

# THE KNOWLEDGE PROJECT #44

Barbara Coloroso



Welcome to another Episode of the Knowledge Project

This conversation is with Barbara Coloroso. Barbara is a best-selling author, speaker, consultant on parenting, teaching, school discipline, bullying, grieving, non-violent conflict resolution and restorative justice. Her thoughts, as you will soon see, speak for themselves.

I first heard about Barbara through one of my son's friends' moms, possibly as a hint to my parenting. She mentioned that Barbara spoke at one of her medical conferences and would be an awesome guest on the show. So I bought Barbara's book, Kids Are Worth It, and seeing all of my own parenting flaws laid bare, I knew that we had to chat.

Well this episode is geared towards parents. I promise, even if you don't have kids, you will learn a lot because if you don't have kids, chances are you want kids, you know someone with kids, or occasionally have to look after kids. You'll walk away with a better understanding of how to be a positive influence and what kids need to be successful. Let's get started.

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**Barbara, I'm so happy to have you on The Knowledge Project.**

Barbara Coloroso: Thank you for having me. It's a joy.

**I think I read that in the '60s you entered a convent to become a nun at the age of 17. What led you to do that?**

I entered a convent, a Franciscan convent. At 17 what do you really know, other than I wanted to work with kids with special needs having been a lifeguard and taught special needs in swimming. And I had my dad's cousins. One was a monk, one was a priest, one was a nun, and the other was a woman who had seven kids, so that was his cousin batch. And so I grew up knowing them, and when I talked to Sister Jean Marie about what I was thinking of, she suggested a Franciscan order in Milwaukee that also ran the Coletta School, which is where Joseph, I mean John Kennedy's sister was at.

So that's what got me to the Franciscan convent. I'm glad I went and I'm really glad I left. It was a good experience in my life for three years, and I'm glad I left. I have a husband and three kids, and no, I didn't meet him in the convent. He wasn't a priest. I met him after I left the convent, so that'll answer all the Catholics' questions on that one. I have three kids and three wonderful grandchildren, as well.

**And is that where you learned to teach, at the convent?**

Yes, I got my teaching degree after I left the convent, but I was pursuing it. I was a year away when I left the order. And anyone listening to me would know that we take three vows, chastity, obedience and poverty. I grew up very poor, so that wasn't an issue. Chastity, I was too young to know what I was really giving up with that, but the obedience was a difficult one for me because all along in all of my work, I talk about raising people who will stand up for values and against injustices, and at that point in my life it seemed like I was to be obedient to the bishop. I know better now, but it just seemed like that, and I was not going to do that. It's obedient to the Gospel, and that's what I live today.

But yes, that was the beginning of my journey. That's where I got most of my special ed training. And then I left the convent and finished up at the University of Northern Colorado, and that's where I met my husband at a migrant protest march with Cesar Chavez's...group, and I had been involved in civil rights as a nun in Milwaukee.

**And then you started teaching, only everything you had found out about what you learned about teaching turned out to be not true.**

The area of behavior modification—because that was big in the late '60s, and that again, getting kids to do what I wanted them to do by using rewards and bribes and threats and punishment—really went against, actually, what I was learning in my theology and philosophy courses, which were required as a nun. And they ran headlong into that with, “This is how we should bribe children and threaten them and reward them and punish them.” So in my real-world experience in the classroom, I realized that I would far better rely on my philosophy, sociology, and theology training to work with kids.

And I came up with three basic tenets. One, kids are worth it. I believe they're worth our time, energy and resources to help them become all they can become. Second, I won't treat them in a way I, myself, would not want to be treated. If I wouldn't want it done to me, I'm not going to do it to a child. And third, if it works, it must leave my dignity and the child's dignity intact. Not just if it works or appears to work, but does it work and leave both of our dignity intact?

**What do you mean by leaving your dignity intact?**

That I'm not doing things to that child that would—like hitting a child. I'm opposed to that because I think it destroys their sense of self-worth and dignity, and in return, I have harmed a child and I want to look at alternatives.

The title of my video, my very first one, was “Winning at Parenting Without Beating Your Kids,” and “Winning at Teaching Without Beating Your Kids.” I mean that not only in a humorous way, but also in a serious way, because we still have 19 states in this country that allow corporal punishment.

But I’m talking more about the power struggles we get into with kids, and this is where I felt that bribes and threats, rewards and punishments, which by the way, have become an insidious part of our culture, really interfere with raising an ethical human being. That’s why I went back to my sociology and my theology and philosophy. I want a child who will stand up for values and against injustices when it costs them, not when they’re getting rewarded for catching being good, because it’s all about getting caught.

When the high-status social bully says to all the other girls in grade eight, “If you want to be in my group,” which is a reward, “don’t eat lunch with the new girl,” I want your daughter to be the one to say “That’s mean, that’s cruel,” and have the courage—and it does take courage—to go sit next to the new girl, because she will do that at cost. She is not going to get any scratch-and-sniff stickers and stars, lunch with the principal. What she’ll probably get is, “Oh, Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, you’re next.”

And I want your sons, when their friends say, “Look at that kid over there,” different skin color, religion, gender, physical or mental ability—the big five for hate crimes. What makes a hate crime different than any other crime? It’s criminal bullying. And the kids say, “Let’s go mess him up.” I want your son to be the one to say no when the burden’s heavy, when his friends say “What, are you chicken? What, are you just like him?”

So I look both as a parent and as an educator at how do we raise a generation willing to stand up and speak out and step in and not be praise-dependent and reward-dependent. Praise-dependent, reward-dependent children make wonderful henchmen for bullies. They will do the bully’s bidding because they want whatever reward that bully is dangling in front of them. I want young people who do the right thing when it’s difficult to do, and so what do we do in the classroom and what do we do at home that encourages that? We give them opportunities to make choices and decisions and mistakes. We hold them accountable and allow them to see that they truly do have the agency in their lives, that what they do matters.

**I want to do a huge deep dive into that. What does it mean to hold them accountable? What does it mean to make them own their decisions? Can you walk me through what that means, not only in the classroom for the teachers out there listening, but also at home for the parents like myself, who probably default to this sort of reward/punishment.**

Yep, we do, it’s part of our culture. Well, let’s look at first, giving them choices and decisions. I don’t say to a two-year-old, “Do you want to go to bed or not?” That’s not a decision they get to make. But I do say, “Do you want to go to bed now with your red pajamas or now with your blue pajamas?”

And they show up red bottoms, blue top. I've always said if it's not life-threatening, morally threatening, or unhealthy, let it go.

Stick with the big stuff you may have to get hysterical about. And so they show up with that mix. Then you constantly increase responsibilities and decisions, both at home and in the classroom, that give them the opportunity to make those choices, real choices. So I go from red pajama, blue pajama to three outfits, pick one, to here's your school clothes, here's your play clothes, pick something from your school clothes, and regularly our middle daughter would show up with the layered look. All school clothes, just definitely layered.

Now I know a lot of parents who would say, "Go pick out an outfit. Oh, you can't wear that one." Now, it's not life-threatening to a kid to wear the layered look. It's painful for a parent, but it's not life-threatening. You let it go.

Kids with shoes on the wrong feet, if they hurt, they'd move 'em, but we worry, worry, worry. I've yet to see a senior with shoes on the wrong feet, but we sure spend a lot of their early childhood worrying about it. No, it's letting go and saying what truly can a kid do—age appropriate, ability appropriate, and that'll be different for each child. Our goal is to constantly increase responsibilities and decision making, decrease limits and boundaries, so that when they leave our homes and our schools, they are truly responsible for all of their own behavior and for their own choices in terms of mistakes they've made and how to fix them and the like.

So you start with responsibilities and decision making, and then after we've looked at that in all areas, I ask educators, "Do you have a plan from kindergarten through grade 12 in this district to increase responsibilities and decision making and academic skills, work-study skills, and affective skills? Because that's how kids are successful, and do you have that plan to constantly increase that?"

Again, helping them develop what I call inner discipline, self-discipline, and then I look at what do we do at home or at school if they make a mistake, create mischief, or cause mayhem. Now I must say right up front, any and all bullying, because it's an attack on another human being, is mayhem, but there are degrees of mayhem and not all mayhem is bullying. You can have a one on one fight that's so serious that it becomes mayhem.

So that aside, when kids make a mistake—bullying is not a mistake, calling somebody a gross name, dunking their head in the toilet, is not a mistake, although people will say, "Oh, he made a big mistake." No, he didn't, he created mayhem. So let's look at the distinction there. A child runs along, leaving art class, and his felt tip marker has the lid off and he's accidentally marking up the wall. That's a mistake. Another child does tic-tac-toe on the wall. That's mischief. Another child writes a gross term and another child's name. That's mayhem. All three markings, but the intent is different.

So what I want young people to know, again at home and at school, that if you make a mistake, it's a very simple formula. Simple doesn't make it easy. With a mistake, you own it, you fix it, you learn from it and you move on.

So as educators, if we know, and I've seen it posted in classrooms after I've done lectures in schools, that whether you're a kindergarten kid or a twelfth grader, if you make a mistake, your job is to own it, fix it, learn from it and move on.

If it's mischief, we show them what they've done wrong, give them ownership of the problem, give them ways to solve it, leave their dignity intact. If it's mayhem, we do three Rs. It's called restorative practices: Restitution, Resolution and Reconciliation. In other words, you have to own and fix what you did, figure out how you're going to keep it from happening again, and find a way to heal with the person that you've truly harmed. And so, going back, if a child makes a mistake, a three-year-old drops a glass on the floor or a 16-year-old in a lab class drops a beaker that has caustic material, both are mistakes. They were not intentional. They have to own it. They can't blame it on a crooked table. They can't blame it on a slippery glass. They have to fix it.

Now a three-year-old cannot pick up glass but they can run get a bag, and you can pick up the glass while they hold the bag, and they can help mop up the floor. The 16-year-old can't pick up the caustic material, but he can get the hazmat kit and you can demonstrate to the whole class how you pick up caustic material. Then he has to replace the beaker, and then he has to do his experiment again. So own it, fix it, learn from it, move on.

With the three-year-old, you say "Which of these two plastic glasses would you like to use today?"

That same principle of own it, fix it, learn from it, move on. So we don't have to have a lot of confusing rules and levels of discipline. You know if a kid dunks a kid's head in a toilet, which is mayhem, I am not going to give him a warning or her a warning. I mean, we're going to treat it as mean and cruel right away.

### **How would you handle that?**

With a child dunking another kid's head in the toilet?

### **Yeah, or writing on the wall with the name and the—**

Okay, the name on the wall, restitution. Own that you did it, and fix it. So you've got to erase it. Now let's say they said it online, as well. They have to go in and try to get that off, which is almost impossible. It can be scrubbed, but that's expensive. But you can also have the child send out a message. "I said these ugly things—" and you don't repeat it, but—"I said these ugly things to, about this person. What I said was mean and cruel. If you received it, would you please delete it? If you sent it on to others, would you send this note on?" It's a humbling experience for them to do that, but if it's on the wall then they have to scrub it off and own that they did it. Fix it, and second is figure out how you're going to keep it from happening again.

