

MANAGING A VIOLENT CHILD

Free extract from the new book for parents, written by Islay Downey and Kim Furnish, and to be published soon by Darton, Longman and Todd (ISBN: 978 0 232 53147 3).

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INTRODUCTION

Most parenting books offer strategies to deal with challenging behaviour; this puts the responsibility for change upon the child. This book aims to give a better understanding of why your child is hitting you and why you may be feeling out of control. It will give you the opportunity to raise your own awareness and provide a deeper understanding of the areas that you may be struggling with. By raising your own awareness and acting upon this new information your child is more likely to change their behaviour, and your relationship will improve.

You may have chosen this book because you have concerns about the high levels of anger your child is displaying. These violent episodes could be shown by;

- Angry words
- Kicking off/tantrums
- Trashing the house or their room
- Attacking parent(s), siblings or others.

This behaviour could be happening in only one place, e.g. at home or school, or may have escalated into all areas.

Many parents tell us that this type of behaviour is triggered when they say 'No' to their child or when the child is asked to do something that they don't want to do. This then results in parents feeling that they are walking on eggshells to keep the peace. Parents recognise this situation but feel powerless to change it because of the violence they are experiencing.

Many are reluctant to make things worse so they maintain the status quo; unfortunately this does not hold any benefit for themselves or their child. There is always another alternative to walking on eggshells and this book provides it.

If you would like to:

- Reduce arguments in your family
- Set and keep to boundaries
- Have your children respect you
- Take back control
- Have a happier home
- Gain tools to cope with challenging behaviour

then you have the chance to use this book as a tool for self-awareness. Your raised self-awareness provides a platform for you to move towards some significant, long-lasting changes. Our message is that there is hope, and with hope comes opportunity for growth and endless possibilities to learn new patterns of behaviour.

First, let's explore your current situation before we attempt to make some changes. You may have asked yourself or others the following:

'Why are my children so angry, I've been good to them, I haven't hit them so why are they so aggressive to me?'

'How can my child be hitting me?'

You may also justify their behaviour in your attempt to understand what is going on:

'I suppose it's good that she's hitting me and not someone else'

'It's whenever he doesn't get what he wants, if I try to say "No" to him, or when he loses a game.'

Regardless of the words and justifications used, experiencing violent behaviour from your child will always be accompanied by feelings of shame, guilt, and loss of control:

'It's so shameful – how can I tell someone that I can't control my child?'

'I feel so frustrated. There must be something wrong with them.'

Violent behaviour breeds in secrecy, and can control and isolate you to the point that you feel like you are the only one going through this:

'Everyone else seems to have such perfect children...'

Why are some children so violent? There are many reasons why children become violent and it is becoming more common. Most parents search for a diagnosis to explain their child's behaviour, yet, irrespective of having a diagnosis, the behaviour still has to be managed.

Why does a child hit their parent? Let's think about what a child gets out of being angry. Normally a parent would focus on the immediate behaviour and walk on eggshells around a violent child – fearful of what they may do. This is understandable because they don't want to get hurt or see anyone else get hurt, and it is especially relevant if there are younger children around.

The outcome of this is that a child then begins to learn a destructive pattern of behaviour. For a parent to step out and change this pattern of behaviour can be terrifying, it is often easier to continue to do the same thing. This leaves both parent and child in a stuck pattern fuelled with anger, shame and loss.

If you do what you have always done, you will get what you have always got.

It is highly likely that the violence will continue and the situation will escalate completely out of a parent's control. The challenge for parents is to not take things personally. It is a fine line between recognising the power within you to take control and feeling that you are to blame for the way your child is behaving.

For things to change you need to recognise the power you hold and ditch the feelings of guilt and blame.

Let's look at what stops many parents from recognising their power. Often it is:

- **Extreme Love**
- **Extreme Guilt**
- **Extreme Control.**

This realisation leads us to the following questions: What causes parents to feel this way? What are the actions associated with these feelings? What steps can parents take to move themselves out of stuck patterns of behaviour?

The causes will be different for each person; however, there will be similar threads running through them. These would have been set during your childhood and then passed onto your child when they were born.

In our busy lives it is hard to find time to stop and think about why we behave the way we do. Once we are able to stop and reflect on our behaviour we have greater choice with regard to the actions we take.

Our behaviour can fit into four boxes, as described by Johari's Window:¹

1 Known Self Things we know about ourselves and others know about us	2 Hidden Self Things we know about ourselves that others do not know
3 Blind Self Things others know about us that we do not know	4 Unknown Self Things neither we nor others know about us

The more you understand your own behavior, the bigger Box 1 becomes. This is self-awareness; it relates to how well you know and understand your own behaviour.

To enable Box 2 to become smaller you need to open up and be willing to think about what is happening and why it is happening. This can make you feel vulnerable as you open yourself up to be judged and criticised. With this in mind, who you confide in is very important. You will need to trust that this person has your best interests at heart.

Box 3 can only become smaller if we are willing to receive feedback about ourselves. This can challenge our self- image and the temptation is to be defensive and reactive. When you receive feedback, notice whether you react defensively or whether you are accepting of it. Check it out against any evidence that you or the other person may have; ask yourself, 'Is that correct?'

Box 4 becomes smaller the more you are open to learning about yourself and you continue to explore why you behave in the way that you do.

So why is this important for your child? Why does it make a difference to them what you are feeling and how you are behaving?

We can link it back to the extremes in parenting styles:

- **Extreme Love**
- **Extreme Guilt**
- **Extreme Control.**

If you were asked about your parenting style you may say that you love your child but you find it hard to put in boundaries. Extreme love is like wearing rose coloured glasses, it will blind you to the reality of what is really going on. As your reality is distorted it may be difficult to assess what is acceptable behaviour and what is unacceptable behaviour. This then becomes your normal relationship with your child, it is uncomfortable yet familiar.

