

Coercion: The Real Parent Trap Part I (of 2)

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[This is the first part of the first article in the first issue of Glenn Latham's *Parenting Prescriptions* magazine. As one of the four Founders of TIBI and a *Behaviorology Today* staff writer whose work has appeared in the pages of this journal before, Glenn had planned other submissions (before his unexpected death). So we are thankful to have received permission to occasionally reprint one of his helpful, science-based practical articles for parents and other child caregivers. (Readers can obtain all four issues of *Parenting Prescriptions* magazine through the "Products" section of www.parentingprescriptions.com which is the web site that Glenn established as an information resource.) The other part of this article (Part 2) will appear in the next issue (Volume II, Number 2, Fall 2008).—Ed.]

Welcome to the first [article in] *Parenting Prescriptions*, a newsletter that provides proven formulas for parenting with love. We at *Parenting Prescriptions* have a vision. We have a clear view of where we are going, how we are going to get there, and what we hope to accomplish in the process. What we hope to accomplish is this: We want to help parents get coercion out of their homes and out of their relationships with their children.

We also want to help parents replace coercion with noncoercive parenting skills, or parenting prescriptions. Toward that end, this article explains what coercion is and gives some examples of how to replace coercion with noncoercive parenting.

Coercive Parenting: Parenting Skills that Stink

Coercive parenting is negative parenting, which attempts to compel children to act or to choose in a particular way. Coercive parenting puts children down, draws undue attention to children's weaknesses and failures, and leaves children feeling unsafe in their own home and family. Consider this example of a father using coercive parenting:

"What a terrible report card! You're no dummy. Why do you do this to yourself? Don't you get it? This is your life we are talking about. Fail in school and you fail at life. Don't be so stupid! Is this what I go to work every day for? To pay taxes to support your schooling, then have

you throw it back in my face every nine weeks with a rotten report card? Get those grades up, Buddy, or you're dead meat!"

Does this tirade sound familiar? Too often, not only does it sound familiar, it is right on the mark. In fact, in this instance, it's a direct quote. (For examples of other negative parenting habits, see "Eight Common Coercive Behaviors" [the sidebar on page 38].)

Let's analyze this angry, negative, coercive outburst. Does the parent explain to the child what he was supposed to do? No. Does the parent say anything that would give the child a reason to do better? No. Does the parent say anything that would bond the parent to the child so that in the future the two can work out their differences in harmony and good will? No.

How do you think the child will respond to the parent's outburst? Is there any chance that the child will respond in the following manner?

"Thank you so much for being so direct and candid with me. Surely this is just the nudge I need to get off dead center and start moving ahead with my life. How could I have been so selfish? My, my, how I appreciate the long hours you put in at work, knowing you are doing it all for me. Well, my days of thoughtlessness and selfishness are over. And all because you care enough to take your valuable time to give me the tongue-lashing I need. What a parent. What a dear, dear parent!"

Let me ask again, is there any chance that the child would respond in this way?

In keeping with this brain-wrenching question, brace yourself for a tough multiple-choice question: What would the child most likely do?

- A. Get away from his father
- B. Stay away from his father
- C. Get even with his father by getting worse grades next time
- D. All of the above
- E. None of the above

To help you answer this question, I am going to give you some important information about coercion. After all, it wouldn't be fair to ask a question about material that hasn't been covered. (Although this reminds me of the time one of my college professors told the class: "Don't worry if I don't cover all of the course material during class, because I will cover it in the exam.") This information will not only help you solve the multiple-choice question but will also help you solve more perplexing parenting problems in the future.

Coercion is like the smell of a skunk: We want to get away from it, and we want to stay away from it. But even worse, we want to get even with the animal (or person) responsible for it.

Dr. Murray Sidman has been a major contributor to basic and applied behavior analysis since 1952. [“Behavior analysis” is a name that has been used for naturalism-informed behavior science, especially during the period when such science and the non-natural science discipline of psychology shared their history; see Ledoux, 1997/2002.—Ed.] He [Sidman] is also the author of more than 100 scientific papers about behavior. In his book *Coercion and Its Fallout* [Sidman, 2001] Dr. Sidman effectively teaches that coercion makes a person want to escape (get away), avoid (stay away), and counter-coerce (get even). *Parenting Prescriptions* will teach you the skills you need to get coercion out of your homes and families because, in the long run, the two cannot coexist. Eventually, one has to go. Either coercion stays and the child goes, or coercion goes and the child stays. It’s as simple as that.

Noncoercive Parenting: The Sweet Smell of Success

Now that you understand how destructive coercion can be, let’s revisit the encounter between the parent and the child about the report card. This time, however, the parent uses noncoercive parenting skills.

Parent: “I’m sorry you chose to do things other than your schoolwork. What can you do to get the kind of grades you’re capable of getting?”

