

## ***Parenting the demanding generation***

When thinking of ways to support children's wellbeing – the idea of boundaries, rules and the consequences of breaking them, along with the notion of exerting authority over children would to many seem a contradiction in terms - or a throwback to the 1950s. In the recent trend toward so-called positive discipline, parents have been encouraged to be friends with their children, to provide them with choices in many matters and to negotiate more. To enhance a child's wellbeing 'You've got to accentuate the positive, Eliminate the negative'. However, being warm and friendly is not the same thing as trying to be best friends with our children.

Although paved with the best of intentions, the result hasn't always been what we expected. Without clear boundaries and clear figures of authority children develop a sense of entitlement, self-centredness *and* they are also less happy, secure and socially viable.

In addition to looking at current studies, I travel extensively to a variety of cultures including North Korea, Bhutan, Mali, Tonga, Myanmar, Borneo, Laos, Iran, Vietnam, Bolivia, China, Japan, Burkina Faso, Far Eastern Siberia, Sumatra, South Korea, Philippines, Chile, Jordan and Cambodia, among others, to observe child welfare and development. This is a marvellous reality check against the fashions and trends in child rearing that come and go in our own culture. I'm interested in identifying universal common denominators for child wellbeing that appear in the most remote and unrelated places on earth. I found that **although our society may have 'moved on', children's needs have not ... and they never will: clear boundaries and figures of authority along with discipline and consequences are a basic health and wellbeing requirement for all children across time and space.**

### **Authority**

Even as we chant 'put children first' ever louder, we have actually retreated from parenting. We are confused: unable to confidently distinguish between being authoritative and authoritarian, many of us have chosen what appears to be the safer option. And many teachers, policemen, doctors – have gone to great lengths to obscure obvious signs of hierarchy and control. This loosening-up of overt hierarchy and power relations may seem cosy and kind, but it has helped to undermine the authority that children desperately need.

There seems to be an unconscious misperception that authority and sensitivity, love and compassion are in some way mutually exclusive, and that by exerting authority (including compulsion and threats) we, in some way, diminish the caring we want our children to have and the love and trust we want to feel from them.

But our concerns are absolutely groundless. In 2009, Britain's Institute of Education published a study involving 12,500 families and children, combined with a major research review, which concluded: 'Multiple studies have documented that children who have authoritative parents – that is, both firm disciplinarians and warm, receptive caregivers – are more competent than their peers at different developmental periods including preschool, school age and adolescence ... contrary to popular understanding, "authoritative" parenting leads to better-adjusted, more competent children.'

Those who require more research in order to feel less queasy about exerting authority over our children may be interested to hear that between 2005 and 2009, cross-cultural studies with titles such as, 'Rules, legitimacy of parental authority, and obligation to obey in Chile, the Philippines, and the United States' have found strong links between rules and parental control and authority and children having fewer behavioural problems and higher 'self-efficacy'. An authoritative parenting style also leads the child to disclose more to their parents which is later "important in maintaining positive, respectful and trusting relations during adolescents' transition to autonomy'."

### **Being Friends?**

Some parents have difficulty in setting and enforcing limits and boundaries for their children, unconsciously deciding that being their friend is more important than being their parent. But stop and think: friends are equals so when parents try to be friends with their children, it sends a confusing message. When our children break our rules, we'll need to enforce the right behaviour, but our children won't understand the change of role. This conflict of interest creates inconsistency in our role as parents and undermines our children's feelings of security.

Our role in our children's life is to be their parent, not their friend. This need not be an adversarial relationship, but simply one in which we make it clear who is in charge. This gives our children a solid, secure base from which they can explore the world. Despite what they say or do, our children realise underneath it all that they are, in fact, children, and don't know how to 'do' life yet. If they feel that no one is in command and behaving like a parent, they'll often challenge our (lack of) authority, trying to provoke us into rising to the occasion.

### **Boundaries**

As an honorary school-gate mother, I've had a great deal of time to observe modern parents who, when they say 'No' to their child, say it almost with a sense of apology in their voice and a lack of conviction in their demeanour, which often reeks of acquiescence. This is part of a modern belief that we should negotiate with our children because it seems more democratic – and it's also just plain nicer to endear ourselves to them, as opposed to challenging and upsetting them. This also reflects a misplaced concern that to demand our children's compliance, through compulsion if necessary, will in some way be counterproductive and even harmful, quashing their character and preventing them from expressing themselves. Parenting with flimsy boundaries might make us feel as if we are being 'nice', but while at first our children may enjoy getting away with things, they will eventually feel that their parents don't actually care enough to do the hard work of parenting. A child who feels his parents don't care about him will feel *unsupported* and is likely to experience more problems. As is the case with authority, boundaries make children feel safe and secure. And while they may not act or look happy when we impose a consequence, setting boundaries and enforcing them shows children that they actually matter to us – that they are loved enough to motivate a tired, overworked parent to deal with them, as opposed to taking the easier option and conceding. We'd all prefer to enlist our child's co-operation and even endear ourselves to them in the process – but parenting also involves the not-so-feelgood aspects....

