

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

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[This is the second 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](http://www.parentingprescriptions.com) which is the web site that Glenn established as an information resource.) The first part of this article (Part 1) appeared in the last issue (Volume 11, Number 1, Spring 2008).—Ed.]

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Coercion makes a person want to escape (run away), avoid (stay away), and counter-coerce (get even).... (Murray Sidman, 2001)

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As mentioned earlier [See Part 1.—Ed.] coercion makes people want to counter-coerce.

## Counter-coercion: The Destructive Results of Coercion

The tragic evidence of counter-coercion is everywhere:

- ✧ A father murders his infant son to get even with his wife.
- ✧ Angry students murder teachers and classmates to get revenge for a perceived wrong done to them.
- ✧ Ethnic Albanians burn and loot the homes of Serbs because the Serbs burned and looted the Albanians' homes.

- ✧ People driving in traffic shout obscenities to other drivers, offend them with obscene gestures, and even shoot them to get even with them for "getting in their way."
- ✧ Children do exactly what their parents don't want them to do. For example, a 17-year-old girl told her mother, "I know I'm not supposed to do what I'm doing. I don't even like what I'm doing. But if I behave as I am supposed to, Daddy wins, and I can't let that happen." A 19-year-old girl recently told me she got pregnant twice out of wedlock, got her tongue pierced, and got a tattoo on her back "just to [annoy] my parents."

Counter-coercion is everywhere—in fact, it's always been everywhere. The real tragedy is that since society knows so little about human behavior—how to mold it correctly in the first place and how to fix it when it isn't right—society tends to respond to inappropriate behavior with more of the same. I am reminded of a sign I saw on the wall in a workplace: "The flogging will continue until the behavior improves."

Drs. Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) explain this problem: "Parents of [misbehaving] children have a firm belief that the harsher the punishments they mete out, the more likely it is the child will remember it and that will be effective. Such parents were often exposed to harsh punishments themselves and tend to replicate it with their own children." (p. 363)

Coercion breeds coercion. It is passed along from parent to child to parent. You should do and say to your children only what you want said and done to your grandchildren.

Counter-coercion is in-kind responding of the worst kind, and it virtually never makes anything better. The Serbs and the ethnic Albanians have been counter-coercing for 600 years! And so it is with the Protestants and the Catholics in Northern Ireland, the Arabs and the Israelis in the Middle East, and the Hatfields and the McCoys. Counter-coercion tears whole societies and cultures apart. Worst of all, counter-coercion tears families apart.

## Responding Noncoercively

There is a better way to mold human behavior, and we know what it is. It isn't metal detectors in schools, it isn't making parents legally responsible for the misbehavior of their children, it isn't more police, prisons, and punishment. The better way to mold human behavior is to respond noncoercively.

I recently completed a 20-year study that focused on the public and private schools of America (and beyond). Based on this study, I have written a book entitled *Behind the Schoolhouse Door—Managing Chaos with Science, Skills, and Strategies* (Latham, 2002). On of these skills is

the ability to respond noncoercively to the inappropriate behavior of students.

I had the following experience when I was doing some research in an alternative high school. This experience illustrates the power of responding noncoercively.

While I was observing a math class, a student leaped to her feet without any warning and began wildly cursing another student she accused of “tormenting” her. As I typically do when assessing the effects of treating such behaviors, I quickly set my stopwatch to record how long the disruptive behavior continued, given the teacher’s response to it.

To my delight, the teacher retained his professional dignity. His face registered not the slightest annoyance. In complete control, the teacher approached the enraged and quietly said, calling her by name, “It seems that you are upset about something. Would you care to tell me about it?”

All eyes were glued on these two disparate figures standing before them—one with a flushed face, trembling, loud, profane, and out of control, and the other serene, composed, calm, and quiet. In the presence of such a teacher, the girl, though trembling and very angry, grew slightly calmer.

“I hate this [expletive],” she said loudly, pointing to the boy in the seat beside her. “All he does is make my life miserable. He doesn’t know nothin’ ’cept how to make my life miserable. I wish that [expletive] would die—right now. Right where he’s sitting!”

The teacher replied empathetically and quietly, “I can understand you’d be upset. No one likes to be tormented. I’m sorry this happened.” In a room so quiet you could hear a pin drop, the teacher and the student just stood there looking at each other. The anger drained from the girl’s face.

Quietly, almost pleadingly, she asked, “Mr. Porter, would you ask him to leave me alone?” She sat down, put her head on her arms which were folded across her desk, and quietly cried.

The teacher turned to the other student and gently, softly said, “I know that sometimes it’s fun to provoke people and to get a rise out of them, but what is the appropriate, mature thing for a young man your age to do?”

The second student, hardly able to make eye-to-eye contact with the teacher, replied, “I know, Mr. Porter. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. Honest.”

The teacher, as he said thanks, patted the boy on the back. Turning to walk away, he gently tapped the girl’s elbow. I looked at my watch. Fifty-seven seconds. The episode was over in 57 seconds!

Furthermore, the entire class remained composed, and all the students returned without incident to their schoolwork. No one was hustled off to the principal’s office for disciplinary measures, no school psychologists

were called in to conduct endless testing to find out what went haywire in the girl’s psyche, no parents were called in for meetings “to get to the bottom of things,” no psychiatric exams were conducted to determine which medication the girl should be taking, and no bad-conduct reports were filed with the school district. None of these actions were necessary, thousands of dollars were saved, and the school remained orderly. Why? Because a teacher had the ability [skill] to respond noncoercively to the spontaneous outburst of an angry student.

### Conclusion

Coercive behaviors poison parent–children relationships. To improve your relationship with your children and to help them be happy and behave appropriately, you must eliminate these poisons from your home. *Parenting Prescriptions* will provide you with the antidotes to these poisons. That is, *Parenting Prescriptions* will explain how noncoercive parenting can help you mend your relationship with your children and positively influence your children’s behavior. I’ll see you next issue with just what the doctor ordered!✦

### References

- Latham, G.I. (2002). *Behind the Schoolhouse Door—Managing Chaos with Science, Skills, and Strategies*. Logan, UT: P&T ink.
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