

Teaching Your Children to Think For Themselves

By Stefanie Conte, M.A. Cand.

Karen is the proud mother of a young woman named Stacey. Since Stacey was born Karen has wanted nothing more than to raise a child who would be capable of going out on her own into the world one day. To do this, Karen made sure that Stacey always knew what she needed and why. When Stacey was six-years-old Karen would say, "Sweetie, I put an umbrella in your backpack in case it starts to rain." At nine-years-old she would say, "The weatherman said it's going to rain today. Here's your umbrella, go put it in your backpack." At fourteen-years-old, "Stacey dear, don't forget your umbrella. It looks like it's starting to rain outside." When Stacey turned seventeen, Karen started to get frustrated and questioned why her child wasn't capable of thinking for herself and saying, "It looks like it's going to rain outside, maybe I should bring an umbrella with me."

But why should Karen expect her daughter to do something she's never actually been taught to do? The only lesson Karen has been teaching all of these years is that Stacey doesn't have to think about whether or not she needs an umbrella today because mom has always done that for her. Parenting guru and author of *Winning at Parenting...Without Beating Your Kids*, Barbara Coloroso, points out

that parents can easily get stuck in the trap of teaching their child what to think, not how to think. If we fill in the blanks for them they are never taught to critically think and make decisions for themselves. Furthermore, if someone else is always telling a child what to do and making decisions for them, the child will not learn to trust their own instincts and decisions.

What might Karen have done differently? She could have simply said, "Stacey let's take a look outside at the weather. What kind of day does it look like to you?" As soon as Stacey figures out that it looks like, mom can ask, "So if it looks like it might be a rainy day what do you think we should make sure we take with us?" By getting Stacey involved in figuring out the logic behind bringing an umbrella with you on a rainy day, mom can rest assured that by the time Stacey is seventeen (and likely much earlier than that) she won't need to be reminded to bring an umbrella when she leaves the house.

Judy Arnall, author of *'Discipline Without Distress'* encourages parents to show faith in their children by giving them the power of choice from a very young age. For a child under the age of five the choice may not be whether or not they should go to bed, but rather, which pajamas they would like to wear – the red ones or the green ones? As children age the number of choices should gradually increase. Your teenager then

has the choice of picking their outfits from whichever clothes they own in their closet (possibly with the odd exception).

The lesson is to not do for your child what they are capable of doing for themselves. The key word here is capable. Parents cannot expect their child to carry out a thought or behaviour that they've never actually been taught. Beginning with the end in mind may be helpful when considering how we can teach and guide our children in learning how to think for themselves. We would never expect a child to know how to drive a car without being given the knowledge and tools of getting behind the wheel, so why would we expect a child to think about whether or not they need an umbrella without setting problem solving skills in place first.

Under-estimate Your Willpower

(continued from page 2)

because we don't know if new behaviours will satisfy us like the old ones. We won't know until we try.

You have other options than blindly allowing impulses full control. In moments of distress, it's helpful to pause, to be aware of your distress and recognize your vulnerability. At that moment you have a choice. Stopping to breathe slowly and calmly allows you to use the moment to choose another option.

Having "enough willpower" is not the complete answer to changing our bad habits. Supplementing our willpower with willingness to choose and imple-

ment new behaviours and thoughts can put us on the road to success.

*A note on the "clean eating" agreement between Joan and her daughter: This was a month-long agreement to eat no white sugar, no white flour and no second helpings. Concessions were made for an occasional dessert for special occasions. Side benefits have been increased energy and moderate weight loss.

** (Pearl s. Buck, American author, 1938 Nobel Prize for literature.)

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Christmas Blues

Most people love Christmas: the music and coloured lights, traditions, great food, gifts and special gatherings with family and friends. There are some, however who dread the season or find it stressful; they experience a significant contrast between their unhappiness and the celebrations taking place around them.

Where do the Christmas Blues come from and what can be done to ease them? Let's first look at the causes.



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1) *Seasonal fatigue* is a factor for many people. Christmas comes at the end of a busy Fall and it is not unusual to be exhausted from everyday demands. The increased socializing and holiday preparations can seem

overwhelming to someone who is already worn down or "burned out." SAD or Seasonal Affect Disorder can also contribute to the blues, as the loss

of light tends to bring on depression symptoms for many people.

2) *Hyper-activity* is the name of the game in the month prior to the Christmas celebration. With hectic work and family schedules, the pre-Christmas season can be exhausting. Party overload!

3) *The ghosts of Christmas past* can surface readily during this time of year. Some people have sad or hurtful memories of celebrations past. For instance, a person who grew up with an alcoholic parent may recall

excessive drinking and uncontrolled fighting during past holidays.

4) *Grief* surfaces strongly at Christmas. This season of family celebration can be particularly painful for anyone who has suffered the death of a loved one in the previous year. The grief may have begun to settle, but now it

continued on page 3

Also in this issue:

Under-estimate Your Willpower.....2

Teaching Your Children to Think For Themselves.....4

Video Games: Friend of Foe?