### **'Natural Justice'**

It certainly isn't children who have an aversion to boundaries and punishment. They seem to possess a sense of what we could loosely call natural justice. A predictable fair system of rules and consequences provides them with a sense of coherence. Far from diminishing a child's world, restrictions and consequences are liberating. But parents, and society as a whole, feel ambivalent about embracing the idea of

punishment too enthusiastically, concerned that it may perhaps break a child's spirit. Although some 'experts' emphasise the philosophical differences between punishment and discipline, in reality, judicious punishment is often a necessary part of discipline and can take many different forms. Real-time punishment, such as shouting at our child at exactly the point at which they are doing something wrong may instil discipline, guiding them and teaching them to understand limits at home or in other settings.

There is certainly nothing wrong with our children knowing – *feeling*– our anger being vented through their punishment, provided they know – *feel* – that we love them. A key part of their social and emotional development is to learn that their behaviour has direct effects on the emotions and behavioural reactions of others. As parents, we are introducing them to this concept in a controlled and loving way.

We may empathise with a child's desire to assert his or her own will, but we are still the adult, and should always act like it. We can offer our children choices, but we cannot allow their preferences to run our lives. As parents and teachers, we must still provide structure and support for our children, even if it doesn't taste good. The relevance of this spreads far and wide: clear and consistently enforced limits and boundaries teach our children the protocol of life, so they can grow up, fit in and cope.

Though it may take years, our children will appreciate it, especially when they have children of their own.

**Shift children's self-focus** – encourage children to help others and to think and feel for others. This can be done on a casual ad hoc personal basis or through more organized means – Scouts, Brownies, community/school schemes and activities involving volunteering and informal helping.

**Deferred gratification/impulse control** – encourage and reward it!

**Ration children's recreational screen time** – don't allow The 3-parent family to move into your house

**Increase green-time** – exposure to nature can make our children pay better attention to us and to be more caring to others.

**Just say 'no'** – and convince yourself that you mean it so it sounds genuine. Remember: disappointing your child is often very good for their development and, as their parent, you *can* say 'do as I say, not as I do'.

**Limit their choices.** Younger children may feel confused and as they grow older may also develop a sense of entitlement where everything comes with options.

**Pull rank.** Children need to know you're in charge. This will make them feel far more secure.

**Construct boundaries.** This framework gives them a structure and security and is the forerunner to obeying rules at university, work and the law.

**Self-esteem.** Don't feel you have to praise or accept everything your child does for fear of lowering their self-esteem. It's good for our children to learn to deal with some constructive criticism if they know we love them. And praising everything will render praise meaningless.

**Spend more time, less money.** There's no substitute for eye-to-eye contact and full-on attention. Not only does this make our child feel loved, but it puts us in a much stronger position to influence them and sanction them when necessary. They also will be less likely to act out because they feel neglected. We mustn't keep looking at our iPhone or iPad when talking to our child, our undivided attention means a tremendous amount to them.

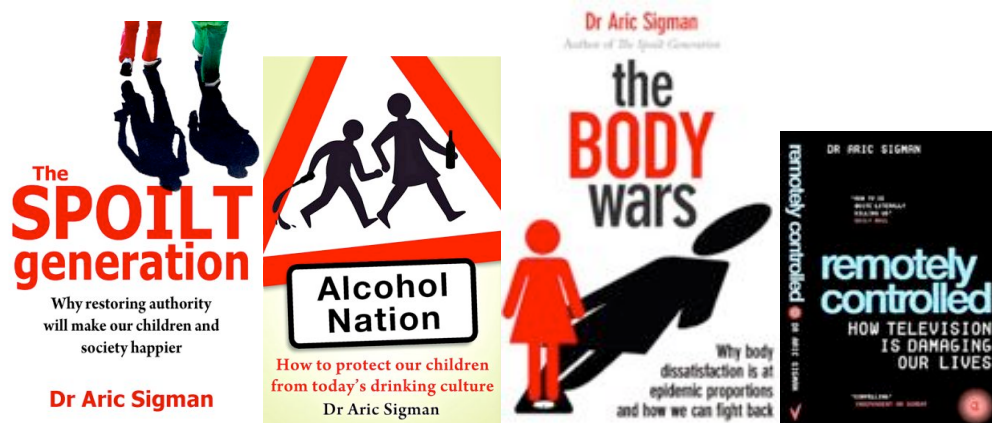
**Dr Aric Sigman is the author of the books:**

***The Spoilt Generation: Why restoring authority will make children and society happier.***

***Alcohol Nation: How to protect our children from today's drinking culture.***

***The Body Wars: Why body dissatisfaction is at epidemic proportions and how we can fight back.***

***Remotely Controlled***



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