

THE FAMILY FORUM

PASSING ON THE SHAME

by Michael Farnworth Ed.D.

The term “abuse” doesn’t apply only to events of physical, sexual, or emotional punishment but also to processes that most of us probably consider part and parcel of normal everyday life in our Western culture—namely shaming. A look, a tone, a name, a tease, a rebuke, a challenge, or a question that subtly implies: What is wrong with you?

WE CAN BE active in the Church, attend the temple, pay our tithing, read the scriptures, have Family Home Evening, pray, and teach our children the doctrines of the Kingdom but, without knowing it, we can still be mean-spirited, petty, manipulative, demeaning, and hostile when disciplining our children.

Take me for example: despite my young children being very well behaved generally, I could have been the poster boy for Bad Dad. My early parenting years reeked of immaturity and manipulation. I unwittingly subjected my children to emotional, psychological, and spiritual bullying that wounded their vulnerable souls. I made them strangers in their own lives as they bartered parts of themselves trying to please me. I passed my own childhood shame on to them. I was devastated when I finally awoke from my cultural trance and realized what I had been doing. But despite my multiple apologies, the damage I did to them was irretrievable. I could not erase the numerous times I had made them feel wrong so that I could feel right. I could not return to them their sense of courage after having forced them, by fear, into acceptable human packages of behavior.

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events of physical, sexual, or emotional punishment but also to processes that most of us probably consider part and parcel of normal everyday life in our Western culture—namely shaming. A look, a tone, a name, a tease, a rebuke, a challenge, or a question that subtly implies: *What is wrong with you?* Shaming incubates the fear of not being good enough, of being unworthy to be embraced and loved by others. It is a sense of being flawed and inwardly broken.

We parents regularly use shame, threats, and fear to win skirmishes with our children. Even if our parenting arsenals don’t include spanking, hitting, or slapping, we often unwittingly resort to humiliating, belittling, or dominating our children in order to enforce their obedience. Even our size can be frightening to a child. Imagine what it would feel like to be confronted by a ten-foot giant who is displeased with us? Further, what parent hasn’t threatened abandonment or bodily harm just to get his or her way?

Though we may like to consider ourselves well intentioned, we use these degrading discipline techniques because they are condoned by our Western culture of obedience. Besides, who could blame us for wanting well-behaved children? Subconsciously we

believe that the end justifies the means.

As a parent, it was easy for me to justify my shaming or threatening behaviors because our culture teaches that discipline is the means to exact obedience, and that disciplined children are worth any price. I didn’t realize it at the time, but clearly I felt that my worth as a parent was tied directly to my children’s behavior. If they acted well, I was a good parent. If they didn’t—well, that just wasn’t an option. My own need to be seen as a good parent trumped all because my subconscious was laced with a sense of unworthiness and that feeling made me want to hide—and I did so . . . behind my children. The façade of perfect children protected my own façade of perfect parent.

MY childhood could be considered a normal one: I was raised by active, loving LDS parents and regularly received spankings, head thumps, ear pulls, and slaps; I was routinely yelled at, labeled, teased, threatened, and on one occasion, whipped. It was normal at the time, and even now, my treatment doesn’t seem like a big deal, just the stuff of a then-normal childhood. I didn’t consider myself abused or traumatized by these experiences. I have since learned that, considering my robust denial capabilities, I am a poor judge of how my own history has affected me.

For example, I felt a sense of recognition when reading another person’s description of the philosophy of discipline from his childhood home. 1. His parents “had set up home regulations. 2. Any child who broke a regulation deserved and would receive punishment. 3. One regulation was that the children were to obey every order of the parents. 4. A child who refused to obey a particular request when ordered to was disobeying an order and thus breaking a home regulation. Thus when a child refused to do as directed, he was punished until he repented.”

Does that philosophy sound familiar and logical to you, too? I confess. I have misled you. That passage actually comes from a book published in 1973 by Bookcraft called *Seven Years in Hanoi: A POW Tells His Story* by Larry Chesley. I simply respectively replaced the words prisoners, torture, guards, and prison camp with child, punishment, parents, and home. Being dependent on their parents for life, food, and shelter, the position of children at home is structurally much like that of a prisoner. They have little to no power to provide for themselves. They must take



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what they are given because there are no other viable options.

