

Why Don't They Just Control that Child!

Not long ago, I was in a restaurant seated near a family with young children. They were all having a very bad day and I over-heard another patron say (under his breath) “Why don't they just control that child?” So, why don't we just control our children? To answer that question, we have to really think about what it is we want for our kids. What do we hope for them? What do we want them to be like when they're all grown-up?

Whenever I talk with parents and ask about their hopes and dreams for their children, one of the first qualities mentioned is independence. Parents also list responsibility, honesty, and caring. Most of us want to control our children, because we want what's best for them. We love them and want them to be the best they can be. But we have to ask ourselves an important question. Can we control our children into being the best they can be? Can we make our children be responsible, caring and independent?

As a start, it may be useful to reflect on how much control we actually have. Even when children are very small, there are many things over which we simply have no control. We can't make a child eat or sleep, even when they're hungry and exhausted and we all know you can't make a child use the “potty”. As our children grow, we learn we can't control their feelings or thoughts, we can't make them study and we can't control their values and beliefs. But our lack of control should not lead us to despair. Instead, it should lead us to the profound conclusion that *these children of ours are unique individuals with their own wants and needs, deserving of our unconditional love and deep respect*. Children don't need to be controlled, but they do need us to help them learn to control themselves.

How do we help them learn to control themselves? The Assets message is very clear: if we want our children to become strong, responsible, independent caring adults, we have to deliberately create an environment that nurtures those qualities. These values and skills we want for our children are internal assets – they only grow from the inside out. We can't control our children into being kind or caring or responsible, no matter how much we want to. But we can control the environment we set-up in our families and schools and neighborhoods to nurture all these positive values and the self control that goes with them. Let's look at a few every-day situations to think about how we can use the control we do have to create this nurturing environment.

The Dinner Table: As mentioned, parents do not have control over eating, but we do have control over what food is served in our homes.

- Providing a few choices and allowing children to serve themselves what and how much they choose empowers children, and sends the message that you respect their ability to make healthy choices. (Don't worry if the food choices you put on the table to get fussy eaters to eat are a little “unconventional”. As long as the choices are all healthy, it's fine.)

Bed Time: Clearly we can not make our children sleep – we have no control over that. But, we can control the environment they go to sleep in.

- We can insist that that our children are in their beds at a reasonable hour, with **no** TV's or computers in the room with them! We can help children understand the consequences of not getting enough sleep; again sending the message that we know with good information, our children will make smart decisions about their own bodies. We can also try to build in some quiet relaxing time before bed so that children aren't expected to go directly from high-gear to sleep.

School work: We can't make our children learn or study, but we can control their learning environment at home.

- We can help children control their own learning by making sure they have a quiet, well-lit place to do their school work. We can also be interested in what they're learning and try to connect that with what's going on in the big world outside of school. If they do poorly on a test or forget assignments, we can help them understand that mistakes are for learning. We can help **them** own their mistakes and help **them** figure out how to solve the problem. Again, we're sending the message that we believe in our children and in their ability to act responsibly and make competent decisions. When **we** try to control their mistakes and the inevitable consequences we are telling our children that they are not competent or capable and they need us to control things for them. This clearly does not encourage responsibility and independence!

Values: As mentioned, values can only grow from the inside out. You can not **make** your child caring or honest or responsible. But you do control what you say and how you say it, and what you do, or don't do each and everyday. We can't escape from the fact that children internalize their values from observing how we adults go about our everyday lives. They're always watching, they're always listening.

- We all get to the "end of our ropes" and that's when we really want to get things back in our control. It's at those times we may resort to rewards and punishments to control our children's behavior. The trouble with both rewards and punishments is that, although they do allow you to control the child's behavior, they don't teach the child about controlling his/her own behavior. Rewards and punishments don't teach anything about caring, responsibility or independence. Instead they teach children to do what they're told so they can either get the reward or avoid the punishment. But when no adult is around, what will the child do? Unless we take the time to help children understand why we want them to behave in a particular way and consistently encourage them and unless that behavior is consistently modeled for them, children will have a very hard time developing the values that will guide their behavior from the inside. Children who are controlled may grow-up to be adults who are dependent on others to tell them what to do. And that's very different from the independent, responsible caring adults we were hoping for.

The Assets message makes it clear if we want our children to grow into strong, independent, responsible and caring adults, then we have to create an environment that nurtures the growth of those qualities. So let's put all our energy into taking control of the environment – our families, our neighborhoods, our schools - to ensure that Arlington is the most nurturing community it can possibly be.

If you have questions or suggestions or for more information about Assets or the Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth and Families please contact me - Mary Ann Moran at mmoran@arlingtonva.us or call me at 703-228-1671. You can also visit our website: www.arlingtonpartnershipforyouth.org