And most kids will say, “Oh, I won’t do that again.” I said, “Well, that’s good, that’s what you won’t do. I want you to tell me what you will do.” And this is where your wisdom as an educator or a parent will come in. They say, “Well, I don’t know.” I say, “Well, one of the things you could do, if it was on the computer, is not use your computer for a period of time till you can demonstrate, with supervision after that, that you can use it in a way that’s civil and savvy, smart and kind.

And another thing you can do is I never demand an apology. I can say, “Well, you can own what you did to the person you did it to,” because you ask for an apology, you get one of three kinds. I’m sorry, real heartfelt, or I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, they keep doing it again and again and it’s like some people use confession—some people listening will have no idea what I’m talking about. Or they will say, I’m sorry you were offended, which by the way, is not an apology.

What I do say to them is, “You need to let them know that you did this and that you’re fixing it.” And that I do demand. I don’t demand an apology but they must fix what they did.

And other things, like let’s say they called somebody a name sitting in class and it was overheard by me. I say “Whew, no more, not here, never. That was mean, that was cruel, and it’s a safe harbor for every child in this classroom.” And they need to fix it and they say, “Well, I just won’t call her names.” I said, “No, you’re going, here’s some options. You could sit in the front of the class, you can sit in the back of the class for the rest of the term. You cannot sit near her.” Giving them options. Obviously they’re not coming up with this, but I give them options that they can choose to do. For some kids, if it’s serious enough, “You need to take a different English class so that kid is not tormented the rest of this term. Now let’s look at your schedule.” “Oh, but that means I won’t have lunch with my friends.” Oh, that’s a bummer.

Maybe you’ll think about not calling anybody gross names because it meant you had to change your English class.

### **Does that eventually foster a sense of responsibility in kids for their actions?**

That’s the whole thing. From red pajama, blue pajama through all of this, both discipline and choices, you’re helping young people say that I have agency in my life, that what I do matters, and that I can effect change in the world and it can be for good or for ill and that’s a choice I get to make. I want them to see they do have choices that they can make.

The third step is probably the most difficult, to heal with the person you’ve harmed—when the person who was targeted is ready. Now if you’ve dunked a kid’s head in the toilet, he may never be ready to meet with you, and that’s what that child needs to live with—the kid who did the dunking has to live with—is that kid doesn’t even want you around.

But others, when it was calling a gross name, is to sit down with the kid and I'm there, and it's not conflict resolution, that's totally separate. That's done with conflict, not with bullying. When it is, I say, "Okay, first thing you have to do," and I talk to the kid who was targeted, I give them tools for standing up and speaking out when it happens to them. We want to help them. We want to empower them.

But I also feel that what the other person did was mean and cruel, and bullying we stop. So when they sit down together, the bully has to say, "This is what I did." Often what our target wants to hear is the bully just admitting they did it.

And if they have a smirk on their face when they say it, I say "We're done. We're done, we're not ready yet," because if a kid is still smiling and smirking about the event, they don't have any remorse for it yet. So I stop it. "Oh, but my mom won't let me use a computer until I get through this process." Well, that's a bummer, come back without the smirk on your face. But most of the time they're ready and they say, "I did call you a gross name and I regret that, and this is how I want to fix it. I'm going to sit in the back of the class."

And the other child may say, "Oh, you don't have to do that just don't call me names." But they might say, "Good! Sit in the back of the class, or sit in the front." Then they say, "You know what? I'd like to invite you to sit at the lunch table with us because this group of girls and myself locked you out of the lunch room, or a chat room, and we'd like to invite you."

Now the targeted kid might say, "Thank you, I'd love to sit with you." But they might not. They might say what Steve Seskin said in that powerful song that he and Allen Shamblin wrote and Peter, Paul and Mary made famous, "Don't Laugh at Me." "Don't laugh at me, don't call me names, don't take your pleasure from my pain," and he says, "I'm not asking you to be my friend, but is it too much to ask, don't laugh at me, don't call me names?"

And so the targeted child might say "I don't want to sit at lunch with you. Thank you for the offer." Most targeted kids are kind, caring people, so they might say, "Thank you, but I don't want to do that. I just need to know that when they sit in English class, I'm not going to be called a gross name. When I go online, I don't see my name. I'm not locked out of a chatroom. This is what I need."

In restorative practices from that kind of scenario of mayhem, what we do is we empower the targeted kid and we humble—not humiliate them, I'm not into humiliation—but we humble the person who did the meaningful act. I don't care whether it's kids at home, because we do have sibling bullying, or kids at school. The process is basically the three Rs, Restitution, Resolution and Reconciliation, and they need us to help them get through that.

The middle one, our son, had made a mistake. He made a goal for the opposing team in a major tournament, and people on the sidelines were yelling and screaming. He came out of goalie, went on the field, fell down on his shoelaces, untied—

**Oh no.**

—and got up, grabbed the ball and went down as his teammate is screaming, “No, Joe. No, Joe, this is our goal.” And Joey was ready to make that goal and he made a beautiful left-footed goal, and then realized he did it.

**He was on the wrong net.**

Yeah. His coach handled that beautifully. He demonstrated owning mistakes. He said “Joseph, get over here,” and Joe walks over and he says, “I’m sorry, Coach, I’m sorry.”

He said “I don’t want an I’m sorry. That was a beautiful goal. Now get out there and get one for us.” You see, the coach said own it, don’t blame it on your fact you came out of goalie. Don’t blame it on the fact you fell on your shoelaces. Just own it. I made a goal for the other team. Fix it, learn from it, move on.

So we can use that in our everyday life with all ages of children, after about age two.

**Even adults.**

Oh, all stages of our lives.

**Yeah. Well, does that differ at all if you have siblings and conflict between siblings?**

Conflict’s normal. It’s natural. It’s necessary.

**How should parents think about handling that? Like say you had, I don’t know, seven- to nine-year-olds at home and they’re bickering.**

Over the TV, a TV show.

**Sure.**

Yeah, what you need to understand is, as Liz Osher said, “Conflict is inevitable, violence is not.” So our job as wise and caring parents is to teach them to handle that conflict non-violently. Two kids fighting over a TV program—I talk about three kinds of families, the brick wall, the jellyfish and the backbone.

The brick wall goes, “Stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it. Nobody’s watching it,” and points a finger at them, which shows them that we can’t handle our own conflicts. It’s when adult is around and then they stop us, and that doesn’t serve them well when we’re not around.

A jellyfish goes, “Oh, please, you’re brothers and sisters. You’re supposed to love one another. Don’t do this to me.” That doesn’t help them either.

Backbone parent understands the slower you walk, the quieter you are, the better your chances of it being over before you get there. And if it's still going on you just take the remote, turn the set off, model it for them, and say, "You're both fighting."

Don't say, "Give me your side of the story, give me your side of the story." I've never gotten a news story out of two editorials, so I'm not going to bother. So I say, "You're fighting. You may turn this set back on as soon as you both have a plan."

"Now why do I need to have a plan?" They never say it nicely, "Oh, mom, we need a plan," so don't count on it. But one of three things will happen. They'll share, they'll both get up and leave it, or one of them will come up with a plan they both can live with. As long as the one who came up with the plan does not use brute force or intimidation. If one says "I'm going to beat you over the head," you say, "That's not a good plan."

I mean, there's a reason we're hanging with kids. They're going to grow up but we have to be there to raise them lest we get Lord of the Flies, you know. So I say to them, "Nope, that won't work, come up with another plan." You see, I haven't said "What? You can't hit your brother!" You don't get hysterical, you just, "No, that's not going to work." But if one says, "You leave me watch this one today, you can have two tomorrow."

Now you and the older kid know tomorrow's Saturday, nothing's on, don't say a word. This is not a teachable moment. It comes the next day when that little one goes, "It's not fair! There's nothing on!" I say, "I noticed you're giving in to your big brother a lot. Would you like to learn a few good lines?" And you teach him the lines like, "I'm willing to let you watch this program today if I can have this one on Monday, this one on Tuesday, and I want it in writing."

You teach that little one to do that and nobody's going to walk all over 'em.

So you give them both the tools to handle their conflicts. And they'll have to practice and they'll make mistakes and you keep working with them. And you know, they go through this process and then 10 minutes later they might be fighting again and you walk in and you turn the TV off. And pretty soon they get the idea of, "Mom. We can do it, we can handle it. I know, I know we need a plan." They get it.

But it'll serve them well at home and at school, and so that's real important that we teach them that. However, sibling bullying is something we've ignored for too long. There's a fascinating research project done by Volpe out of England, a 20-year longitudinal study that showed that children who are targeted by their siblings are at higher risk for being targeted by their peers, higher risk for alcohol and drug abuse, for self-harm activities, and depression in the later teen years. It's easy to see why, but we dismiss it.

So you solve the fighting scene, but this is different. The 10-year-old has the five-year-old's arm up his back. We're not talking a yoga pose.

The kid's in serious pain, screaming. You rush in there and as soon as your oldest sees you, she drops her brother's arm and starts comforting him. And we say, "What are you screaming like that for?" And the way your 10-year-old looks at the five-year-old—because bullying has to do with intimidation—he knows, right now, if he says anything in front of you, when you leave his sister is going to whale on him harder.

So he makes a choice to say, "Oh nothing, Mom, nothing," and we say "Well, then quit screaming like that." We have just re-targeted the target. But step back a moment. When you walked in there you saw something you wished you hadn't seen. You saw your daughter smirk before she saw you. As she had that arm up the back, she had the biggest smirk on her face. The smirk is an involuntary response when you're hurting someone and getting pleasure from their pain, and that's what bullying is about. A conscious, willful, deliberate activity intended to harm, where you get pleasure from somebody else's pain, and that has to be stopped.

### **What should that mother do?**

That's the restorative practices. Restitution. You were hurting your brother and you seemed to be getting pleasure from that, with that smirk on your face. So you need to own and fix it, figure out how you're going to keep it from happening again, and heal with him when he's ready for it. I'll take it back a little bit here with somebody bopping a kid over the head with a toy and smiling, same kind of thing. Own it. "I grabbed my brother's arm and hurt him." Sometimes that's all the brother wants, is affirmation that the kid owned that they really were doing something mean and cruel.

Fix it. How are you going to fix it? Well, this is tough. One of the things you can do—and that's where your wisdom comes in again—one of the things you could do is go over into your room, it's not time-out at this point, but into your room and let your brother have the rest of the house and any toys in it for a period of time. "Oh, but Mom." You need to do something. If you can come up with something better that gives him some peace and quiet, I'm open, but otherwise, you need to leave him be. It can be for an hour, depend on age, an hour, two hours, and he just has free roam of the house and you can play in your room.

### **Is that a punishment or a consequence?**

It's a consequence for what you did. You harmed your brother, and you need—we can talk about time-out later and the effectiveness of that, but another thing you might say is that you need to sit in the third row of the car, if there's a third row. "I don't like the third row, I get car—" "Oh, that's a bummer, maybe you'll think about not bopping your brother in the nose next time."