But prisoners have one advantage children do not: prisoners can remember what life is like on the outside and can hate their captors. Children are aware of mostly their own home life and usually can't do anything but love the masters of the house. As far as they know, their parents' behavior and expectations are normal. If the children don't meet the parents' expectations, they may naturally assume that they don't meet anyone's. Therefore, any punishment directed at them must be just, even if they fight it. In such a situation, where children have so little power and their parents so much, children are likely to develop something akin to what psychologists have termed Stockholm syndrome.

Briefly stated, when a hostage develops a compassionate bond and even adulation for his or her captor, he or she has developed Stockholm syndrome. Psychologists see the syndrome as a coping mechanism—a way to survive the hostage situation. Interestingly, the more intense the hostage threat becomes, the stronger the potential bond the captive feels. The hostage understands that the captor is in control of his or her survival and basic needs, so it is best to align him or herself with the captor. If the captor shows any kindness, the hostage will submerge the anger and terror he or she feels and focus on the captor's "good side"—thus hoping to ensure survival while the hostage blames him or herself if the captor becomes upset or angry.

This seeming contradiction of sympathizing and protecting one's abusers is exactly what children tend to do. Even when parents are extremely abusive, their children will still love and defend them. The behavior is even more pronounced in the case of "normal" childhoods when children usually receive both loving and punishing gestures: they idealize and defend their parents. If in order to survive, independent, resourceful adults fall prey to the idealization of their captors, imagine how dependent, vulnerable children would react in structurally similar situations.

Research has shown that during infancy and young childhood, the brain is developing synaptic connections faster than it ever will again. Abusive, shaming events coupled with prolonged stress and trauma can therefore have a lasting impact on how a person's brain functions. According to Daniel Siegel, author of *The Developing Mind*, Patterns of neurological responses to

fear and threat are laid down in early childhood and provide the unconscious pathways for later adult relationships and behaviors. Even if people retain no conscious memories of the stressful events, their nervous system imprints the pathways and operates according to them.

IN 1920, John B. Watson and his assistant Rosalie Rayner performed an experiment that would now be considered unethical with a child they called "Little Albert." After establishing that Little Albert wasn't predisposed to be afraid of white mice—or indeed of anything fuzzy—the researchers would strike a hanging bar of metal while Little Albert played with a white mouse, frightening the child with the loud noise. After several of these events, Little Albert began to show distress when presented with a white mouse and eventually even when presented with something merely fuzzy such as a dog, a sealskin coat, or a Santa Claus mask. His distress continued even after the loud noise was removed from the events.

So it is in our lives. When young, we're exposed to events we don't understand. But our brains set up neural pathways in response to those events, and soon we become adults who are perplexed at the anger or fear we feel at a seemingly ordinary event. We likely have few conscious memories of early childhood trauma and stress, but our strings are still being jerked around by environmental triggers we don't consciously recognize. All we may know is that when a person acts a certain way, or uses a certain tone of voice, or when a particular situation arises, we suddenly find ourselves in the thrall of a reflexive, destructive behavior over which we have little control. To illustrate, I know of many women who, when stopped by a police officer for a traffic infraction, end up in tears. They never plan to cry, but being confronted by an authority figure for bad behavior triggers that response—possibly because of a neurological survival pathway laid down during childhood.

What about the children on the other end of an adult's reflexive behavior? In the face of a threat, most of us go into fight-flight mode. But children have neither option. They can't successfully fight their parents, and even though some run away from home, it usually doesn't last. Children eventually learn that their best survival option is to freeze in hopes that the threatening person will lose interest or focus their wrath on someone else. Adults do this as

well. When the boss storms into the room, we try to keep a low profile so that we don't attract his/her attention. Children also learn to survive threats and trauma by dissociating from the situation; by becoming numb, passive, and compliant; or by pretending that things aren't as bad as they seem. Learning to be a well-behaved boy or girl, the one who doesn't require attention, the family peacemaker, the good student, the humorist, the tireless worker, the surrogate parent, the surrogate spouse, the loner, the sports, music, or art star are all personas children take on in order to cope with family shame, threat, and trauma.

