

PARENTING MATTERS

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Newsletter

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The New Year has started off well for me as I am trying to focus on my resolution: to keep up with filing and sorting papers that lie everywhere in our house. My second resolution is to be more proactive to take some time for me. I decided to start with something simple, so I went to have a consult at a reputable skin line product kiosk. This new regime of applying these products has got me going to bed earlier and waking up a little bit earlier to fit it all in! So even though it is simple, I can easily come up with an excuse not to follow through (being tired as my first fall-back complaint!). A friend of mine told me that it takes 21 days to incorporate one new habit!

To promote the gift of time to myself, I have decided to cut back on writing monthly newsletters and move instead to writing **four newsletters a year**.

In January I presented at the Capilano Elementary School PAC on **Helping Your Child Manage Their Anxiety**, and I was thrilled at how well attended it was!

Family Gone Wild!

Recently, I have been working with several families where parents are feeling out of control in putting order back into the family. The main complaint is that their children/teens are constantly fighting and there is no respect in the home. I will call this family the Jones family. They have three children (two girls aged 16 and 13 and a 9 year old boy). They lead a very active life. There is a lot of swearing on a daily basis, problems with privacy for the girls in their bedrooms, and a constant battle over use of electronics such as computer use, gaming systems and control of TV shows. One teen complains that her sister is always taking her clothes.

How to tackle this problem?

Order needed to be restored because the teenagers were swearing around their brother with no consequences. The youngest child is very physical and often uses foul language when dealing with his older siblings. In a large family with two different age groups, consequences cannot be the same for each age group. It was important to first establish **clear concrete rules** for the family. In the beginning, I suggest parents focus on no more than three rules. Two is fine as once these rules are established, the parents are responsible for **following through with consequences**. Mr. and Mrs. Jones had given up on enforcing consequences because it became a yelling match. To establish rules there needs to be a **consensus on what is being targeted**. The parents then decided on

using a **time-out model** for their son. For the teenagers, we focused on taking away their **key privileges such as cell phone, computer use, ipod, money and socializing.**

In a **family meeting**, the rules were discussed and consequences were clearly stated. For the teens, the rule that had the heaviest weight would take away the biggest privilege. For the youngest teen, socializing with her friends was most important to her.

The parents were told that some of their children's behaviours will get worse before getting better. They were also told that if they give up and do not follow through, their child will continue to use their best tactic that melts them down. The stakes would become high and the family chaotic. They were told to stick to the plan and try hard to focus on the agreed upon rules, even if some of their children's behaviours became outrageous, (safety of course always needs to be addressed first).

At the same time that parents are working on establishing their parental power, they also need to **spend some quality time** with each of their children. Often children/teens who are fighting or are disrespectful in the home do not feel connected to their parents or other family members. They often feel left out, or jealous that another sibling is getting more privileges. The parent needs to find a way to connect with each child and to provide for their emotional needs. **Taking time to spend uninterrupted free play** with a younger child is key. This can either be 15 minutes a day, or for busy families, plan on each parent spending 40 minutes per week playing a game, or getting out of the home to share in an activity together.

Teenagers also require feeling more connected to their parents. **Unconditional listening** to your teen is really important. This means listening without interrupting, or making judgemental comments. Parents of teens need to be creative in finding the opportunities to listen to their teen like when driving to events or when doing a chore together, or even invite your teen to have a cup of tea with you. If your teen rejects parental advances, remember that often the rejection is about them feeling hurt and misunderstood. Try to find a neutral way of connecting with your teen such as making eye contact, touch or making their favourite breakfast or dessert. Parents need to put aside their hurt or anger at being rejected, and keep trying to gain their teen's willingness to share with them.

Put in structure and routines for your children

In working with the Jones family, it became clear that **basic routines** had not been enforced because of conflict. For instance, the son did not have a bed time. He had control of the TV because he was home earlier from school than his older sisters. He would only go out to his siblings' lessons if he was bribed by a food reward. The daughters too would only comply with a family outing if bribed. In this instance, bribery was the parents only leverage and it placed the children in control of the parent's attempts to do a family outing. Besides establishing **a bedtime and a school week routine** for the teens, the parents were instructed to **make a schedule for TV and computer use.** A schedule was also devised for the use of the rec room on weekends so that each daughter could invite friends over without being disturbed by the other sibling.

The parents were then taught about using **clear communication** within the family. This included teaching the parents about **empathy** and how to use empathic statements in family meetings and when listening their child's daily interactions. **Direct Commands** are clear instructions that let you child know exactly what you want them to do and how you want them to behave. For example:

- Please get off the furniture
- Put your dirty clothes in the laundry hamper
- No swearing in our house

It's best at the beginning of these familial changes that the parents **review** how the family is functioning with the new rules. Try to look for the positives, and make adjustments if necessary without compromising on what you as parents feel is important. Learning to **negotiate** with your teen or pre-teen is important.

Parents need to take the lead on putting order back into the family. This may mean changing the way the family has been operating in the past. Establishing rules and consequences is not a popular stance with children who have too much power and control in the family, but it is essential is starting to put boundaries for family members to feel safe. Then family cohesion can be restored over time when the parents spend quality time with each member to establish a trusting caring relationship where each child doesn't have to compete for attention.

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