**ISSUES OF MERCY AND FAIRNESS**

**IN RAISING HEALTHY CHILDREN**

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I find most children at times blow a gasket when they believe their parents are being unfair to them -- as if the child and parent could agree on what’s impartial! Why do the words “That’s not fair!” make us all so furious? *Anger is the normal, adaptive response to something that doesn’t seem fair.*

So what would be a practical, understandable definition of what’s fair? Let’s define *fair as what does the most good and the least harm to everyone in the long run.*  In this view, anger isn’t good or bad. It’s not sick or healthy. It all depends on whether it’s used to fight for something that benefits more people. And we all need mercy, so when punishing mistakes, we need to communicate the terms and reasons for this punishment in merciful ways.

Healthy anger fights for everybody to have a decent shot at the good life, the honest and kind life that everybody needs, that money can’t buy. A healthy expression of anger draws all of our attention to an injustice, and motivates us all to look for solutions that benefit everyone.

Before our children are teenagers, we need to be careful not to reward their selfish, demanding expressions of anger by giving into them. The tantrums of 6-year-olds may seem harmless or entertaining. But when 16-year-olds think they *know* what’s best and can’t make it happen, they explode, and a 16-year-old’s tantrum can really hurt a lot of people. So let’s don’t indulge children’s tantrums, screaming, threats, or harsh criticisms by trying to appease them. That just uses up a lot of tomorrow’s peace to buy a little bit for today.

And best not go the other way, by cutting down your child. Better to ask children what’s wrong in a given situation, what they want, what they think would be more fair to themselves *and* others, what solutions to conflict would be more beneficial for everybody, both now and later on.

Best to be slow to feed your children answers to these difficult questions. Continuing to ask questions draws out better and better answers, and teaches them to use their heads and hearts to solve problems. They need you to do *nothing* for them until they come up with something, something better for everyone. And you’ll need to keep on doing this when they are older.

Here are some other facts for you to believe, teach, and model for **teenagers**:

* Anger can work for or against a relationship: it can build either a bond or a barrier between us.
* If you don’t *talk your anger out* with others, you will *take it out* on others, or on yourself.
* Anger held inside too long becomes self-hatred, bitterness, and depression, which isn’t fair to you.
* Abused children tend to abuse their own children later, unless they get healing. Otherwise, “hurt people hurt people.”
* With social media, if you take in anger and injustice, then you will send out that same anger and unfairness. In a continuous spiral up or down, online, we become what we eat.
* The selfish anger and unfairness you put out against others will come back to haunt you. We reap what we sow. *[That goes for us parents too: if we use anger to control our children, especially to make our lives better at their expense, they will use their anger to control and take advantage of us.]*

***Healthy Expressions of Mercy and Anger***

* Use news and social media filters to build bridges with healthy people, not to wall them out.
* Choose role models that neither harm themselves nor other people.
* Privately decompress myself and soothe my anger so I won’t vomit it later out onto others.
* To avoid the “stuff and blow” cycle, use pressure valves to talk out my feelings about what’s fair.
* Don’t use anger to make war (I win or lose), but to fight for peace (see how we can all win).
* Instead of *getting even* with one who hurt me, I’ll *get better* -- a life well lived is the best revenge.
* Be angry at unfair choices, but not at the people who make them: love the sinner and hate the sin.
* “I hate to see you *[do that]* to *[yourself/this family/our relationship].* Why don’t you *[do this]* instead?”

Responses like these require mercy, forgiveness. We can’t usually give that until we receive it, from somewhere. We can’t receive it until we ask for it, and then receive it by forgiving ourselves. After that, the more we give mercy, the more we can receive it, and the more of it we can keep giving. Maybe time to prime that forgiveness pump? Rather than asking people we have hurt to give it to us, wouldn’t it work better to ask for mercy from those who seem to have plenty to give? Forgiven people are forgivin’ people.

In life, and in every healthy family, there must be a place for anger and blame, and also for expressions of mercy and making peace. We all struggle to learn and live by what’s fair, but we’re better together, working for resolutions that help us all find a better life.