But you come up with something that allows the other kid, who's been harmed, to have some peace and quiet. I also go up to the kid whose arm has been hurt and I rub it, and I say, "That's awful. That must have really hurt."

And you know, when your sister goes to do that—” so I want to let him know that I know he was hurt, but I also say to him “—when you see your sister coming, hold your arms like this so she can’t get them. It’s okay to raise your voice and say leave me alone, that hurts. It’s okay to get attention. I want young people to know you get out of an elevator if you’re uncomfortable and not worry about what anybody else says.

See, all these tools help them become very capable adults as well. So all these are learning tools, using the stuff of everyday life. So restitution, resolution. How are you going to keep this from happening again?

And this is where I like to take a moment with young people and teach them three things. I draw a circle with a line down and I say, “This is you. This is your brother. Now you control half of this.” “Yeah, but he wouldn’t give me the toy.” “Okay. You can ask him for the toy. But once it goes over that line, it’s an invitation to him, and he can accept it or reject. But he has control on that side. You control half. Your brother controls half.

Second lesson. You influence 100%. How you ask your brother for that toy matters. Bopping him over the head will radically reduce the chances of him being willing to share. Grabbing his arm and pulling it out reduces the chance that he’s willing to cooperate with you at all.”

And I try to use some humor in there with it as well. But I want them to understand that that didn’t work, so you can influence it. “And maybe you didn’t think about this, but maybe you could offer him your favorite toy.” And you might see a grimace at that point. “Or two of your second favorite toys.” Give her ways that she can influence how she responds to that. And then the third lesson is, “No is a complete sentence. If your brother—you’ve asked him nicely, you’ve offered the toys—if he says no, you have to go and find something else to do.” Now, think about it. You teach seven- and eight-year-olds, “You control half; your brother controls half; you influence 100%; no is a complete sentence,” how that will serve both boys and girls when they start dating.

See, we are giving them, in the process of all of this, tools to handle both conflict and mean and cruel activities in their lives, to empower them. I also want to empower them. And that’s where red pajama, blue pajama comes in, and giving them choices and decisions. It is saying to them, “You do have agency. When that little girl is left out, you can go over and sit with her.” “But Mom, all the other girls will pick on me.” “Okay. Well, sometimes it’s a cost. And maybe one of the things you need to do is tell an adult that other girls...” “But I don’t want to snitch.” “It’s not snitching. Those girls are hurting that other little girl. It’s telling. It’s not tattling. It’s reporting, not ratting. If somebody’s getting hurt, then you need to report it.”

### **What’s the difference between tattling and telling?**

Tattling is getting somebody in trouble. Telling is getting somebody out of trouble. If it's ever both, and bullying, yes, I need to know. For instance, you know those self-appointed playground monitors? "Mrs. C! Mrs. C, Johnny's on the swing. He's not supposed to be on the swing. He didn't share yesterday." That's tattling. If it's okay for him to be on the swing, he leaps off the swing, his coat gets caught, he's hanging on the swing, tell me. That's going to get him out of trouble. Now, if he's not supposed to be on the swing and he's hanging on the swing, it's both. I need to know. Five year olds get that. I've had little ones come up, "Mrs. C! Mrs. C!" I say, "In, out, or both?" And sometimes they scrunch up their face and walk away. And they go, "In trouble." And they get it. I say, "Thank you for figuring that out."

But I've also had them come up, "Mrs. C! Mrs. C!" I say, "In, out, or both?" And they say, "I don't know. I can't figure it out." I say, "Well, tell me. We'll figure it out together." Or sometimes they come up and say, "Mrs. C," I say, "Thank you for telling me. That's going to get this kid out of trouble." So reinforcing that at a very young age because we have this idea snitches get stitches and stuff. So if it's mean and cruel, number one, we have to keep the target safe. Number two, a witness safe. Number three, we deal with the kid who's doing the mean and cruel activity. Even if it means delayed justice. Like if a kid comes up and says to me, "Those kids are calling me names." If I would go directly to those kids right there, they would retaliate against her and make it worse. So then kids don't tell.

But if I say to her, "That was an ugly thing to happen to you. Let me give you some tools for handling that. But I also need you to know I'm not going to deal with it right now because I need to keep you safe. But tell me where is it happening, and when is it happening?" Because is often is continuous or repeated over time. And we watch the kids like a hawk, and we'll catch them being mean and cruel. And then we nail them on it. But I also want to give her ways to stand up when kids are being mean. I thank her for telling me, that she's being her own witness. Now, if another kid comes up and says, "Those boys are doing these mean things to this other boy," I say, "Thank you for telling me. I know it took courage to tell. And I promise you nobody will know you told me." And I say to him, "I need you to know that I won't deal with the situation, but I'm going to watch them. Where's it happening? When's it happening?"

Now, if they've dunked a kid's head in the toilet and he's dripping in urine, I deal with that right on the spot because the evidence is there. And the smirks are on their faces.

### **What sort of tools would you give that girl to handle the name-calling?**

Being able to—well, we have some lousy tools. I'll give you those first. Many anti-bullying programs will say, "Just tell them, 'Please stop. That hurts.'" That works when you're dealing with a friend who inadvertently said something. It was the wrong time, wrong place. It happens to all of us. It was the wrong time, wrong place, wrong situation, and the other kid's face drops and gets tears in her eyes. And you say, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry." What does a bully do when they know that they have

hurt another child? They keep going. They get more aggressive when the other shows any hurt. It's a difference between teasing and taunting. Teasing is laughing with. Taunting is laughing at. And if they're taunting her, one of the worst things she could do is turn around and say, "Please stop. That hurts." It's like putting a red flag in front of a bull. "Oh, good. We hurt her. See, ha ha."

And you don't want to be aggressive because it takes one to know one. Because bullies are cowards, but they're not ignorant. They picked on somebody they knew they could get. So I want to teach the young girl how to roll her shoulders around and down, and stand strong—not in a passive posture—stand strong, and in an assertive voice, be able to say, "That was mean. That was cruel." Not, "You're mean. You're cruel." Call the deed, not the kids. "That was mean. That was cruel. That was bigoted. That was racist. That was sexist. That was ugly. That was yuck." I tried to give her as many adjectives as possible so they can choose from them. "I don't need this. I'm out of here." And getting themselves out of there.

For older kids and for adults, when they're in a situation, maybe even at a family gathering with an adult sibling targeting them still, you roll your shoulders around and down, stand strong, and say, "That comment was beneath both of us."

### **Is that effectively labeling it?**

Labeling the behavior, not the kid.

And "That comment was beneath both of us," says, "I'm not getting in the mud with you. And I'm inviting you to be bigger than you are right now because I believe you can be." That revenge is so quick. But that doesn't help. The Chinese said it so beautifully, "Those who seek revenge had best dig two graves," because it can eat you up too. So we want assertive lines, not aggressive or passive. And I've got to say our climate today of adult discourse doesn't help our kids at all, with these virulent attacks and dehumanization of another human being, which is what verbal bullying does. So we need to walk our talk and talk our walk. So I ask adults, "How do you treat hired help? How do you treat the new neighbor who looks different than you, has a different faith tradition, different skin color, different language as their first language? Your children are watching. How do you treat that person moving through the grocery store slower than you'd like them to? And how do you deal with the bigoted relative at the family gathering?"

Now, we all have bigoted relatives on the family tree. Some just aren't on the branches yet. They're right there at the dinner table spewing bigoted comments thinly disguised as a joke. And we need to be able to say, "I'm bothered by that," or, "That was bigoted," or, "That was racist." When all the other relatives roll their eyes and say, "What, can't you take a joke?" "Not that kind." And you know you've had an impact when you walk back in the dining room and everybody shuts up. But you've had an impact.

And you've had a greater impact on your children when your mother says, "That's Uncle George. He's old." Hey, I'm 70.

Old is never an excuse for bigotry and intolerance. And I think your children need to hear you saying to your mother, in an uncomfortable situation, “Mom, I don’t want my children to ever believe that it’s okay to make those comments that are bigoted and racist or sexist, no matter how old we are.” Now, you do that, you stand up when it’s uncomfortable to do it, the chances of your daughter sitting with the new girl or your son getting the other boys to stop has been greatly increased.

**I want to go back to something you said about the brick wall family, the jellyfish family, and the backbone family. Can you expand on those?**

Yes. Brick wall, my way or the highway. Uses a lot of bribes and threats, rewards and punishments as a way of controlling the child. And it leaves children with the inability to truly think for themselves, or they will rebel. And they use punishment a lot. And when you punish a child, they basically rebel. They fight back, they flee, or they turn inside themselves because they’re afraid.

**What’s the difference between punishment and consequence again?**

And discipline. The difference between punishment and discipline, yes. Discipline has consequences. Punishment may too. But I always say we need to use the French term, RSVP, répondez s’il vous plaît, which means please respond. Discipline is not something we do to a child. It’s something we do with a child. Punishment’s adult-oriented. It’s imposed from without. It arouses resentment and teaches kids to respond out of fear, or fight back, or flee. Discipline, on the other hand, if we go back to its Latin roots, means to give life to a child’s learning. So consequences need to be RSVP, Reasonable, Simple, Valuable, and Practical.

But let’s look at discipline again. If it’s a mistake, own it, fix it, learn from it, move on. If it’s mischief, and this is where consequences.... You say, “But why do we need discipline when it’s a mistake?” Because discipline is giving life to a child’s learning—whether it’s that 16-year-old with the beaker or the three-year-old with the glass—giving life to their learning. So discipline is an integral part of what we do with our kids.

Let me give you an example of—I’ll use my son again—when it’s mischief. This is where consequences come in. Our son did something that wasn’t on the approved behavior list on a field trip. He broke the beaver bait jar at the natural history museum. Could have been worse. Could have been an irreplaceable dinosaur. We’re very lucky. Very replaceable beaver bait jar. He was not punished. He was not paddled, which is punishment. He wasn’t sent to the principal’s office, which could have been punishment depending on how the principal handled it. He didn’t have to write 550 times, “I will not break a beaver bait jar,” which is punishment. And he didn’t get banned from the next field trip. Which, by the way, sad to say as a special ed teacher, that happens an awful lot to kids with special needs. And then they never learn to go on a field trip.

But those were all punishment. He didn't have any of that. Instead, his teacher wisely said, "Joe, you have a serious problem here. I know you can handle it." He had to write a letter to the natural history museum. He had to replace the beaver bait jar, which was a trip unto itself. For those who are listening who don't know, beaver bait is female beaver urine. He will never break another beaver bait jar. And before he'd go on the next field trip, there were conditions. He had to have all that done, and have in writing how he would handle his feet, hands, and mouth creatively and constructively on the next field trip. He was shown what he'd done wrong, given ownership of the problem, given ways to solve it, left his dignity intact.

Did he have fun? Yes. And this really galls people who are brick wall and into punishment. "How dare a kid have a good time fixing a mess he made." I have worked with administrators who have truly disciplined a child, but since they're not hanging by their toenails at noon in public display and in pain, somebody will say, "You didn't do anything to them." "No, I'm not doing something to them. That's punishment. I'm doing something with them."