Your nine year old tells you he's heard that Halo is the 'best game ever' and wants to buy it. You find out that it's rated R (Restricted) and has gory content. What do you do? Or your 16 year old has spent 6 hours on the computer, MSN, iPod, and her DSi, simultaneously, and gets mad when you ask her to shut them down. How do you handle this situation?

The quality of the graphics, sound, and interactive play of video games these days has kids and teens really excited and eager to play them. As with anything, there are positives and negatives to gaming. According to pediatricians and other experts some of the benefits of gaming are as follows: gaming can increase a child's reflexes, improve hand-

eye coordination, and may sometimes boost logical thinking ability and strengthen problem-solving skills, particularly in educational games and games where kids are required to design a city or make a plan. Educational games in particular can also improve competence in reading, spelling and math, and may also increase alertness. Frequent gamers often score better on vision tests.

That's the good part. The downside is more concerning. On a physical level, gaming causes eye strain, wrist and back pain, and headaches. We've probably all heard of the 11 year



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old who developed tendonitis, a repetitive motion strain injury (more common in us older folk) in his wrist from playing video games. Emotionally, the more kids game, the less social contact they have. Even if your child is gaming with friends, they aren't focusing on each other. Every kid needs to spend time with friends -talking, playing, creating - in order to develop normally. Kids who spend more than four hours a day gaming often

continued on page 3

Under-estimate Your Willpower

Okay, I'll admit it. I did have small private chocolate caches hidden away for times of desperate need. There was the dark stuff from a Finnish friend stashed high in the cupboard with the goblets that no one uses. The Skor bars were hidden underneath receipts in a lower right desk drawer at home. The trichocolate Lindt balls had found a home tucked in the corner of my filing cabinet for emergencies.

Resisting chocolate has never been a struggle for me. I just don't. However, when my daughter and I decided to challenge each other to "clean eating"* for one month, I knew I would have a bit of a battle on my hands. I soon discovered that willpower was not enough. In a recent study in the upcoming journal of Psychological Science, Loran Nordgren observed that college students who rely on their own willpower to help them defeat their urges to smoke, overeat or use addictive substances often fail because they tend to overestimate their ability to resist urges. He describes one experiment where smokers who strongly believed they could resist their urges were twice as likely to light up a cigarette as smokers who perceived themselves as having less self-control.

It seems that humility is our friend when it comes to terminating unhealthy habits. When we think too highly of our own abilities to resist temptation, we create potential hazards for ourselves. Willpower must be supplemented with other strategies to overcome temptation.

Work needs to be done before you come to the point of temptation. Plan how you will deal with specific types of frustrations before they arise. If you know you typically deal with a stressful day at work by engaging in a couch potato ritual accompanied by consumption of high calorie foods, decide before you get home that instead you'll go for a walk, call a friend, or get a small task done that allows you a sense of accomplishment.

Our habits are the default behaviors that are most comfortable and familiar to us in times of duress. These habits

provide comfort and familiarity but also require the least mental input. The following proverb about thoughts and habits still holds true and implies that investing in the effort of disciplining our thought life is well worth the effort:

Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a lifetime.

Instead of providing yourself with opportunities to "resist" temptation, you need to avoid situations where you are tempted at all. "No opportunity" creates more success than allowing yourself to experience the same temptations over and over again, in the same situations. Change your environment to minimize temptation. (Yes, I know. This means the chocolate stashes have got to go.)

Food is often used to sweeten moments. Instead of tending to our emotional frustration, discouragement or fatigue, food can be used as a source of comfort and satisfaction instead of for the purpose of fueling and nourishing our body. In the short term, it seems like a successful strategy, but in the long term "emotional eating" creates unhealthy habits which are hard to rid ourselves of. Changing our environment may simply involve replacing high fat, high sugar and high salt foods with fresh fruit and cut-up veggies.

Goals for behavior change need to be realistic. Start slow. Real success in

changing long-standing habits takes time. Set goals that focus on the positive aspects of your behavior change, not the negative. Notice and congratulate yourself for incremental changes. But remember, change involves increased energy being applied to any given situation. It will take work to change the habits you have grown accustomed to and comfortable with, and we cannot wait for the 'right mood' to happen first. Pearl S. Buck stated: "I don't wait for moods. You accomplish nothing if you do that. Your mind must know it has got to get down to work." **

Be accountable. Find a partner who challenges you to reach your goal. My morning gym routines exist because I know my friend will be there – and she will hassle me "big time" if I'm not.

We are most vulnerable to temptation when our feelings, frustrations and fatigue create the "perfect storm" of low impulse resistance. Identify the factors that increase your impulsive behavior. Recognize your thinking processes of rationalization. They may sound like "I deserve this because..." or "I really need this today because..." If you don't stop your internal behavioral excuses, it is highly likely that you will follow through on your impulsive actions once you allow these thoughts to lead you down your "old habit trail."

