



Kellevison

musings on mental health by a licensed therapist



Parenting: Consistency vs. Rigidity

October 27, 2008

Many of the parents I work with were raised in very authoritarian homes themselves. They are very clear that they do not want to raise their children this way. Unfortunately, some of them confuse consistency with rigidity. This confusion often leads to problems, including ADHD. How?

In their attempts to avoid authoritarianism, many parents will create a very laissez faire style of parenting. Its extreme forms are not good for children. Why?

Children, just like all humans, feel safest

with consistency. They thrive on having consistent rules, patterns, habits and schedules. If this doesn't make sense to you, imagine waking up in a different house every morning, driving a different vehicle to work, going to a different job, working for a different boss and eating a different diet - every single day. This would be very stressful! This is an extreme example, but it makes the point. A constantly changing environment is stressful. Mental health requires a delicate balance of the same habits and patterns (to feel secure and competent) interspersed with a little variety and change (to be mentally stimulated). How much you need of each is determined largely by your personality and genetic programming. Some people need less structure and more diversity. Some need the opposite.

Children are the same. Though they need varying degrees of both, there has to be some structure. I see children of parents who do not provide this structure and they are literally climbing the walls. They are often diagnosed with ADHD and then medicated. But the real issue is consistent parenting. The biggest problem is usually consistent discipline. You cannot discipline a child one way when you feel good and another when you are tired. The most common form of this is the traditional, "If

you don't stop that you're going into time out. If you don't stop that you're going into time out. If you don't stop that you're going into time out." repeated ad nauseum. Now the child and everyone else within hearing range knows the parent is not going to do anything. So the child keeps doing the behavior the parent is telling them to stop. Even if the parent has actually gotten up sometimes and put them in time out, if they do not do this consistently the child learns that there is always a chance they will get away with it. This inconsistently leads to the child not taking you seriously. Having consistent rules, applied consistently allows children to know what to expect. When they know what to expect they feel safer and more secure. They trust and respect you as a parent and they trust the world in general to be a reasonable place.

The same thing applies to a routine. Having a regular schedule also encourages the child to trust you and to trust the world they live in. Having a morning "ritual" for instance, where they know what time to get up, what things they must do and in what order (you can't have them getting dressed then bathing) before going to school eliminates a lot of problems. They know what is expected of them in order for them

to be "good". You also don't have to reinvent the wheel every morning if you establish a set pattern of doing things. The same thing applies for a bedtime "ritual". Start at least 30 minutes before you want them to go to bed and establish a routine; i.e. take a bath, brush your teeth, read a book together. This winds them down for bedtime and makes it easier for them to go to sleep. This should happen at the same time every evening.

Now, does this sound rigid and inflexible? It isn't. It should be consistent enough to set a pattern, but it can be altered for special occasions. The bedtime "ritual" may be suspended when there is a sleep over, or when the children are at grandma's house. There may be no morning "ritual" on weekend mornings. The patterns can be flexible, but that flexibility needs to be the exception, not the rule.

So what's the difference between consistency and rigidity?

Consistency is established gently with habit, not forcefully with yelling and shouting. Consistency is established by what you do, not what you say. You get up at the same time every school morning. Breakfast is ready at the same time. You

leave for school at the same time. You give baths at the same time every evening. It is not the parent yelling, demanding, or enforcing. You lead by example rather than by command.

Consistency is negotiated, not demanded. The patterns can be negotiated with your children. "Would you rather brush your teeth or take a bath first?" "What would you like to lay out to wear to school tomorrow?" Rigidity is often at the parents' convenience, for their benefit and on their schedule. Consistency takes into account the needs and personality of the child. Do they need one hour to wind down for bed or will 30 minutes be enough? Do they need a pretty set schedule that doesn't vary much to feel calm, or do they need more diversity and stimulation?

What happens when consistency is not present? Children can become anxious when they don't know what to expect from the world around them. An extreme example is in a home where there is serious substance abuse by the parents. When mom has her drug, she is high and life at home is quiet, if neglectful. When mom can't get her drug she is stressed and frantic and life can be a nightmare.

Vacillating between these extremes can cause children to be very, very anxious and they appear to have ADHD. You can see the same results to a lesser degree with parents who do not have a substance abuse problem but vacillate back and forth for whatever reasons.

Parenting that is inconsistent to the point of causing neglect or harm can result in Oppositional Defiant Disorder. The parent is the child's first authority figure. When the parent's judgment is so haphazard that it causes harm to the child, the child learns not to trust authority figures. This will manifest itself as a child who will not do what they are told by the parent. When they start school, they will not do what the teachers say. As an adult, they may have "authority issues" with their boss or with the police.

Consistent parenting is not rigid and immalleable. It is not ruled by an iron hand. It is quiet and calm, yet predictable and reliable. In this way you raise children who respect you as a parent, who trust the world they live in to be logical and understandable. They grow up knowing what is expected of them and how to accomplish it. This in turn creates children who are confident in themselves and in

their abilities.



Posted at 12:46 PM in ADHD, Parenting |
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Hi there,

What a great post - I would love to link to this post from my site. I completely endorse all you have written - in fact I agree with consistent parenting so much that I wrote a whole website dedicated to the notion that families are happiest when the parenting is clear, firm and consistent.
Helen

<http://www.consistent-parenting-advice.com>

Posted by: Helen | January 11, 2009 at 08:41 AM



Helen,

Thank you for your comments. I'm

so happy you found my comments to be of value. Please feel free to link to this post and thank you for posting your website address. What a great site and a great resource for parents.

Kellen

Posted by: Kellen | January 13, 2009 at 07:51 AM



Thanks for writing this post especially the last paragraph. I just linked to it from my homeschooling/Montessori blog. I will be checking out Helen's site as well.

Many thanks,

Evelyn

<http://2pequenotraviesos.blogspot.com/2010/vs-rigidity-parenting.html>

Posted by: Evelyn | July 24, 2010 at 05:40 PM

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