Yes, he had fun. The Saturday morning he got up early, got his knapsack ready, and then the game warden very patiently explained to Joe how he had to collect female beaver urine. His eyes got huge. He looked at me. He looked at his dad, who was now smiling. And he said to the game warden, "I have to do that?" I thought the game warden's comment was classic. He said, "Well, I didn't break the beaver bait jar." And just as an aside, Joseph's senior prom was held at the natural history museum. What a fitting end to his public education. But in that experience, he was truly disciplined. Shown what he'd done wrong, given ownership of the problem, given ways to solve it, left his dignity intact.

And that's what we need to do with discipline, whether it's a mistake, it's mischief, or mayhem. And always with mayhem, you go to those three Rs in discipline.

### **And through that, is that how we teach children how to make better decisions and own the outcomes of those decisions?**

Well, it holds them accountable for what they've done. It teaches them that they do matter. What they do matters. And how they fix it matters. And it gives them the opportunity to fix it and heal with people if they've harmed any of them. He got along quite well with it. The game warden went out and did other adventures with him and helped out. And so—

### **What are the other things, as parents, that we can do to help our kids learn to make age-appropriate decisions and prepare them for the world where they have to make their own decisions?**

It's looking around every situation and saying, "Is this a choice he can make?" And we have to give up some of this efficiency control of, "We got to get it done right now."

So I'm going to have sit back and see it's going to take a little bit longer for him to fix his own lunch with us helping him fix it. But pretty soon he's going to be able to fix his own lunch on his own, which is our goal. And you're going to have mistakes. I remember my oldest daughter doing the laundry because she was old enough to learn to do it. And she put all the whites in and put bleach in. However, her brother had taken off his red shirt with his T-shirt at the same time, so it was white on the outside. Inside was a red T-shirt. Everything turned pink, including her dad's underwear.

**Oh, no.**

Everything. So Don's underwear was pink. And I said, "Well, one thing we can do is put it through the wash again without the red shirt, but you got to fix your brother's shirt." Now, she could have blamed it on him and said, "If you had put it in the laundry with the separate..." No. Hey, you did it. You did it. And I, quite frankly, helped her out with buying him a new shirt because it was a mistake. It was an honest mistake, so I helped her out. But she went to her dad and said, "Dad, you have pink underwear." He said, "Well, it'll be different to have different-colored." But we look at it and okay, it was a mistake. Had she put a whole load of blue and red clothes in and purposely—because they were her brothers, and purposely put bleach in it, she would have a bigger problem. That would have been a menacing thing. That would have been mayhem.

**Of course.**

And in a real way, intent matters. But what I want to do is make it simple for parents, not complicated. But understand that simple doesn't mean easy. And along with that, I can't impress upon you how important it is to try to steer away from all the bribes and threats, rewards and punishments. They interfere with ethical behavior. And Alfie Kohn said that bribes and threats are the flip side of the same coin. They don't buy us much. I like to go one step further. I think they bankrupt the spirit of our children because now we have kids saying, "Well, what's in it for me?" And we'll never break the cycle of violence related to bullying if everything's, "What's in it for me?" Because it costs you to stand up and to speak out.

So it's trying to put it all together and using simple things that we can do every day, whether it's dealing with conflict or sibling bullying. None of us like to think our kids are bullying. But we have to look at it. If it is—if that smirk's on that face, we need to shut that down—

**Right on.**

—and help the targeted kid be able to stand up and be strong.

**What tools would you give parents trying to put their kids to bed if there's no sort of like threats or punishments. And you have, let's say, an 8- to 10-year-old, and they don't want to go to bed or they refuse to go to sleep or—**

Well, hopefully by the time they're that old, you've already got them into a routine. Routines are critical. And I don't mean brick wall routine where it's 8 o'clock and you're going to bed no matter what. Bedtime doesn't have to be a nightmare. I wrote about that in Kids are Worth It, a whole chapter. It doesn't have to be. When they're little, my husband and I would take turns putting. I had three kids in three and a half years. And so we would take time putting them down. The littlest one went to bed the latest.

**That's a busy house.**

I was always holding them, nursing them and stuff. But one of us would do the dishes, and the other would put the kids down. One of us would get a break. We're not sure which one on some nights. But it's a matter of, I stayed with them and just would hum, or we'd have a little routine. Often it's being grateful for what has happened during the day, and then reading a story. And having a calmness about the bedtime. Also, if you have a child who has a learning disability—I'm a special ed teacher—if you rub the bottom of their feet...the Chinese knew well, the eyes are the window to the soul, but the feet are the doorway to a body. And you can firmly rub the bottom of their feet. It does two things. One, it calms them down. And two, they can't get out of bed when you're hanging onto their feet. And then you can rub their backs. And make bedtime a pleasant time.

Instead, what we tend to do, is get a—first of all, we ask them, “Did you brush your teeth?” Which is silly. It's a silly question. Kid has cookie all over his face, “Did you eat that cookie?” If they need to brush their teeth, so do you. And so when they're little, you go up and brush your teeth, they're brushing theirs. We're sure we get it all done good. I just had my—I was with one of our grandkids, a seven-year-old. He's into rules right now, because seven-year-olds are. And I was brushing my teeth. I finished before him. He said, “Grandma, you didn't do it the full time.”

**What did you say to that?**

I was...on that. So you do it with them if you really want them. And pretty soon they'll be able to take it over themselves and care for their teeth. And the dentist will have talked to them about teeth rotting out of your head, that kind of stuff. So you teach them, and you model it for them. You make bedtime a pleasant time instead of, “Get back in the bed. Get back in the bed. Get back in the bed. How many times do I have to tell you, ‘Get back in the bed?’” And you start screaming. And then they finally fall asleep and you feel like the bad witch from the west because now they're asleep, and you're awful, and you've been screaming at them.

So taking time. I guarantee you they won't want you to put them to bed at 17. I guarantee you that.

So if you take that time when they're young, and get them in the habit.... Now, the 7-year-old occasionally still likes to be tucked in. But the 10-year-old and the 9-year-old, my grandkids, I'm thinking about, will want to say goodnight to you and they read. And reading—not on tools, not on the electronic tools—a real book. There's a reason for that. The blue light from the electronic tools is not good for helping put them to sleep. They also can be harmful to their eyes. So reading a real book will oftentimes help—

**Now, they like to read that until the fall asleep or is there a, like a bedtime?**

Yeah. Yes. Well, you have a bedtime, but it's a time to get ready to go to bed. And within a half hour, they're out. And you haven't screamed. You haven't yelled. You check in on them. You turn the light out because the book is on their face. Making it a pleasant time. Now, for some kids, especially kids who may have some learning disabilities or some body issues, the massage, the talking to them. My graduate work was in autism. And with them, it was a friction oil, but rub firmly to calm. You don't want the tickle-tickle because they can't handle that. But the firm massaging of them. And helping them relax. Instead of it becoming a battle because you both lose at battles. You're worn out.

**Do all these techniques work with autistic kids as well as ADHD kids and regular kids, or are there different ways to apply them?**

The work that's in Kids are Worth It was originally written for kids with special needs. And then I was asked to write the book. And what I found was with kids with special needs, in that backbone that gives you flexibility you don't get from a rigid brick wall, but it also gives you structure you don't get from a jellyfish model--and we need as parents and educators to have both flexibility and an environment that's conducive to creative, constructive, and responsibility activity—with kids with special needs, we often have to have a smaller distance between vertebrae and a whole lot more vertebrae, and so we break it into steps.

And know that there are moments with kids with special needs when they will be horribly frustrated, and you're worn out, and making sure that we get a break as parents, a little respite. But also, to understand that your kid is struggling at school and that's a lot of struggle for them. And you want to be very tuned in if a kid says, "The kids are calling me names." And bullying can be devastating.

**How should a parent respond to that when their kid comes home and says that, or hints at the fact that they might be getting bullied at school?**

I stop everything I'm doing and sit down and say, "Talk to me about it. Tell me about it." Very soft voice. "Talk to me about it. Tell me about it." And I listen. And I say, "What can you and I do?" "Oh, Mom. Don't tell anybody." They'll tell me, "They'll make it worse." Kids tend to know that if schools aren't handling it well, it will make it worse. But there are things that we need to know.

I'm an educator. If somebody... Bullying tends to happen under the radar of adults. So if a parent would come to me and say that, "My son said the boys are calling him names in the bathroom," then I'd change the bathroom schedule. I make sure it's one at a time kind of thing. And then I keep an eye on those boys.

And I say to the parent, "I'm going to keep an eye on those boys." I thank the young boy for telling, and I also say to him, "Nobody's ever going to know you told." I tell a parent, "Nobody's going to know you told." I'm going to watch them, which means I can't deal with what they did in the past, but I tell you the playground aide, the lunchroom people, we're going to be on our toes watching for that. And once we're tuned in to that, we usually can catch them doing it and we can nail them. And I do.

Normal conflict, we're going to have lots of that. And you just get through it and help them get through it. But bullying is our job to stop and deal with it, both for the targeted person, and the bully, and the not-so-innocent bystanders who joined in.

**In your book *Kids are Worth It*, you talk about the difference between doing good and feeling good. Can you elaborate on that for everybody listening? And what does that mean? And how does it change how you parent?**

I want to teach young kids to do good, as James Nachtwey said, because good is good to do...that you do it because it's the right thing to do. He goes on to say, "Spurn threats of heaven and bribes of hell." You do it because it's the right thing to do. Which brings us back to bribes and threats, rewards and punishments, and looking at the alternatives to those, what to do instead. Feeling good about yourself...it's about yourself. When kids understand they have agency in their life, when they sit next to the new girl, no one can take away how good they feel knowing what they did for that other little girl. No one can take that away. But if you bribe kids, then it's an external approval that will help them feel good. And I don't want external approval.

So let's look, for a moment, at what to do instead of bribes and threats and rewards and punishments, because they are an insidious part of our culture. So it's, again, "If I don't get caught, what I did isn't bad, if I have to be caught being good." And remember, nice kids often get caught being good in the classroom. But they're not being kind to the new girl or to the child with special needs or the child with an allergy. I'm not into nice. I'm into kind. And kind often happens...I will walk up to a child and I say, "I want to thank you for inviting that new girl to sit with you. She feels a part of the class now." So that's part of the alternatives. So let's look at what the alternatives are.

Instead of bribes and threats, rewards and punishment, what kids need are encouragement, feedback, a sense of deep caring, and discipline. We've already done the discipline, so we can look at the others.

Encouragement. Praise can only occur at the end of a deed done the way you want. It's highly judgemental. Encouragement can occur any time. A kid falls flat on his face, how do you praise him? "You fell well." No. You say to him, "Come on, buddy. Pick yourself up. I know you can do it." My six critical life messages: I believe in you. I trust in you. I know you can handle it. You're listened to. You're cared for. You're very important to me.

Children need to hear that in lots of different ways. And one of them is to say, "Come on, buddy. Pick yourself up. You can do it." Encouraging children.

