

PARENTING

THE COMPLEX TASK

ADEQUATE PARENTING and child rearing are learnt through experience — the parents own experience of being parented. It is not a skill easily gained from instruction in classes! I once read that kids need three things — “love”, “limits”, and “letting go”, and from my years of experience in working with families who manifested their distress through the abuse and neglect of their children, I believe that these parents are unable to love, limit and let go. I found that these three L's were also important in looking at ways of helping the parents themselves.

LOVE: By love I mean 'unconditional positive regard' for another person — acceptance of another as a person in his/her own right. So often with parents who abuse their children, their love of the children is 'conditional' and is dependent on the needs of the parent at a particular time, rather than on the needs of the child.

Parents who abuse their children have unrealistic expectations — not only to the particular stage of development of the child, but also unrealistic to the emotional, temperamental state of the child in a particular situation. Over and over again I have seen conflict situations arise between parent and child because of the inability on the part of the parent to be in empathy with the child; the parents own needs are so great there is just no reservoir of emotional energy available to reach out in awareness to the emotional and physical needs of the child.

The following cases will help illustrate what I mean.

Case 1: 'Chris' a 20 year old single mum came to us with her 9 month old

**The names used are fictitious.*

BY AUDREY COX

B. Social Work. Senior Social Worker, Department of Social Security, Launceston.

Formerly Mrs. Cox was Senior Social Worker at Royal Children's Hospital, Brisbane, where she was responsible for the development of the Child Abuse and Neglect Unit and for the establishment of a Parent Aide Training Scheme.

daughter 'Barbara' who had very severe nappy rash but was otherwise physically well. Chris reported having 'murderous' thoughts (her own words) about her daughter which had been growing progressively worse for approximately one month. She told us how the baby would not settle down on the car trip from Melbourne to Brisbane. 'Chris' had repeatedly warned the baby to stop her crying and whinging and she reported that finally she told the baby that she had one more chance — cry once more and 'Barbara' would be put out of the car! Of course, cry baby did! So mum stopped the car, put baby at the side of the road with a clean nappy and a bottle with the words "I warned you 'Barbara' what would happen — you've had your chance." This young mother was under tremendous strain herself at this time, being torn between two relationships, one with the father of the child and the other with the man she subsequently married.

Many of these conflict situations between parent and child seem to surround the area of food intake.

Case 2: 'Margaret' (mother) could see no reason for feeding her 2½ year old daughter 'Rosemary' earlier than the adults in the house. Dad was working late and dinner would not be till 9 p.m. By 6 p.m. young 'Rosemary' was hungry, tired and becoming whingy. She was reprimanded for her whingy behaviour as she became more and more demanding of Mum's attention. 'Margaret' became more short with her, more rejecting and more frustrated. Near chaos resulted till 'Rosemary' subsided emotionally defeated; however 'Rosemary's' frustration and anger were evident in her aggressive behaviour towards baby brother — by her throwing books on the floor — and by her hitting at the author. As baby brother started crying, the conflict between mother and child spiralled once again with more reprimands about being a naughty girl. When 'Rosemary' was finally given food at 9 p.m. she was far too tired to eat and was once again disciplined because she was a naughty girl not to eat the food 'Margaret' had taken the time and trouble to prepare for her. 'Rosemary' was then picked up and dumped in bed where she cried herself to sleep.

Hours of conflict could have been avoided if 'Margaret' had been able to tune in to her young daughter's needs. However Dad had been working a lot of overtime as the family needed the additional income and 'Margaret' was feeling quite unsupported in her role of mother. Dad's image of a wife and mother was modelled on that of his own mother who had been left with five young children to raise as her husband was

“Most children will test imposed limits”

at sea and who was also able to hold down a job. He stated that ‘Margaret’ just had to learn to cope and she could if she wanted to. The result was that ‘Margaret’ felt no emotional support or understanding on her husband’s part and had no emotional reserves to reach out to meet her daughter’s needs. Any emotional energy she did have was being completely used in keeping herself together.