Child: “I did the best I could. I get bad grades because my teachers don’t like me. It wouldn’t make any difference how hard I worked, I’d never get good grades. Besides, my classes are dumb. In fact, the only think dumber than my classes are my teachers.”

Parent: “I can see that you have some strong feelings about your classes and your teachers. Still, what can you do to bring your grades up?”

Note: The parent does not respond to the child’s comment about “dumb” teachers and “dumb” classes. These types of comments are called *behavioral noise*, and you should not pay any attention to such comments. (We’ll discuss behavioral noise in later [articles from] *Parenting Prescriptions*.) Instead, the parent remains focused on what the child needs to do to get better grades.

Child: “I already told you, my teacher’s hate me! No matter how hard I work, or how many assignments I hand in, I’ll never get good grades.”

Parent: “You just mentioned two really important things. Thanks. That’s good. You mentioned hard work and handing in your assignments. Super. What else do you need to do to improve your grades?”

Note: Do you see how the parent focuses on what should be done, rather than on what wasn’t done? This is the key to noncoercive parenting. Also, notice that the parent emphasizes what the child needs to do to improve his grades, rather than what the parent will do to the child if he doesn’t improve his grades.

Child: “Look, I’ll do my best. But don’t hassle me if my grades don’t come up. I can’t make my teachers like me, you know.”

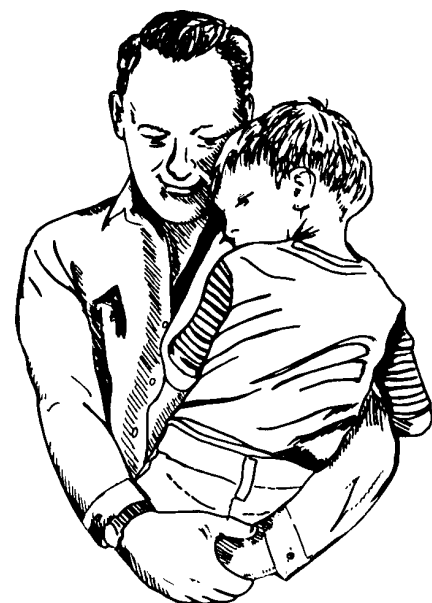
Parent: “Great! I can’t wait to see your next report card. Now let’s go shoot some hoops.”

I bet I know what you’re thinking: “Yeah, fat chance, who are you trying to fool?” Well, it’s no joke. This is virtually a work-for-word dialogue between a father I recently worked with and his 14-year-old son. The boy was failing all of his subjects when they had this discussion. Nine weeks later the boy’s next report card was all As with one A- in algebra. More importantly, however, the boy’s mother told me excitedly, “Best of all, (my son) and his dad are back together again. I would never have believed it.”

When coercion is gone, when the relationship with the parent is safe, parents and their children come together. It is predictable. It is a law of human nature....✻

References

- Sidman, M. (2001). *Coercion and Its Fallout—Revised Edition*. Boston, MA: Authors Cooperative. (Originally published in 1989.)
- Ledoux, S.F. (1997). An introduction to the origins, status, and mission of behaviorology: An established science with developed applications and a new name. In S.F. Ledoux. (2002). *Origins and Components of Behaviorology—Second Edition* (pp. 3-24). Canton, NY: ABCs. Reprinted (2004) in *Behaviorology Today*, 7 (1), 27-41.✻



See the “Eight Common Coercive Behaviors” sidebar on the next page....]

Eight Common Coercive Behaviors

Glenn Latham / *Parenting Prescriptions* sidebar
(part of the *Coercion: The Real Parent Trap* article)✦

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If parents use coercion to respond to children's inappropriate behavior, this coercion negatively affects the relationship between parents and children. In fact, coercive behavior divides parents from children. (By the way, these behaviors also divide students from teachers.)

Over the years, I have identified eight common coercive behaviors. I call these behaviors *parenting poison*.

- ✦ **Criticism** or finding fault with children
- ✦ **Sarcasm** or making fun of children
or ridiculing children
- ✦ **Threats** or warning children that you will perform
a hostile act if children don't quickly behave better
- ✦ **Questioning** or asking children to explain
why they misbehaved
- ✦ **Logic** or trying to reason with children
- ✦ **Arguing** or trying to convince children
that you are right and they are wrong
- ✦ **Physical or Verbal Force** or hitting or shouting
at children to force them to behave
- ✦ **Despair** or feeling hopeless, beaten, and out of control

By avoiding these coercive behaviors, you can calmly respond to your children's inappropriate behavior. When you stay calm and understanding, your children will feel safe and will want to be close to you. In future [articles from] *Parenting Prescriptions*, I will discuss these behaviors in more detail.☺