They also need feedback. Now, feedback comes in three Cs: Compliments, Comments, and Constructive criticism. Compliment. Best compliment you can give every child, as an educator or a parent, is, "Thank you." "Thank you for walking the dog. He's been inside all day. Look how happy he is to be outside." "Thank you for watering that plant. It was really wilted and now it's standing strong." "Thank you for inviting that new boy to lunch so he feels like, as a new kid, he fits in already." Now, notice how I did that. You stroke the deed, not the kid. Be very specific to the deed. And let the child know what his or her behavior did for the dog, a plant, or another human being.

And you say, "But can I ever get excited?" Oh, sure. The three-year-old wants you to wave bye-bye to the bowel movement, you wave bye-bye to the bowel movement. The five-year-old makes it down the hill without the training wheels touching, "You did it!" Do you see how different that is than, "If you make it down the hill, we'll go to Dairy Queen?" And he doesn't make it down the hill, he'll lie to you. He'll throw the bike down and say, "I don't care about any stupid Dairy Queen." But you say, "You did it." Or, "You didn't. Come on. Pick yourself up. You can try it again." You go back to that encouragement. And your 16-year-old makes it around the parking lot without popping the clutch, "You did it." It's okay to get excited. But it's about your child's excitement. Praise-dependent kids can't get excited until you give them permission. "Do you like this? Is this okay?" Blech. So we want to stroke the deed, not the kid. Be very specific to the deed, and let the child know what impact they've had. That affirms their agency again.

The second C is comments. Good solid instruction. We have to teach our kids how to add, subtract, diagram a sentence—that'll date me. We have to teach them how to be kind and caring. We have to teach them those things. We have to teach them to have a healthy regard for themselves, including their own sexuality, and a healthy regard for others, including their sexuality. We have to teach them to be cyber-savvy, cyber-civil, and cyber-safe. We never had to do that a generation ago. But today we do have to do that. And those are things that, as parents, we need to teach our young people. So that's in the instruction, the comment section.

The last C is constructive criticism, which we're so afraid to give kids in a praise-oriented culture. We're afraid to disappoint them. I don't use a red pen at school. I use a green one. And I check all of the answers that are correct. And I say to a kid, "Your job is to fix all the other ones so they get a green mark too."

And that says to a kid, “I believe you can do it.” I don’t say to a kid, “That’s wrong.” I usually say, “That’s not right,” because it’s bigger than right/wrong. One of my books says, “Just because it’s not wrong doesn’t make it right.” And it’s teaching kids to think and act ethically. And in it, I talk about the fact that two kids making up a game only two can play because they don’t want the new girl to play with them because she played with the other girl yesterday—now, there’s nothing wrong with making up a game only two can play. But it’s not right if your intent is to exclude somebody. So your intent matters. So I say, “That’s not right,” and I invite them to fix it. So it is bigger than right/wrong. So we want them to have constructive criticism. I say, “You can fix it. I know you can fix it.”

But how we treat an A+ will give our kids a clue if they can come home and tell you they wrecked the family car, or they’ve been targeted at school, or they worse than that, were targeting somebody. You see, we need our children to be able to tell us about the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Now, praise-dependent kids are afraid to tell you. They’re afraid to take a risk, they’re afraid...they won’t take advance trig because they might get a lower grade. And I like good risk takers. I want to be able to take a risk of sitting next to the new girl, and the like.

Your child comes home with an A+, you say, “I’m so proud of you, you take after my side of the family, let me go put this up on the refrigerator for the other side to look at.” You do that very often, you’re going to go back to school night, pick up every child’s desk, and find every paper in there that’s not an A+, because they’re afraid to bring it home.

You say, “Well what am I going to say when my kid comes home?” I’ve already given you the comment in another situation. All I ever say to my kids is, “Talk to me about it. Tell me about it.” And it opens it up for them to talk, instead of me talking about it, and so I say, “Talk to me about it.” And the girl whose spelling comes easy says, “Spelling’s easy. I don’t get excited about that.” But the other child, where spelling comes hard for them, they say, “Look Mom, I got all the words right! I even spelled February right, and the R is in a funny place!” I get excited about their excitement. But the child who got the A+ because spelling comes easy for them, I say, “You have a phenomenal gift. We have to find a way for you to use that gift.”

At home, I would say something like, “We’ve been going over to the senior center, and you’re old enough to come with us. With your spelling gifts, you can answer their emails, you can write thank you notes for them. You can write letters for them.” I want young people to know that if you have a gift, you have an obligation to use that gift, instead of, “I’m so proud of you for that gift.”

And then they’ll be less likely to take risks if they’re afraid they’re going to get disapproval from you. In school, I would say, “You have a phenomenal gift.” And we have a young child in class who has a difficult time reading out loud and spelling, and—not but—and she’s a phenomenal story teller, which by the way is true of many

kids with dyslexia. One of the things you can do is, you can write out the story she dictates to you. Oh, we have an artist in the class, you can illustrate her story. We have a musician, you could score her story. We have two class clowns, you can act out the story.

What I just did didn't cost a dime, and didn't interfere with standardized testing is, I just created a larger circle of caring, which goes a long way to breaking the cycle of violence. The chances of the kids mocking the young girl with dyslexia have been radically reduced, because they have seen that she has a gift.

I take a child with a learning disability and let them be the first to climb the rock wall. Why? They often are willing to take those risks. And the kids at the very top, and the other kids are going, "Wow!" Instead of, "Oh, he takes ADHD medicine, he has to go down, yuck." "Oh wow! Look what he can do!"

I take kids who are impulsive, get them in Red Cross programs, first aid classes, so they can learn to fix a nose bleed they get—gave somebody. I try to get them to learn to swim really well. I want all kids to know how to swim, being a former water safety instructor. I want them to swim well so they don't drown. But kids who are impulsive make phenomenal, I mean this very seriously, phenomenal life guards. They make wonderful EMT's and paramedics. Lousy brain surgeons, but I don't need a brain surgeon in the back of an ambulance. I need somebody who uses their impulse quickly, and they've got it trained.

So it's a mindset that we have to have about what are the gifts these kids have. And I want them to, say, talk to me about getting an F. "Okay, talk to me. Oh, you ran the car into a post at school? Talk to me about it. Show me how you're going to fix it. It was a mistake. You know how to fix it. Own it. Fix it, learn from it, move on."

Now if they were drinking, they had an accident, they got mayhem on their hands. That's a much bigger issue. But you see how it fits in that structure of the backbone?

**I like that a lot. I find so often the schools are focused on what the children can't do—and it's usually geared toward some curriculum, or they don't fit inside this ever-narrowing sort of box—instead of what they can do and taking advantage of maybe special gifts, or different ways of viewing the same problem.**

Well I try to change that as an educator, regularly. When I'm lecturing and working with schools, when a kid walks through those doors.... I've been doing a lot of opening of schools, it's the beginning of the school year, and I say, "I don't care where a kid comes from. Dad's an alcoholic. Mother has an interesting occupation. Brother's been in jail." Any kid walking through those doors it's a kid, and they need those six critical life messages. I believe in you. I trust in you. I know you can handle this. You're listened to, cared for, very important to me—

**I think that's creating psychological safety for the children.**

It has to, the school—

**I mean, it's the exact same thing we do for adults to create an environment of safety.**

Well, we may indeed. I had people say to me when I was working with seriously troubled adolescents, “But they’re going to go home to the same environment. They’re going home to the same streets.” I say, “I have applied that five hours a day. I can only do all I can do, but I’ve got to do the best I can do with them, because this truly is safe harbor.”

Alice Miller, the psychiatrist, did a study of kids who had been horribly abused, and found that those who did thrive had one person in their life that cared about them, and very often, it was an educator. So we can make a difference in their lives. We have to believe that.

**Oh totally. I mean, I had one teacher make all the difference for me, and it was grade 10. It was the only teacher who ever believed in me, and it just changed everything.**

It does change everything, it does. Carl Upchurch, who wrote *Convicted in the Womb*, he spent a good portion of his junior high and high school years in prison... juvenile detention, and then went on to prison. And an English teacher in the prison said, “You’re a good writer.” And he went out and wrote, and he also got the Crips and the Bloods to put down their colors in Kansas City, and went on to be a phenomenal advocate and writer, but it was that one teacher that said, “I believe in you.”

**Yeah, I totally agree with that. Mr. Duncan, if you’re listening, thank you so much! I want to talk—you’re a big proponent of real-world consequences. I want to understand what real-world consequences are, and I want to understand when parents or teachers should intervene, and when they shouldn’t.**

If it’s not life-threatening, morally threatening, or unhealthy, let it go. Let them experience the consequences, but you don’t say to a 16-year-old, “Go ahead and jump off the building, we’ll discuss the consequences after you land.” You pull them back, give them a second chance at life. But the rest of the time, I give them the opportunity to make those choices and decisions. Does that mean I don’t give them wisdom? No. My own wisdom. We’re there for a reason! You know, as adults, we’re not just kind of hanging with them, and we’re certainly not their friends.

**Do you give them recommendations?**

Oh, I do! And I would say to someone, “You know, I know you love that combination.” How do you think I try to get them to quit? “How do you think some of your peers may respond to that when you walk through the door?”

And if he says, “I don’t care what they think,” and says it very strongly, I say, “Go for it. You’re your own person. “ But if they say, “I don’t know. What do you think, Mom?” I tell them that, “Well in my day, this is what might have happened,” going back to me, because I only know from my own experience, and experience as an educator—I know these things. I also can talk to them about, “If you said that to somebody, and said it in that way, how do you think they might respond?”

It’s a matter of teaching. I was driving one day with my oldest granddaughter, and my daughter. And my oldest granddaughter asked something, and I went off into my teaching mode, and my daughter said, “You’re always teaching, aren’t you?” I said, “Yep.” You know? Because it was a teachable moment, and I think you take those teachable moments.

### **Take them when you get them, yeah.**

Yes, and you give it to them, you know? I believe I’m a good teacher, and I think that I have some knowledge to impart. I want my grandkids—I want children in the neighborhood to be able to experience that, and that’s why I lecture the teachers. Hopefully they can take some of the wisdom that I have and make it a part of their own school.

I want to go back a moment here, because I said you know, they needed the three C’s. But they also need deep caring, which is something you just alluded to. Deep caring is not liking somebody. I tell kids, “You do not have to like every kid in this classroom, but you must honor their humanity.” Deep caring is a must to relieve somebody else’s suffering, and wishing them well, which by the way, is the antithesis of mean and cruel. So if you care deeply about another human being, you want to be in there to help relieve any suffering they have, and wish them well. And that’s what we as educators, we need to be mindful with a wise heart.

If we’re so locked into rules—I have very few rules, and many more guidelines. Rules are how we expect kids to behave. Guidelines are how we hope they behave. But a rule is important, but it must be rooted in deep caring. I’m going to go back to brick wall with that.