Case 3: In another case related to food intake ‘Anne’ (mother) insisted on 3½ year old daughter ‘Ros’ eating every scrap of food served up for her at mealtimes. ‘Anne’ complained regularly that ‘Ros’ would eat the first half of her meal well but would then refuse to eat, would hold food in her mouth and would play with it. And would or could not accept that ‘Ros’, a slightly built child did not require plates of food almost as large as those served to Dad. With both ‘Anne’ and ‘Ros’ each determined to have her own way, mealtimes invariably became fields of battle. While ‘Anne’ could agree on a cognitive level that small daughter did not require as much food as her father, emotionally she was unable to cope with rejection symbolised by the rejection of food.

In many situations food has meanings other than sustenance. In cases 2 and 3 the mothers equated good mothering with food. Rejection of their offering of food by their children resulted in the mothers themselves feeling rejected, and because their own need of acceptance was so high they were quite unable to empathise with the needs of their children. Their love of their children was conditional upon the children being able to provide their mothers with good feelings. All three cases illustrate the inability of these mothers to judge the appropriateness of their expectations of their children in relation to either the particular stage of development or to the emotional and physical state of the child at the time.

LIMITS: I found repeatedly that abusing parents were unable to set appropriate, realistic limits on their

childrens behaviour. Either the limits set were extremely rigid and excessive (like those imposed on the active four year old boy who was made to sit in a corner facing the wall, with his hands on his head for three hours at a time and who was subsequently shut in a dark shed when he was unable to meet the demands made of him in his corner) or the limit setting was either inconsistent or virtually non-existent.

Frequently we saw children severely disciplined in one instance for perhaps going to the refrigerator or touching the T.V. and these same children were totally ignored half an hour later when engaging in the same behaviour. On a number of occasions I spoke with parents about my observations but they merely expressed that fact that it did not make any difference really — the child either took no notice of them and resumed the forbidden activity or it objected strongly. I sensed a pervasive feeling of powerlessness — the parents lost out anyway — and again an apparent lack of emotional reserves to deal with this type of situation.

Most children object to limits, will test limits when they are imposed and at times can really perform when thwarted, but the parents in these fragile families yet again feared rejection. This ‘normal’ behaviour by their children represented for them a loss of love, rejection, and hence they experienced a lowering of their self esteem. They were unable to set adequate limits for their children, feared the usual fuss children make when adult will is imposed and felt powerless. In fact unless abusing parents had happy (i.e. not whinging) compliant, well mannered children they felt a failure as parents. So often it was only through their children that the parents had any sense of worth, and a rebellious child was a reflection of their parenting. If they said ‘no’ and set limites they feared their child would not love them.

LETTING GO: Paradoxically, these parents who find child rearing such a burden and so often get very little pleasure from it, are yet unable to let