Face the anxieties that cause you to resist behavioral change. At times we keep to our old dysfunctional behavior

continued on page 4



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Video Games - Friend or Foe? (continued from front page)

become more introverted, aren't as keen to hang out with friends away from gaming, and don't develop important social skills they need to function in life.

So what can we do about this issue as parents? One of the most important things you can do for your child is to be involved. Watch the games your kids are playing and maybe even play them as well, so you know not only the content of the games but also the goal of the games. Pay attention to the games your child or teen is interested in buying. All games are rated from E (everyone) to 18+ and M for mature adults only. Your 8 year old may really want to play Grand Theft Auto, but with a rating of M, it isn't made for him.

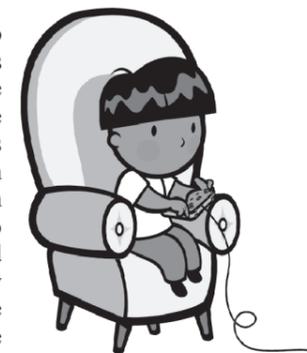
The second thing we need to do as parents is set limits with our kids around gaming. This includes the type of games they want and the time they are allowed to play. It's important to let our kids know which games we are okay with and which ones we are not. Our kids need to hear us say "I know that game and the content and I will not let you play it until you are older. Please choose something else." We also need to be

aware of what our kids are playing at their friends' houses. If we tell our son that we will not let him buy or play Halo in our home because of the content, he may just head to his buddy's place to play. It is our job to intervene and let the other parent know our wishes or invite his buddies over to our place instead.

As was stated previously, there are many negative things about gaming, and one of the biggest is the amount of time our kids spend playing video games. It is not uncommon to hear of kids playing video games for 4-8 hours at a time. Experts encourage parents to limit our kids screen time. Basically, they can play after

responsibilities are completed (homework, chores, etc.) and if there is an agreed time limit. This can range from 30 minutes per day for a 7 year old up to 2 hours per day for a sixteen year old. Pediatricians recommend no more than 3 hours a day.

Another important



Christmas Blues (continued from front page)

returns with a vengeance as memories of the missing special person flood to the surface with all the seasonal reminders.

What is the cure for the Christmas Blues? In some instances there may not be a cure so much as a management strategy to ease the discomfort.

1) *Seasonal fatigue* - Make time to rest during the holiday break. Realizing that seasonal fatigue is a normal result of living busy lives, time can be built in to "chill." Making time to watch movies or read novels or play games with family can all help to recharge the human battery. Going for walks can be relaxing and good for the body. Deciding to change one's attitude about dark and gloomy days can help as well. Enjoying the coloured lights which don't neighbourhood homes can be a means of making the most of the darker evenings. Deciding that winter is a great time to reacquaint oneself with the inside of one's home and the interests therein

(music, books, organizing the thousands of pictures on the computer etc.) can make the season less distressful.

2) *Hyper-activity* - Say No to some invitations and stay home and take it easy. When out socializing, leave early and monitor (i.e. cut back) the intake of goodies and alcohol.

3) *The ghosts of Christmas past* - Become a temporary journal writer and take fifteen minutes a day (more if you wish) to write memories and the feelings which accompany them. In this way you will stop your mind from automatically focusing on old happenings and get a release at the same time. Sometimes in the past when we were hurt there was no chance to release the personal upset. The old unexpressed hurt may be the main reason the memory still has power.

4) *Grief* - Accept "anniversary grief" as being normal and not a slipping backwards. Also keep up traditions

job for us as parents is to encourage our kids to involve themselves in other activities, both social and individual. Kids need to have balance in their lives for optimal health. I always try and get my kids to find other things to do like hang out with friends, play a sport, read, play a game or spend time with me (just so they remember how to do it). If kids had their choice, some of them would play video games from the moment they come home from school, eating a quick dinner and then continuing gaming until bedtime. They might play video games alone or with friends and would likely play all weekend long. As parents it's important we make ourselves part of that decision!

Books

Marriage Can Be Great! ...no really

by Denis Boyd, M.A., R.Psych.

Parenting Teens Without Power and Strings

by Rick Hancock, Psy.D., R.Psych.

which were shared with the deceased, even though they can be accompanied by sad feelings. Eventually the traditions will be seen as a way of connecting with the loved person who is gone. It can also be helpful to create new traditions and one of them can be a dinnertime toast to the memory of the person(s) who has died. The Christmas season is an opportunity to further one's healing after a loss. The secret to "good grief" is to experience it and share it with others repeatedly over time. If one has "let go" of the person who has died, experiencing and sharing the pain associated with the loss leads to eventual healing. Avoiding the pain tends to delay, if not prevent, healing.

Christmas is a wonderful opportunity to rest, socialize sensibly, write one's thoughts/ memories/ feelings, release old hurts from long ago and celebrate the memories of very special people in our lives.