THE Apostle Paul compares us to the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16–17), implying that we have sacred places within us. I believe children's hearts and minds are those sacred places. When parents invade those hallowed places, regardless of how well-intended they are, children become disconnected from their sense of sacred self. When parents use shame, threat, fear, and bullying, trauma results. As a child, I believed I wasn't good enough for my mom and dad and that I therefore deserved their punishments. My shame eventually gave birth to self-contempt, a sure sign that I had disconnected from myself spiritually. Even though I became the family hero by excelling in sports, church duties, and school politics, I carried that self-contempt into my adulthood where it continued fueling my life as a young father, husband, and professional. I tried so hard to be good but in all the ways that really didn't matter. My dress, my behavior, my professional demeanor, my church service were all performed for a public audience while privately I continued leaking shame onto the people I loved.

In *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Alice Miller writes, "Contempt is . . . a defense against one's own despised and unwanted feelings. And the fountainhead of all contempt, all discrimination, is the more or less conscious, uncontrolled, and secret exercise of power over the child by the adult, which is tolerated by society."

I can see how the truth of her conclusion played out in my own life. My self-contempt manifested itself while I was in elementary school. Trying to bolster my sense of worth, I made fun of kids I thought were inferior to me. Despite not generally being a violent person, I even got into fights in the third and fourth grades trying to establish a sense of worth. When my parents' punishments seemed especially onerous or

unfair, I would envision a time when I would be big enough to gain some power of my own. I wasn't sure who was going to become the victim of my power. All I knew was that I badly wanted revenge—somebody was going to pay. What would I have thought then had I known my own children would be the ones feeling the brunt of my repressed anger?

I remember how frighteningly infuriated I became when, as a young parent, my children didn't obey my discipline attempts. "Where is all this rage coming from?" I wondered. I now understand that it was simply waiting for a familiar time to burst out after years of circulating within my soul. It was as if my suppressed emotions were screaming, "I may not have been respected as a child, but I will be respected as an adult! You will not get away with this! You will obey me!" Sadly, I was big enough then to administer my ill-rooted fears and punishments, passing my pain on to my children. I regret these encounters and have sought my children's forgiveness. But I fear it was too little, too late. I remained in slumber too long.

IN a parenting class, I once assigned students to illustrate various parenting dynamics by devising short plays. Most of the plays were marginal at best, but one really stood out. It portrayed a young mother fixing dinner while holding a baby; two younger children ran around being obnoxious, the mother periodically yelling at them. The phone rang, the doorbell buzzed, the food burned on the stove, the kids screamed, the baby cried. None of us knew where the group was going with this scenario. In the discussion afterward, the group revealed that their role-play was created to showcase the unintended consequences the pandemonium had on the infant. All of us were caught by surprise. We had never considered the infant. This short role-play is a microcosm of what is going on in our own society as we remain blinded to the plight of infants and children. Most of us just don't get it yet.

Perhaps our egos would have us believe that our childhood traumas are all safely in our past, or that they don't even exist and have no effect on our lives. But despite our intellectual protests, our unconscious neurological pathways are running the show. All our childhood fears, hang-ups, defense mechanisms, neuroses, addictions, and secrets stand in silent testimony of the fetid catacombs hiding behind our respectable, controlled public façades.



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Again, Miller asserts, "Until we become sensitized to the small child's suffering, this wielding of power by adults will continue to be a normal aspect of the human condition, for no one pays attention to or takes seriously what is regarded as trivial, since the victims are only children." Indeed, if we remain asleep, shut down and hardened towards our own childhood experiences of shame, we won't be able to understand the magnitude of what we put our own children through. We will persist in contemptuous behavior towards our-

selves and unknowingly pass that contempt on to our children. Only by awakening to genuine compassion for our childhood selves can we start the healing that we can then extend to our own children. It takes only one enlightened parent to impact the next generation of children for good.

In the next column, I will analyze the Walt Disney film *The Kid*, which, despite starring Bruce Willis, can act as a roadmap for the stages of our own personal awakening from contempt and shame.