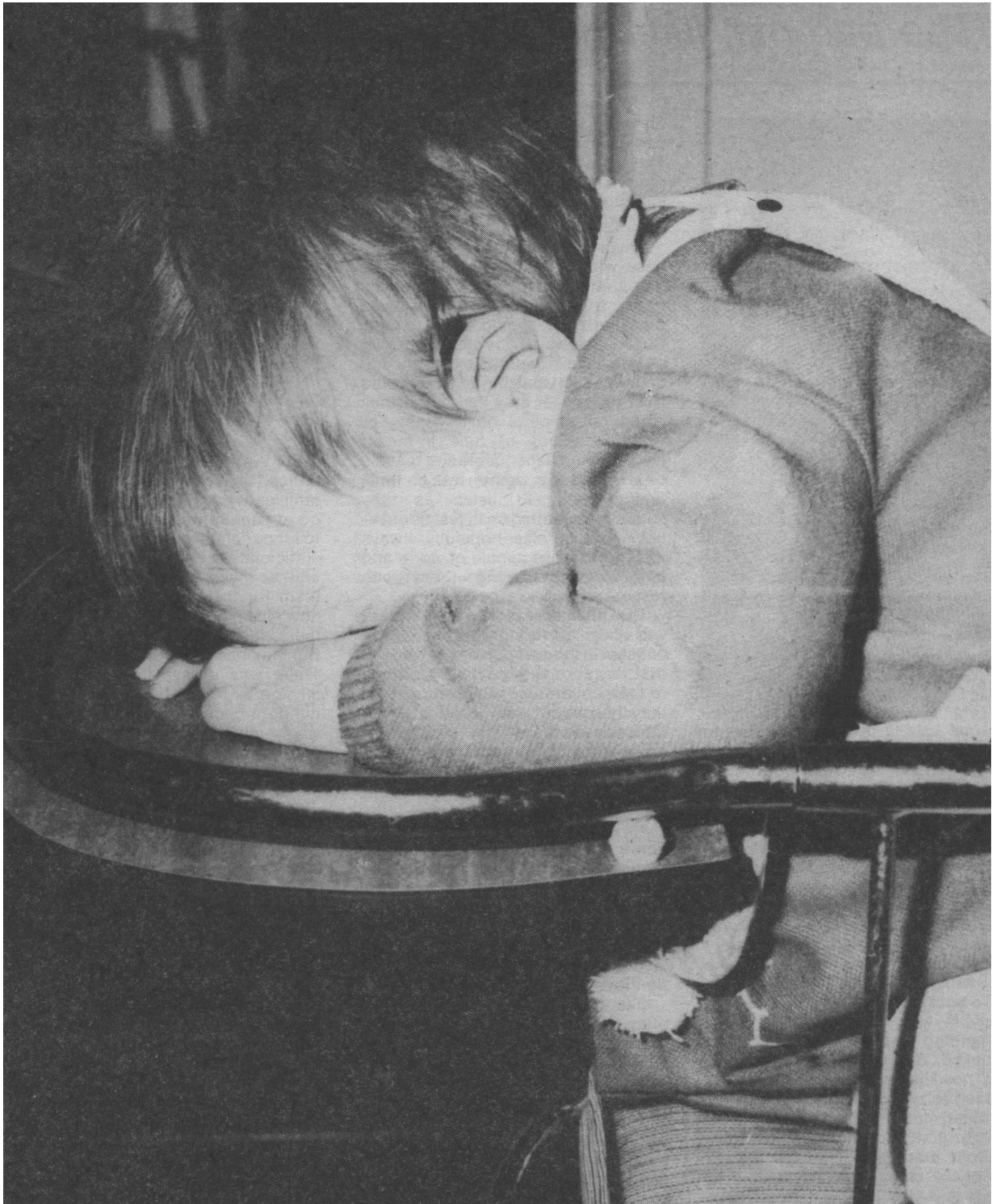
their children go. It was hard work to get ‘Anne’ to allow ‘Ros’ to attend kindergarten because she felt lonely when ‘Ros’ was away from the house. Such parental demands on a three and a half year old place a tremendous burden on a child.

So often mother and child are closed inside the house all day — the child very often is not allowed downstairs to play or to play with other children. The parent needs the child for her/his own security and the physical presence of the child seems somehow to be equated with the parents wholeness as a person. The child’s movement into wider social circles is felt as a loss of control by abusing parents; it represents a competition for the child’s attention and affection and puts their parenting skills under scrutiny, and these skills may be found wanting.

THE PARENTS: I am aware that in all of the cases illustrated I have written about the mothers and nothing about abusing fathers. Working in a hospital setting the majority of our cases were from the younger age groups, (under 4 years of age.) and in these instances it is mostly the mother who is left at home with the children. We also found it a much harder task to engage the fathers in the follow up work we attempted with the families.

Experience has shown that intervention with abusing parents can also be viewed within the dimensions of ‘love’, ‘limits’, and ‘letting go’. The cases which I considered had the most favourable outcome were the ones in which the parents could allow someone to ‘love’ them. They were able to trust sufficiently or come to trust sufficiently to allow social workers or parent aides close enough to love them; i.e. they came to accept the unconditional positive regard — acceptance of themselves as people of worth. (this does not mean acceptance of their, abusing behaviour)

The initial stages of contact with new families was one of establishing an accepting, warm relationship — one in which parents could feel free to express problems they were having with their children and in managing