You know, there was a situation outside of Atlanta, Georgia a few years ago, where they had a rule about cell phone use. It was a good rule about cell phone use. However, 30% of those kids had one or both parents deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan. And a grade 11 boy made international news. His phone vibrates in the lunch room, it’s his mom from Iraq, she doesn’t get to call very often. He goes into the commons area, for better cell phone reception, and a moral, absolute, rigid, brick-wall teacher came by and said, “Turn that phone off and give it to me.” He said, “But it’s my mom from Iraq.” And how telling moral absolutism is. She said, “I don’t care.” She took the phone, he got belligerent, he was suspended five days for using his phone, five days for getting belligerent.

Now the board backed that teacher, because they said, “If we let him use the phone, then everyone will use the phone.” See, moral, absolute, rigid brick walls are so afraid of moral-relativism jellyfish. But they even got that wrong. It isn’t moral-relativism jellyfish, isn’t “Everyone will use the phone,” but who you are, who you’re related to, what position your parents held in the community, and who caught you. That’s the jellyfish.

**Also reinforcing not thinking, right? You’re just blindly following some sort of rules or procedures, and you’re not exercising any sort of judgment. I mean, you might as well be work—**

That’s what zero tolerance is all about. It’s zero thinking. So what would a deeply caring teacher do? Who’s—the rule is a rule, it’s a good rule. But there’s a time to bend...to go above the rule. Not because the rule isn’t a good rule. So you see the child with the cell phone. You say, “Cell phone!” And he looks at you and says, “But it’s my mom from Iraq.” And a deeply caring teacher, whose ethic is rooted in deep caring, and rules are rooted in deep caring says, “I’ll talk to you when you’re finished,” and hangs around. And then when he’s done with the phone call, say, “How’s your mom doing? And how are you and grandma doing? It’s been a long deployment for all three of you. Is there anything I can do to help?” That says I care. And that, you know, the rule is there, but there’s a time to bend. Another kid comes up and says, “How come he gets to use the cell phone and I don’t? And I say, “When your mom’s in Iraq, you get to use your cell phone, too.”

You have child with cancer, needs to wear a hat, but you have a hat rule. There’s a time to bend. It’s like two yellow lines down the road. That’s a rule. Not a guideline, and we have trust the highway department. Rules are about trust. I have to trust you stay on your side of the road, you have to trust I stay on my side of the road. However, an ambulance comes down the middle of the road. They have not violated that rule, they superseded the rule. It’s still a good rule, but there’s a time to supersede that rule, to get to the place so that you can be deeply caring. You know, the must relieve somebody else’s suffering, wishing them well.

**Do you think—**

Oh, go ahead.

**Do you think people follow those rules because they’re trying to avoid punishment, or trying to avoid being wrong if they exercise their judgment?**

Well, I ask people, when I’m talking about this in the lectures, I say, “If any of you have a radar detector—I don’t want you to raise your hand—if your child is in the car with you, what you have just said to them is, “Speeding is not bad, it’s getting caught that’s bad.” And some people go, “Ugh” and moan a little. But it’s about getting caught. None of us like to get caught, none of us like to. But if that’s the only reason we’re not speeding, then we have a problem. And, you know, rules are there for a reason.

There's only, when I say, "Develop your school rules, your classroom rules, your general area rules, the basis of those rules has to be deep caring." And it's a matter again of, does it have to do with safety or the way we relate to other human beings?

If you have a rule that doesn't have one of those two things in common, then I challenge the rule you have.

### **What were your family rules?**

My own? Well, my school rules, my classroom rules were easy. Show up on time, be prepared, do your assignments, respect your own and others' life space. Very simple. I had a lot of guidelines, where you sit, how you ask for things, guidelines. But rules are how we expect you to behave, guidelines are how we hope you'll behave.

In our own home it was, be kind and caring, help out with chores...that you're a responsible member of this family, we're counting on you to do chores. And treating one another kindly, I think was the biggest thing.

### **Can you walk me through what would be age appropriate chores for say six to eight, eight to 10, 10 to 12, 12 to 14, 14 to 16?**

Well remember, our goal is to constantly increase responsibilities and decisionmaking, and reduce limits and boundaries. So you don't let a two-year-old play with a gas stove, but you let them help put peanut butter on the celery, and put the little raisins on top for ants on a log, you know? That kind of thing. It's again, age-appropriate, and I'm going to impress upon you, ability-appropriate. You may have a child with special needs who's the oldest, but the second oldest is more capable of getting more responsibilities and decisionmaking. They ought to be allowed to do that. Not because, "Oh, I'm worried that the other kid will feel bad." No, we honor each one's differences, and seek out one another's gifts as well.

It was interesting to me, I had a niece, who's a doctor, say that she was talking to some of her patients. Some of them who came from third world countries, those children were more likely to do more chores, and be more helpful around the family because it was expected, now even that they live in a first world country. Then our children, we could take a serious look at if our goal is for them to be independent, what chores are we willing to take the time to teach them to do and hold them accountable for?

So I couldn't give you exactly, all I know is your goal is, when they leave home, they know how to do the laundry. They know how to mow a lawn. They know how to wash windows. They know how to keep a house in order. They know how to shop.

Some of you listening may say, "I've got a 15-year-old, we lost it, we've lost it! What do we do now? We've done it all wrong!" No, you haven't. It's never too late.

You can say, “Kid, you’ve got a job to do, and I’ve got a job to do, and that’s to get you ready to go outside on your own at 18, so we’ve got some catching up to do, and we can do it.” Again, it’s affirmation, “We can do this! We can do this!”

What responsibilities and decisions do you think you’re capable of doing now? And what limits and boundaries do you think we can take away? And you’re open, and when they realize that you mean it, they won’t give you some far out things like, “I think I can stay out all night at 15.” Well now, not really. But you’re open, let’s see what limits we can put and how about curfew? Some people have that rigid, brick-wall curfew. Jellyfish says, “Oh well, my kid will come home whenever.” But a backbone says, “Half-hour after the event’s over.” Or, “An hour after the event’s over.” Because an event may end at 10:00, but you say, “Curfew at 12:00.” Well, they can get in trouble during that time. But you know, an hour after the event’s over.

That means your child can still say, “Mom, the other boy had something to drink, I’m driving him home.” “Thank you for telling me.”

**My parents always had this rule, which I think we may not even need anymore because of the like of Uber and stuff, but the rule was, you can call me anytime, anywhere, no questions asked, and we’ll come get you.**

That’s still a very good rule. That’s still a very good rule, because it’s not always about drinking, it’s not always about an Uber. Sometimes it’s about, they’re in an uncomfortable situation, they want out. So you have a code that they can give you. A text message, or something that says, “Please come get me.” “Oh, my mom needs me home right now. Darn it, I’ve got to babysit my brother.” You know? Because they’re uncomfortable. You get to be the fuddy-duddy!

It’s like three alternatives to no. You know how often we say no to kids? “Mom, can I have a cookie?” “No, it’ll spoil your supper.” “Dad, can I go over to Jamie’s?” “No.” “Mom, can I have the car keys?” “No.” “Dad, can I stay out all night?” “No.” We say no so often that they don’t take us seriously on that big one.

Well, there are three alternatives to no. You can start today, so when you need to say no you say it, and mean it, and follow through with it. “Mom, can I have a cookie?” “Yes, later.” How do you fight a yes, later? A five-year-old says, “But I’m hungry.” “Okay, have a cookie.” It’s already later, it’s at least three seconds later. But most importantly, you didn’t change a no to a yes. It was a yes all along.

The second, “Dad, can I go over to Jamie’s house?” “Give me a minute.” There’s nothing wrong with asking for a moment to develop your own case. You might think, gee, it’d be kind of nice to have him out of here. “Yeah, you can go.” Or, “Wait a minute, we have this and this and this to do. No, you can’t go.” At least when you say no, you know why you said no. How often we say no, we haven’t the foggiest—because it sounded good? You know, why did I say that? I don’t know. So yes, later. Give me a minute.

The third I often use with adolescents, but you really can use it with anyone, it's stir ball. "Mom, can I have our car keys?" "Convince me." Why should I spend all my energy at my age, convincing adolescents? You can let her expend all her youthful energy convincing me why she should. "But Mom, all my friends..." "I'm not convinced." "Mom, you let Maria." "I'm not convinced." "Mom, if you don't give me the car keys, you're going to take all of us to play practice." "I'm convinced!"

And then, when your 16-year-old says, "Can I stay out all night?" A good line is, "No." There is a time and a place for no. And they're going to say, "How come?" And our typical response is, "Because I said so," which is not a wise reason at all. They're going to go out the back window after you lock the front door, and they still won't know why. Tell them why. "Kid, you can't stay out all night, because of sex, jail, drugs, and personal safety." "What?" "Nope, you can't stay out all night because of sex, jail, drugs, and personal safety."

"Mom, you don't trust me!" "Oh, yeah, I do. I trust you from the moment you walk out of this house in the morning till you come back in the evening. It takes less than 10 minutes to get involved in sex, jail or drugs, and I just trust you're not. But after midnight in this community, there's a whole lot less to do than sex, jail, or drugs, and I just don't want to put you in a position you can't yet handle." "Oh but Mom, everybody's staying out." "Not true, you're not." "You don't love me!" "I do, I'm not going to argue, but I do."

They're not going to be real happy. Many of our kids, though, will be relieved, because now they can say, "Mom won't let me." And you get to be the fuddy-duddy while they're still developing that strong backbone of their own.

**I like that approach a lot, where you can take the blame for the kids. "My mom won't let me. My dad won't let me." And then that gives them an out, a way to save face.**

Yeah, that—

**Without them having to stand up and say, "I don't want to do drugs," which is really a hard position to put them in.**

Yes, and also, now that they all have their phones, a text, a code word, that they can text to you that means, "Please come get me," or, "I'm scared," or, "I'm worried," and you'd be right there. And you can even walk into that party, and just say, "John, you didn't get something done, you need to come home right now," and they'll think, "Whoa, is she firm!"

We took in, before we had our own children, kids who were troubled adolescents, and one of them was on the verge of being sent back to juvie hall if he messed up one more time. And I said, "You can always blame it on me, I'll back you up." And this was new for him, and he came running in the house, ahead of his buddies, and said, "Tell me no, tell me no." And I had no idea what I was telling him no about, but he said, "Tell me no, tell me no."

So his buddies come on in and, “Mom”—all the foster kids called me Mom. “Mom, Mom, can I go...” I said, “Nope.” “Oh, come on!” “Nope.” And now mind you, I have no idea why I’m saying no. But, “No.” I got even firmer. “No, you absolutely ask me one more time, it’s going to be a bigger no.” “Ah, she won’t let me.” And then after they left I said, “Explain this to me.” Well they were going to go do something he knew he would get in serious trouble for. But we had that agreement, that if he needs me to say no, I’ll say it.

### **How long did it take the foster kids to integrate into the family?**

Well, I didn’t have kids then. We took in the kids before we had kids. We took in young offenders while they were being adjudicated or leaving one foster care to another. My husband was a psych rehab counselor. I was a special ed teacher. Some of these kids were my students, so some of them, that boy in particular had me morning, noon, and night.

