

Less Heat, More Warmth

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This following story is true. It is a story that I have told many times to teacher groups at workshops and seminars to illustrate an important concept.

Here's the story:

Many years ago a close friend of mine was enrolled in a "body work" course.

During one of the workshops on this course, participants were asked to lie on the floor and get into a meditative state. When they

were about five minutes into the relaxation, the teacher slammed two saucepan lids together. Such a thunderclap had the obvious effect. Some people swore at the teacher, others sat in bewildered amazement, while a fair few were in tears, too startled to speak. The obvious question, "Why?" was demanded of the teacher. She explained, rather perfunctorily, that she wanted them to experience what she called a "startled reaction."

After processing how the participants had felt, she asked them to again lie on the floor and meditate. This time they were forewarned that in three minutes she would bash the saucepan lids together. After about two minutes people started to get unsettled, and the atmosphere became increasingly charged as the three minute deadline approached. About a half minute after the deadline had elapsed the sense of anticipation became excruciating, so much so that someone finally snapped and yelled out, "Slam the lids together!" It was only after the lids had been banged that participants began to relax.

How is this story relevant to our management of some children who have emotional or behavioural problems? Quite simply, it is to do with expectation and belief. If we substitute the saucepan lids for a regular clout over the ear, belittling cruel statements or constant ridicule, then we can gain a small (very small) measure of understanding of the expectations of these children.

If a child has grown up in an abusive environment - either physical or emotional - then that child will carry around a 'memory store' of what their world is like. When these children experience a temporary reprieve from such abuse, such as when they go to school, locked into their body and mind is the strong belief that the world is a dangerous place, that adults cannot be trusted, that adults abuse. It is common for them to expect that the abuse will continue and they will go about trying to recreate the abusive environment from which they've come. Just like the poor fellow who wanted the saucepan lids hit together their belief is that adults will eventually hurt them in one way or another.

How can we deal with this?

An initial strategy is being aware that these children can use intimidating tactics; provocative gestures; hurtful, cruel and foul language in an attempt to get the adult to fulfil the abusive role. Knowing this is the first step in preventing ourselves from reconfirming the child's world view. Seeing the child's provocative actions for what they are, can allow us to approach them with **less heat and more warmth**. Implicit in some of these provocative actions is the notion that the children are also testing you to see if you can be trusted not to hurt them and not reject them. They are testing you to see if you will remain consistent. Remember, when dealing

with these children don't be surprised if their behaviour gets worse before it gets better. In fact, expect it to.

Another useful strategy is that of having some stock phrases or planned language at the ready. Rather than get into a power struggle with the child and threaten something in the heat of the moment, or threaten something that is punitive and only serves to reconfirm the child's hostile view of the world, it is better to say something that allows both the child and the adult some time to calm down. An example of one such phrase, is: "I want you to make a good choice, so you will need to follow the instruction. I'll give you a couple of minutes to think about it and I'll come back and check on you."

This provides some breathing space for the child to think about their actions and, more importantly, shows the child that despite their having behaved in a provocative and challenging fashion, the adults around them will remain calm (outwardly at least) and not become hostile towards them.

Further, it allows the teacher to work out what they will do next. By behaving in such a dignified manner, the teacher is modelling to the child a different way of being in the world. They are showing that, even when under pressure, adults can still be caring, supportive and nurturing, while at the same time being firm and consistent. Even though it may be difficult to discern in some children any behavioural or attitudinal change, initially at least, the effects of modelling appropriate behaviour is powerful and should not be underestimated.

The better the behaviour you expect, the better the behaviour you will get. Always expect a lot. And leave the saucepan lids in the cupboard.