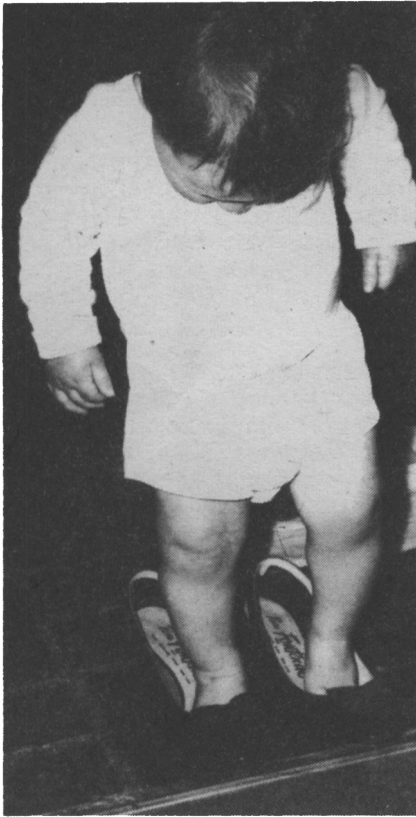


their own lives, without their feeling exposed and more vulnerable. This was usually a long arduous task

requiring tremendous reserves of time, patience and consistency on the part of social workers and parent

aides. (although we did not use parent aides in the initial stages of intervention.)

“The parents, like their children needed limits”



Limit setting behaviour was often necessary in the areas of finance, eating, and in the use of time. Many abusing parents exhibited over-indulgence regarding themselves, spending or eating on whim. Yet these same parents found it exceedingly hard to deliberately reward themselves in any way or to accept praise. They did not see themselves as deserving! 'Anne' was very overweight and found it very hard to set limits on her food intake but when it was suggested that she set a goal for herself and then reward herself with a new record or something she desired she was shocked. She stated that she could not possibly spend any money on herself as she did not deserve it.

Other mothers used their time so poorly that household chores were seldom done and life was always chaotic — they were never able to develop any routine for themselves or their children and almost everything was done on impulse. Their activities and rushing around seemed at times

an attempt to keep out feelings of panic and the possible loss of control. The majority of our families did not require limits set by the court system although where appropriate this method of limit setting was also used.

Anyone hoping to make it to first base with these families had to be prepared to prove themselves worthy of any trust that might be bestowed on them. Why should these parents trust us anyway? Why should they let us get close? Their life experience to date was such that they felt they could trust no one — they had found they could not depend on anyone. For varying periods of time it meant always being dependable and reliable — arriving for appointments on time, finding time to listen as they sometimes chatted on to test us out — but above all else, hopefully always viewing them as people of worth and dignity and treating them with respect.

The initial task of the social worker was one of nurturing — an expression of belief in them as persons of value — that despite anything they had done to their children or whatever feelings they had about their children, they themselves were still worthy of acceptance. It was not hard to find something endearing about abusing parents; after all they are no different from anyone of us.

As abusing parents experienced some degree of re-parenting themselves and experienced love, they were increasingly able to love their children unconditionally and to see something worthwhile in their children as individuals. One cannot love or accept others if one cannot first love and accept oneself!

Like their children who were so often out of control, so too were the parents and they too needed limits — limits not only on their abusive behaviour toward their children, but limits in many areas of their life. Side by side with the early development of a trust relationship went the setting of the *first limit* — holding the parents to continuing contact. Parents were unable to engage actively in therapy for a number of months following presentation (three months seemed to be an average period of time but

with one family of a severely abused child it was nine months before there was any noticeable movement). The limit setting during these initial months was more a 'psychological holding' to keep the parent together as a person and prevent further fragmentation. I was not always sure what was happening for parents during this early non-communicative stage — possibly there was guilt, further loss of self esteem, loss of their self image as good parents, and increased feelings of unworthiness — the majority were difficult to reach emotionally but it was essential to hold on.

For workers possibly the most difficult aspect of our work with these families was our 'letting go! Like all good parents we had to be prepared to let our children go — to trust them sufficiently to allow them to take risks and to make mistakes — to praise them for their successes no matter how small, and to be there to support them when they felt they had failed. But the price that workers pay is high. There was always the tremendous tension as to whether we had made the right decision, as over-riding the whole situation was the ultimate question "Is this child safe?" Balancing the parents growth with the safety of the child was often like walking on a tight rope and was emotionally draining. Even if not always in conscious thought, that ultimate question could never be forgotten. Social work termination with clients while often problematic poses additional problems with families where child abuse has occurred.

I am aware of all the sociological and psychological aspects of child abuse I have left unmentioned and I have made no attempt to look at causes of parental insufficiency. Rather this article is one attempt to make a very complex problem more manageable for workers by the use of a framework which I personally found valuable. There are many other frameworks which could be useful, but this existential response to presenting problems has produced some favourable outcomes for some families. ●