### **What a phenomenal place to land, though!**

Oh, we loved it. You know, I told my own kids, we’ve handled kids who have seriously harmed others and hurt themselves, so you’re going to have to work hard at shocking us. They all three did, by the way, in the teen years. They worked hard. But again, you go back to, it’s not life-threatening, morally threatening, or unhealthy, let it go. The purple hair will grow out.

### **Nobody likes admitting they’re wrong. How should parents admit that they’ve made a mistake to their kids? They reacted, they punished too much, or....**

Yep, I blew it. You know we all lose it. We yell and scream, “How dare you! You’re grounded for six months.” I mean, why would your kid not want to get home for six months? But if you’ve ever done that, you can always pull back, just like we teach kids. We can always pull back and say, “I lost it. Give me a few moments to come up with something that makes sense, and I will. No, you are not grounded for life.”

I had a friend ground her adolescent for six months, including senior prom because she lost it, and—

### **So often, we see— We see admitting we’re wrong as—**

That didn’t make sense, go back! And you just say, “Kid, I blew that one.” Now, sometimes you have to say, “I blew it. I’m going to go back outside. I’m going to calm myself down. I’m going to start over,” which gives them a tool for how to do it too. And they see that we make mistakes, and that we’re vulnerable. And what’s hard is when your kids say you blew it.

I had one...I was lecturing in Toronto, and we were in an elevator, and I had taken my son with me on that trip.

He turned around—he was 13, and he looked at all the people they were talking about at the lecture I'd just given, and he said, "Well, would you like for me to be good or bad so you can see how she handles it?" You know, like oh, please. So yeah, humor always helps. If you blow it, humor helps too, "No, you're not grounded for life, but let me come up with something that makes sense, and by the way, I'm open to suggestions."

It's okay to ask a kid for some suggestions of what to do, and some kids will say, "Spank me." I say, "Well that's off limits. I don't do that, because it destroys my dignity and it will destroy yours too, so let's come up with another option."

**And then tell them to try again if it's not in line with what happened.**

Yeah, yeah.

**One of the techniques that you use in the book that I thought was particularly interesting, and I tried it on my kids last night was the sit. Can you explain that, and when to use it?**

The sit? If you hit you sit?

**Yeah.**

Yeah. If you hit you sit. Okay, let's look at time out, because I'm often asked about that. There's time in, there's time out, and some people have an interesting time out. I had a parent in one of my workshops say, "I have a wonderful time out program It works! Our son hits his sister, he goes and sits. I don't even have to tell him anymore." I go, "Whoa, that's not working." If he's still hitting—

**There's something wrong there, yeah.**

Yeah, so do I believe in time out? Not that kind. But I do believe in time out. When a child bops another kid over the head, I say, "Whoa, it's all right to be angry. It's not all right to hit your brother." I want to separate those two. "It is all right to be angry. It's not all right to hit your brother. You need to take time out to calm down and to figure out how you're going to fix what you just did." The purpose of time out is to calm down, and to figure out how you're going to fix what you just did. That's the purpose of it. So many time outs, it's obligatory time out, and the obligatory "I'm sorry," and that's the little boy who will go hit his sister, and then go sit and then come up and say, "I'm sorry", and not mean it, you know, and still hit his sister.

But I also give him options. I say, "You can go sit in your rocker room, or on my lap." No, people in behavior mod say. "Why am I going to let him sit on my lap?" I've been trained in behavior mod with rats. I'm not going to use it on kids. Sometimes, a very out-of-control child needs a very in-control adult, and just rocking them may help soothe them.

The goal is to calm them down. Then they have to deal with what they did. So I give them a choice, rocker room, or on my lap. Notice I didn't give them three choices. You give a strong-willed child two, they'll try to figure out which one you want them to do, and they'll choose the other just to spite you. But you give them three, they're confused. So rocker room, or on my lap.

When they're done calming down, now the work begins. "Mom, I'm ready!" If he says, "I'm done being mad," and they're still angry, I say, "Not yet. Do you want to go for a walk?" Maybe sitting isn't what calms them down. You've got to know your kid. But he's getting attention from you, he's calming down. Now he's got to do the work.

It's the three R's. He hit his brother, restitution, you have to own and fix what you did. "I hit my brother with a toy, and I broke the toy." Figure out how you're going to keep it from happening again. This is where you teach him to share, it's that "here's you, here's your brother; you control half, your brother controls half; you influence the whole; and "no" is a complete sentence; that if he says he doesn't want to give you the toy, you've got to find something else to do," kind of thing.

So you very quickly.... But he says, "I won't hit him again." Okay, that's what you want, but what will you do instead? So you give him the options there. And then, the third is to heal. Now, your brother didn't get off to such a great start today, being bopped over the head with his favorite toy, that you now have to go and buy him a new one, or fix this one. Let's see if it's repairable, that kind of thing. What can you do to help him have a better day? And he says, "Well, he likes to be pulled in the wagon." So here's the five-year-old pulling the three year old. The five-year-old knows his own goodness, the three-year-old knows his brother's goodness, and they heal, so they can go back and fight later in the day, because believe me, kids fight!

But it's a matter of you hit, you sit. They know right away. You hit, you sit. You need to calm down and work through the process.

**Did you have family meetings? And if so, what was discussed? How were they run? And what was the frequency of them?**

Yes, we had family meetings, and they were loosely put together when there was a need to come together as a family to decide. When they were older, we talked to them about options for holidays. Now, they didn't get to choose, oh we want to go to Australia. We had limits and boundaries. We said, "We're going to go to this place, and what can we do, and talk about it." As they got even older, they were better at planning trips. When they were five, it was a matter of, who's going to do the map reading? And what do you think we need to put in the cooler to get us from this point to this point? Problem solving, basically.

If there was an issue in the family, where mom or dad had to leave because somebody was ill or something.... We had a really big issue where our kids' godfather was kidnapped in Lebanon. It was in 1983.

He was one of the Lebanon Seven, and we held many family meetings over what do we do to be effective? And our kids were like 10, and nine, and seven at that point. And so we decided—we've always had family meals at the table. TV was off. But when Marty was kidnapped, Ted Koppel used to have a show every night—this will date me—and so we watched TV while we ate to get caught up on what's happening with the hostages. So, you know, every family is going to deal with different kinds of very difficult issues. And Marty did come to stay with us a period of time after he was released and our kids were very close to him. He was their godfather and so that was a traumatic time to deal with it. We also, when our kids were about the same age, my brother-in-law died and we had the two kids, one older than our oldest and one the same age as our oldest, and so we had them and what do you do when all the other adults are planning a funeral that nobody had planned on and all of those things.

So we got together the three kids, myself—my husband, of course, was with the family helping plan everything because it was his brother—and the two whose father had died and said, “Okay, what should we do this afternoon to remember, in a special way, Perry and Shay's dad.” They all just kind of looked kind of solemn and then Perry said, “I think we ought to go to a Walt Disney movie because dad loved those with us.” Okay. So we're going to a Walt Disney movie, you know, but it was a matter of coming together.

So we didn't have meetings every week, I know some families do that. Our lives were just a little more hectic, but we did know a format for a meeting that we would have, that we all listened to one another and we didn't frown on anybody's suggestions. We would tell them how we felt and I think those are all important skills in communication and if there is an issue where we have a problem and it needs to be solved.... Okay, we had a chore. Nobody likes to do bathrooms, it's just the reality at our house. Nobody liked to do bathrooms. Okay, how can we make this something? Okay. We'll all rotate the bathroom, but we all have to do a stint at the bathrooms.

Now if there's a chore, one of my kids loved to cook and another liked, not especially but she didn't like to cook, so she would clean up. So working those kinds of things out...and if the one who always had to clean up says, “But you're using too many dishes here,” okay, what can we do to solve that kind of a problem? So you got a problem, what's your plan, basically is a formula that we use. You know, I like to have some kind of structure there. You got a problem? Okay. What's the plan?

**I'm a huge fan of that because it gets the kids out of knowing what to do and gets them thinking how to do it and they've got to figure it out. You're not telling them.**

Yes. Still the adult, you are their parent until they reach puberty and then you become their mentor, their model, their guide. I really dislike it when people say, “My teenager's my best friend,” I say, “Get a life.” You know, they need a mentor. They don't need a friend right now, not you as a friend.

Then in adulthood you can become their friend—and you better become a good friend because they do pick out your nursing home. So we need to move through that progression, but it's critical during those formative years that we are truly a parent and then we become a mentor and a guide and then we can become a good friend in their adult years.

**Two questions left before we wrap up. I want to talk about teens and social media and....**

Oh, yes. Now we have five-year-olds on social media, but, yes.

**How do we, as parents, be responsible with our children, and what kind of conversations should we be having with them, and what kind of monitoring, if any, should we put in place and how do—**

It's the very same thing as red pajama, blue pajama. I mean some of our kids today come out of the womb knowing how to use the phone because mom and dad were using it in the room when they were born. You know, texting to their friends, sending pictures and you see an 18-month-old who takes a picture book and tries to slide it and it doesn't change because they're so used to sliding on the phone. So what we want to do is teach kids three things. To be digitally savvy, smart about the tools they're using. And this starts very young, and I know we often think that we don't need to teach them because they don't have a cell phone yet, but I was working with the Department of Defense schools in Europe and I had done a day session for teachers. Then I was working with the parents at night and then in the day I had third and fourth graders together, and then fifth and sixth graders together, and teachers were in the back.

I said to the third and fourth graders, "Can anyone here tell me how you might be mean on a cell phone?" This little boy shot his hand up, had a smirk on his face and he told me how he had been mean, not how he could be mean. He said, "I asked my classmate—" and he was real cocky. He said, "I asked my classmate if I could borrow his phone to call my mom," and then he had this smirk and he said, "But I didn't call my mom. I went into his phone book," and a lot of you say, I know a lot of parents who don't know how to do this but, "I went into his phone book and sent an ugly text message to every one of them and got him in trouble," and he's laughing, right.

The teachers in the back of the room were stunned. You know who was the most stunned? The fourth-grade teacher, his mother. She believed she didn't have to teach him this stuff because he didn't have a cell phone yet. No. He had borrowed a friend's. So I believe it's important about age five we start teaching them to be savvy about the tools. To be civil and that's where we put structures on it. I used to use the old Sufi saying that our words must pass through three gates. First, is it true. Not kind of true, maybe true, half true, or rumor, but is it true? Is it necessary to say? Something may be true but not necessary to say. And the last is, is it kind. If it won't pass through all three gates, don't you dare push send.

But it also is true in the offline world too. Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind? Again, we're fighting in a climate today with adults not going through those three gates before they engage their mouth or their fingers. So we've got to work against that. So we teach them to be digitally savvy, digitally civil, digitally safe. Now it starts about age five. You have limits and boundaries. Of course you would, just like crossing the street for a five-year-old. More limits and boundaries and fewer responsibilities and decisionmaking and then you constantly increase the responsibilities and decisionmaking as they demonstrate ability and age appropriateness.

