

Non-verbal parenting:

I was wondering recently how one recognizes an effective parent and why some parents always need to resort to angry threats to gain the compliance of their children. These parents seemed to use a kind of postured authority that got compliance not from natural leadership but from threat or punishment. As you are aware, certain parents have an authority over their child that seems natural. Equally, certain children show a respect to their parent that is equally natural. How is this achieved?

When I was rearing my own children I knew that, when need be, I could exert my authority without the use of either threat or aggression and have recently begun to muse about what that is. In advising parents with troublesome children I became aware that the techniques of reward, punishment, and listening did not get at what was often the core problem.

I meet many parents who seem to have little control over their children and who seem to show little natural authority. They are often at a complete loss as to what to do. When I observe parents interacting with their 'problem' children I frequently observe one major relationship or skill deficit. This particular relationship and skill deficit is not one you would ever think of as being the source of parenting problems but it often is.

It is a fundamental evolutionary based mechanism by which authority is displayed in parent child interaction. It is a form of control and authority that is so effective that it does not need words, threats, punishment, coercion, or aggression to gain compliance. What is it? It is what might be termed *eye signaling*. Virtually every parent who has difficulty in controlling a small child shows serious deficits in eye-signaling contact as to make the establishment of influence and rapport with their child almost impossible.

From birth small babies are hard-wired with the software to respond positively to contact, love, and authority as communicated directly through the eyes. I am not talking here about the airy-fairy eye contact as is exchanged between teenage lovers. Rather I am referring to the form of eye contact and signaling that occurs throughout the animal kingdom. Signals of dominance, aggression, and authority are communicated with the eyes in most of the more evolved species. Those of you who have pet dogs will realize how a dog that may have done a bad thing (ripped up the cushion or pooped in the kitchen) will avoid eye contact with his/her 'master' until forgiven.

I will sometimes ask parents of difficult toddlers to consider how they would control their child if they as parents could not speak. This is because many parents believe that the control of children is achieved through verbal threats or instructions when, in fact, it is achieved more through non-verbal influence than verbal influence. I ask parents to think of ways of influencing their child that did not involve the use of speech – which is usually the mechanism used for threats, aggression, temper tantrums, or age-inappropriate reasoning by the frustrated parent. All of these things teach the child little and certainly do not communicate authority.

Some mothers will have difficulty in learning how to communicate with their child with their eyes because of three possible reasons. They may have been dominated or abused in their childhood; they may have been abused in their adult relationship; or they may have developed an attention deficit themselves. Each of these will likely have resulted in their reflexively casting their own eyes down or away when engaged in intimate challenges to their authority – even by a small child. In these fleeting eye-movements and distractions, they instantly surrender authority to a child. This is evident in research with not only parents and children but in many species of animal. It is my view that the ability to maintain authoritative eye-contact and use authoritative eye-signaling is a defining characteristic of effective parents. (The same applies to love).

When a parent needs a child to respect his or her authority it cannot be achieved unless the parent gains optic control of the child. Until such optic control is established it is pointless to attempt verbal control. The eyes are the means by which we animals gain respect, authority, and influence *when that respect, authority, or influence is being ignored*.

Verbal control, without visual or optical control, deteriorates quickly into threats, shouting, or name-calling. The parent blames the child for not paying attention or not doing what he or she is

told. How many parents give out that their children “just do not listen”. It is not the child’s fault because he or she is born to respond more to communication framed by non-verbal authority than to communication framed by verbal authority. Most parents say way too much.

For that reason it is pointless for a parent to try to gain compliance from a hyperactive child by shouting. The parent has to (1) get the child to stand in front of them; (2) get down on one knee in order to enhance eye-contact; and (3) get the child to make full eye-contact with him or her. In that moment authority is magically gained. The degree of authority is proportional to the parent’s ability to get the child to look into the eyes. It is also proportional to the degree to which the parent refuses to engage in any other attempts at controlling the child until the natural parent-child hierarchy is affirmed with the eyes. This does not have to be explained to children. They know it because they are born with the software already downloaded onto the brain of their computer.

This is as relevant to teenagers as much as it is to toddlers. It is as relevant to couples relationships as it is to child-parent relationships. The most powerful tool for influence at the disposal of parents and partners is the eyes. Hypnotists know this, leaders know this, lovers know this, and parents must know it.

The next time you get frustrated because you cannot get through to your son, daughter, husband, parent, or sibling consider that the problem might be your inability to get them to see you, and by virtue of that, to take seriously what it is that you might want to say. *When a parent really needs to connect with their children, the first and most powerful instruction they can make is “Look at me”. It is 100 times better that “Listen to me”.* The contact between the mother and baby is visual long before it was ever verbal.