You may reason that you love your child and you are able to put in boundaries and consequences. However, when examined, both the love you are showing and the limits you are setting are extreme. The love you are expressing is all-consuming and the boundaries you are using are unreasonable. There is no balance in this style of parenting - what your child will experience is extreme behaviours.

Guilt is one emotion that prevents parents from putting in boundaries. This is generally because they feel sorry for their child for some reason, which is probably rooted in the past.

Extreme control will suffocate your child. Parents will justify this by believing that they know best for their child. The parent's behaviour suggests that they do not trust their child. They do everything within their power to guarantee that their child does not experience failure.

None of these actions were asked for or are needed by your child. It is important to recognise that the power to change is in your control. If the power is in your hands to take control of the situation and that is not happening, let's look at what may be going on at a deeper unconscious level.

You are walking on eggshells around your violent child; your experience tells you that their behaviour is going to get worse if you confront them. However, the reality is that the behaviour will get worse anyway if you continue in the same pattern of behaviour. We think we have two choices, to give in or to challenge. Giving in works for a while, but it is short lived. A pay off for the child is that he has learned how to get his own way. To challenge a child's behaviour will result in parents experiencing uncomfortable feelings. Underpinning the problem with changing patterns of behaviour is that it is all too comfortable to stay with the familiar, even when it is dealing with violent behaviour.

We have three zones that we operate in:

- **Comfort Zone – the familiar**
- **Stretch Zone – the challenge**
- **Panic Zone – the step too far.**²

What is required is for a parent to step out from the familiar, take a risk and begin to change this pattern of behaviour. This will feel incredibly uncomfortable when they first come out of their comfort zone into the stretch zone. If a parent pushes themselves too far they may enter the panic zone and things will feel very unsafe for both parent and child.

It is important for parents to think about whether they are in the comfort, stretch or panic zone at any one time and what the triggers are for each of the stages. This will give you really useful information about your behaviour and your child's behaviour. Knowledge is power and it is a power tool for you to make those changes that are so necessary to break destructive patterns. One thing to be aware of is that you may, unconsciously, create a conflict situation *because it has become normal life for you*. Living with violence can become normal but it is also counter-productive: it chips away at trust, love and hope until the relationship is barren.

Noticing and reflecting on how you manage comfort, stretch, panic and being truthful about your patterns of behaviour will increase Box I in Johari's Window for you. The chances are that if you are brave enough to ask your child they will tell you what needs to change. They have probably been trying to tell you what the problem is for a while but you have not been able to hear it. What parents need to hear is their child's messages behind their behaviour. You may have been focusing on the violent behaviour and naming this as the problem.

The problem isn't the problem. It's their solution to the problem. So what's the problem?

If you focus so hard on the presenting problem that appears in front of you then things will keep getting worse. The skill that

is integral to effective parenting is having the ability to give some attention to your child's behaviour and some to your own behaviour. This requires from parents a certain detachment which can prove difficult when their emotional responses are being triggered.

How behaviour patterns can be modified will be covered in a future chapter, but for now it is useful to consider how behaviour can be seen as just one way of communicating. In this way behaviour patterns are created and sustained.

- Our behaviour patterns can be like a play that we act out repeatedly
- All behaviour has a consequence or a pay off
- Our children will copy our behaviour
- We can all get stuck in negative patterns of behaviour.

It has been recognised that managing violent behaviour is exhausting and draining. It can leave parents feeling lost and confused. Our experience of working with families suggests that these things can help:

- Having a positive attitude
- Being confident in our abilities
- Recognising our progress
- Using a support system.

The main way that we have supported parents is by working with them in parenting groups. Many parents think that by going to a parenting group they will be judged as bad parents. It is well worth taking that risk. Going to a parenting group means that you have recognised that things need to improve for you and your child. We would strongly recommend attending a parenting group to support you making changes in your parenting relationship. If you are unable to do so then we hope that you are able to use this book as the next best thing – a parenting group in a book.

We have already started to raise awareness of your own behaviour and to look at what lies underneath the behaviour of your child; this will continue throughout the book. Although each of us has a unique family, there are core elements that are the same in all families. To illustrate this we have used three families as examples in each chapter. We will follow these three families through their journey, showing what new understanding they develop and the actions they take to improve their family's lives.

SUMMARY OF THE FAMILIES

The Jones Family: Mum (Sharon); Dad (Greg); Joshua (14); Craig (12); Steph (7).

The Jones's presenting problem

Joshua is the 'problem'; he is 14. He is struggling at school. He hates his brother Craig who always gets away with everything. He will often scream at his parents that he hates them too. He argues with Mum until she cries and then Dad steps in and it escalates into physical fights. Mum and Dad constantly argue about how to control Joshua. Home is like a war zone.

The Hall family: Mum (Margaret); Damien (12).

The Halls' presenting problem

Damien is the 'problem', he is 12. He doesn't go to school, he plays on his Xbox most of the time. He is in charge at home - he gets what he wants or there is a violent outburst. When he gets angry with his mum she says he is just like his father. This makes him even angrier.

The Dawson/King Family: Mum (Anne); Dad/Stepdad (Darren); Sophie (26); Thomas (24); Peter (21); Mikki (8).

The Dawson/Kings' presenting problem

Mikki is the 'problem'; she is 8. She is verbally abusive to all the family and trashes the house when she is angry. Mum didn't have this trouble with the older children and can't understand how the situation has become so bad. Everyone knows that Mikki has been spoilt. Dad tries to control the situation; he loves Mikki to bits and doesn't want her to be hurt in any way. This makes her feel suffocated.

Notes

1. Luft & Ingham, 1955.
2. Karl Ronke.