

Raising Children Compassionately



Introduction

I've been teaching Nonviolent Communication to parents for 30 years. I would like to share some of the things that have been helpful to both myself and to the parents that I've worked with, and to share with you some insights I've had into the wonderful and challenging occupation of parenting.

I'd first like to call your attention to the danger of the word "child," if we allow it to apply a different quality of respect than we would give to someone who is not labeled a child. Let me show you what I am referring to.

In parent workshops that I've done over the years, I've often started by dividing the group into two. I put one group in one room, and the other in a different room, and I give each group the task of writing down on a large paper a dialogue between themselves and another person in a conflict situation. I tell both groups what the conflict is. The only difference is that I tell one group the other person is their child, and to the second group I say the other person is their neighbor.

Then we get back into a large group and we look at these different sheets of paper outlining the dialogue that the groups would have, in the one case thinking that the other person was their child, and in the other case, the neighbor. (And incidentally, I haven't allowed the groups to discuss with the other group who the person was in their situation, so that both groups think that the situation is the same.)

After they've had a chance to scan the written dialogues of both groups, I ask them if they can see a difference in terms of the degree of respect and compassion that was demonstrated. Every time I've done this, the group that was working on the situation with the other person being a child was seen as being less respectful and compassionate in their communication than the group that saw the

other person as a neighbor. This painfully reveals to the people in these groups how easy it is to dehumanize someone by the simple process of simply thinking of him or her as “our child.”

My Own Awareness

I had an experience one day that really heightened my awareness of the danger of thinking of people as children. This experience followed a weekend in which I had worked with two groups: a street gang and a police department. I was mediating between the two groups. There had been considerable violence between them, and they had asked that I serve in the role of a mediator. After spending as much time as I did with them, dealing with the violence they had toward each other, I was exhausted. And as I was driving home afterwards, I told myself, I never want to be in the middle of another conflict for the rest of my life.

And of course, when I walked in my back door, my three children were fighting. I expressed my pain to them in a way that we advocate in Nonviolent Communication. I expressed how I was feeling, what my needs were, and what my requests were. I did it this way. I shouted, “When I hear all of this going on right now, I feel extremely tense! I have a real need for some peace and quiet after the weekend I’ve been through! So would you all be willing to give me that time and space?”

My oldest son looked at me and said, “Would you like to talk about it?” Now, at that moment, I dehumanized him in my thinking. Why? Because I said to myself, “How cute. Here’s a nine year old boy trying to help his father.” But take a closer look at how I was disregarding his offer because of his age, because I had him labeled as a child. Fortunately I saw that was going on in my head, and maybe I was able to see it more clearly because the work I had been doing between the street gang and the police showed me the danger of thinking of people in terms of labels instead of their humanness.

So instead of seeing him as a child and thinking to myself, “how cute,” I saw a human being who was reaching out to another human being in pain, and I said out loud, “Yes, I would like to talk about

it.” And the three of them followed me into another room and listened while I opened up my heart to how painful it was to see that people could come to a point of wanting to hurt one another simply because they hadn’t been trained to see the other person’s humanness. After talking about it for 45 minutes I felt wonderful, and as I recall we turned the stereo on and danced like fools for awhile.