgeoned your little girl’s self-esteem on my account. And do you have any idea the amount of hate you just injected into her?”

But in that brief and unexpected moment, I didn’t know what to say. In an effort to counter the harshness, though, I tried to meet the little girl’s eyes—smiling reassuringly—but my attempt was denied, for the child buried her head in her coat, an understandable response to being subjected to shame and embarrassment.

To learn standards of behavior, it is not necessary to have our spirit pummeled. Many adults walk around with a negative opinion of themselves, conditioned to believing they are inherently flawed and bad. Such people have suffered from an abundance of the type of treatment I witnessed in the department store.

Stacey, a former client, is a good example. In one of our counseling sessions, she declared, “I don’t feel worthy of the air I breathe.” That belief was formed by being the constant target of her mother’s anger and criticism. As a result, she began to wonder: “What’s wrong with me?”

I am sure that the little girl’s mother dearly loves her and felt it was her job to teach lessons on being proper. Sadly, though, this mother apparently doesn’t understand a very important fact: Young children are incapable of understanding social expectations; they don’t know how to be sensitive to others’ feelings and needs. It makes no sense to reprimand a child for what she doesn’t understand. It’s akin to getting chewed out by the boss for something in which we haven’t yet received training.

If I’m teaching a class on knitting, I will achieve only minimal success if I expect the students to already know how to knit. Under such circumstances, my manner will invariably demonstrate impatience, anger and criticism. Such qualities don’t enhance the learning process—they hinder it.

Does scolding teach desired behaviors? Are dogs trained by being scolded and undermined?  
No.

Almost certainly, the little girl learned more about fearing her mother than learning about the courtesy of not blocking aisles. She also learned that innocent mistakes are unforgivable and deserving of unrestrained fury. If treated in this manner repeatedly, a permanent poor self-image is likely to form.

As with short-sighted knitting instructors, parents err when they believe their children should automatically be proficient at social skills. It's unrealistic to expect children—of any age—to have the wisdom and foresight for which an adult is capable.

Parents who see themselves as coaches and mentors—instead of behavior cops—tolerate imperfection because they expect it. They understand that the learning process includes making mistakes; they appreciate the evolutionary nature of learning. Consequently, they steer instead of chastise. The situation in the department store called for patience and gentle handling, not harshness.

As parents, it is our duty to plant the seeds of respectful social behavior. We do this best by showing, not just telling. If I want my children to be respectful and sensitive to others, I exhibit those qualities myself. On the contrary, the mother in the department store wasn't modeling the respect and sensitivity she was expecting her child to demonstrate.

A more powerful approach would have entailed the mother gently pulling the girl over to her. Speaking softly and warmly, she would have said something like, "Let's move out of the way, so other people can get through."

Such an approach would have planted an important seed in terms of learning respect and caring regard for others, while fostering a positive self-respect.

In choosing how best to direct and guide our children, we need to ask: Do their spines become straighter or bent as a result of my style?"