Then you look at what limits and boundaries can we put on it. I believe through the early teen years, it's important that we know their passwords, that they trust us and we trust them, but trust, and I use in Ronald Reagan's comment, trust but verify with them because there's so much dangerous stuff out there today and we need to talk to them. I try to stay up and there is a wonderful website started here in Colorado, CommonSenseMedia.org, and you can subscribe to it free and it will give you the latest apps, the latest games, the latest concerns with movies and they've done a wonderful thing. They hired experts in the field to make handouts for parents and educators from preschool all the way through high school on digitally being civil, savvy, and safe, but uses different terminology. So that's a tool that I use regularly.

Then the other one StopCyberBullying.org that Parry Aftab started is made for middle school and high school kids and their parents to help them help their kids stay safe, and civil, and savvy about it. I mean, the tools are changing so rapidly and you've got to know that kids are not targeting their peers on Facebook now because Grandma's on Facebook. They're using apps and they're using them quite effectively. And these are tools. That's all they are. They can be used for good or for ill.

### **And parents have an obligation to kind of keep up with what's going on.**

And so do we educators. Both of us do, but I also feel very strongly.... Raffi, the singer started the Red Hood Project. Raffi—"Beluga the Whale" was one of his famous songs—after a young girl had killed herself after being targeted by a predator from the Netherlands. She lived in Canada, Amanda Todd, and she thought she was communicating with a 15-year-old, and he blackmailed her. Our crack team here in the United States actually found him in the Netherlands, and found her and over 200 other US and Canadian boys and girls who had been blackmailed by him. So he was so angry he started the Red Hood Project that you can subscribe to, but his whole push is that yes, teachers and parents can help keep kids safe, but—

### **Would you talk to your kids about examples like that or would you hide them from it?**

Oh no, I would. I would. Age-appropriate, ability-appropriate, again. But he goes to Google, and Twitter, and Yahoo, and the latest app producers, and Facebook, and says, “You’ve got to help us out. You’ve got the money, you’ve got the resources. You need to help keep our kids safe,” because educators and parents cannot do it alone and the police department will be overwhelmed. So we need to be able to have that conversation and demand that these companies that are developing these tools help us help our kids be safe. It’s more of the issue of safety, but also, you know, we have an obligation to teach our kids to be savvy about these tools. Not be used by them, but to be able to use them effectively.

And civil. Probably civil is the most important. Sometimes kids will hide behind the anonymity of the net, but other times people will say, “Well, it’s that anonymity.” No, sometimes they can hardly wait to get to school to see how the targeted kid’s responding to their vile comments to her the day before when they’ve used their full names because there’s nothing going to happen to them. Now, I was a part of developing David’s Law in San Antonio, Texas, drafting that law for cyber issues because I think, David was—

**What is that law? Sorry.**

It’s a site on cyberbullies called David’s Law. You can look it up in the Texas state legislature. It was one of the first to deal with holding kids accountable if they tell someone to kill themselves, as had happened to David, if they demean or harass someone on the web to hold them accountable. Our laws have not caught up. So parents have a kid being relentlessly tormented and what do we do? We can’t take it into our own hands as much as we’d like to, but the law says they haven’t reached a point. Well, now they have and it’s, you know, different degrees of offenses there. So, you know, we need all of us to help keep our kids safe.

The online/offline worlds—we used to talk about the real world and then the online world, well, we can’t use that language anymore. It’s online/offline have merged to create the real world for our young people today. I’m 70, I spend a lot of time trying to keep up. You know, the Fortnite is now a popular thing—

**Oh my God, tell me about it.**

—and it frightens me and people will say, “Oh, don’t be such a fuddy-duddy,” but I know the research behind what military has done to help break down the barrier for killing someone and it’s that same kind of thing, breaking down those barriers, those inhibitions. Kids are becoming desensitized to offline—

**If you were a parent, would you allow your child to play that, or would it be supervised, or framed, or how would you go about that?**

I’m not a real fan of censorship, but age-appropriate and ability-appropriate and I believe that game was developed for older people. It was not developed for seven-year-olds.

However, let me just frighten you a little bit more. There is an online program where somebody has developed a form of that that young kids—and this is something parents need to be aware of, in the ROBLOX—where kids go online and get invited by friends and the parent may think their kid is just playing good games here because, “Oh no, somebody’s communicating with them. Somebody else is inviting them to talk. Oh, what is this?” Well, somebody did a form of Fortnite that doesn’t have any of those restrictions on it and you can have a five-year-old, seven-year-old, six-year-old playing it.

Now I know there are parents who have actually hired coaches so their kids can get better at it and they’ve hired coaches themselves so they can beat their sons or daughters at it. I got serious concerns about it because I am—and part of it’s my own world history, my own life’s history. I worked in Rwanda with orphans from the ‘94 genocide. I see what happens with hateful rhetoric. It is a short walk to hate crimes, to crimes against humanity, and I also look at the good research out there about what happens with all that violence. Any violence our kids are exposed to, whether it’s online or offline, become a part of their worldview, and we need to be tuned in to that.

So I have a problem with that with young kids. The frontal portions of their brains are not fully developed. There’s a lot wrong with that for young people. Now I’ll probably get a lot of grief and people saying, “Well, there’s nothing that bad about it,” but in my book, *Just Because It’s Not Wrong Doesn’t Make It Right*, I talk about the whole issue of what’s so wrong with all this violence and violent video games. It isn’t just that one. Again, there are people who will say, “Well, the research has said that it’s not that bad.” Well, let’s look and see who did the research for it and when we find out who did it, if it’s the people developing the games, you know, that’s going to be skewed. If it’s people who are truly concerned about what’s happening in kids’ lives, and in their minds, and are willing to look at it objectively and now I think we are seeing some good research on that, but I think it’s critical that we take a serious look at what’s wrong with all the violence that kids are being exposed to.

If we can do that, then I believe we can show kids that, you know, violence in our homes, I don’t care, maybe it’s the way we treat one another. It isn’t just the online, but how do we speak to one another in our homes as adults? How do we speak to one another when we’re talking to our neighbors? How do we correspond? Are we always online, and if we’re always online, when a kid walks in from school and we’re on our phones, do we get off our phone so that they can communicate with us and say, “How was your day?” The kid walks in, head down, shoulders down and this, “Fine.” This isn’t fine, but I want to go back here just a moment.

The deadening consequences. what’s wrong with all this violence. Real or imagined acts of violence tend to cultivate a sense of danger, of mistrust, of alienation, and gloom in our kids. None of what our kids need today. And children who are regularly exposed and engaged in media violence, and that isn’t just the gaming, but media violence in general, they’re more likely to become desensitized to real-life violence.

So they won't see other kids at school being mean to another kid as such an awful thing when it really should. Their guts ought to say this is awful.

One of the scary things is they imitate that violence that they see and hear. They also, some of them, for some, they become easily intimidated or depressed because it's online and offline for them. Others become fearful and distrustful of others. Oh, that really creates community. And I think one of the most important things that happen is they miss their natural healthy fear clues.

Our bodies want to keep us alive and if they become fearful, full of fear, they don't get tuned in to things that should bother them. Little ones will say, "I don't want to go to Uncle George's," because they're listening to their little guts saying it's not a good place to be. But if they're fearful of, you know, stranger danger, which drives me crazy because we usually have to go to a stranger if we need something or if we need help, then they miss their fear clues. They're often lulled into thinking that they are safe when in familiar surroundings with familiar people and that's not always true.

When you have those video games, you know, there are pluses. It does draw them into intricate systems where they learn to play and interact with one another. It does strengthen eye-hand coordination. Ask surgeons, they use it. Quick thinking, and cooperation, and imagination, and problem solving, and it does—some of the games can invite kids to be thoughtful, and caring, and come up with solutions to quandaries or dilemmas, like Sim City. The UN has developed some wonderful games for that. But there are probable negatives as well.

When you're playing a video game, it requires little more than quick, aggressive, violent responses to perceived threats. You see something pop up right away and you've got to respond. It glorifies violence as a legitimate solution to problems, and violence is not a solution. Like Liz Losier said, "Conflict is inevitable. Violence is not." It sets other people up as adversaries, preys, or targets rather than people that we need to communicate with. That Martin Buber's, "I and thou in our common humanity," you know, I am I and you are thou. I'm unique, you're unique, and we have a lot in common.

It does, we know it to be true--military have used it—it breaks down our natural inhibition to killing. It also does something that neurologists have found out and neuroscience, it creates neuropathways that connect violence with pleasure and rewards rather than sadness and sympathy and fright, and that ought to scare us all, and it's nonstop stimulation. It can provide comfort and becomes a source of soothing. We have young people waking up at night having to get online to play something to sooth them back to sleep, and we do know that for some kids it can become addictive. So we have to look at these deadening consequences and what's so wrong with all the violence, whether it's online or offline.

**I think that's something all parents and educators should reflect on. I want to end with a question on sex, and drugs, and how we should talk to our kids. I mean, my kids, we can use my kids as hypotheticals. They're sort of like eight and nine right now. Walk me through how I should talk to them about that over the next 10 years and what do I need to be doing now to lay the foundations?**

I would start younger using the proper words. Very young. A little three-year-old in the grocery store, "Mommy, my vagina itches." People are going "Uhhhh," you know, and we have 105 words for penis, and 125 for breasts, and only one for ankle. You know, we have to start young teaching kids to use their proper words. I want a little boy to say that there's something, "My penis feels funny," and instead of using all these euphemisms, wee-wee, sausage and bacon, or twigs and berries, and all the different words that we use. Junk, family jewels, to use them and you say, "But why?" Well, when they reach middle school, they won't be calling one another slut, whore, fag, queer, or bitch, which are derogatory sexual terms. So we start young. You said, well, eight, nine. No, we start even younger. We start giving them the proper terms.

We talk to them about limits and boundaries. Just like we talked about limits and boundaries in every other part of their lives. That sexuality is an integral part of their being. So that instructions—how do we treat them? How do we treat their bodies? How do we talk to them when they're real, real young about proper words? Then as they're getting older and we're seeing puberty drop with, especially our young girls today, and so the Talk, quote-unquote, has had to come earlier. If we couch it in being free about talking about our bodies properly and talking about that we don't violate somebody else's space, then we can start talking about the difference between teasing and taunting.

You say, "But what does that have to do with sexuality?" Teasing is laughing with somebody, taunting is laughing at somebody. So if we can start about age five talking to kids about the difference between teasing, which is a mutual thing... it's lighthearted, clever and benign, and it's only a small part of your relationship and both parties are laughing. Taunting, it's one sided, it's the only part of the relationship you have, you use bigoted comments thinly disguised as jokes. In teasing when the other person appears distressed, we stop. In taunting, we keep going.

So if we teach them that, then by fourth grade we can start talking to kids about the difference between flirting, which is normal, natural, necessary to keep the human race going, and sexual bullying, which is none of those. The checklists for teasing and flirting is very similar, for taunting and sexual bullying are very similar. So that's why I said we have to start young, so it isn't just dropping in the Talk. Being open.

When a kid asks a question about sexuality, you're driving in the car and your eight-year-old says, "Daddy, where did I come from?" and your mind's going a mile a minute. Where do I start? Where do I start? You start talking to him about, "Well, Mom and I loved one another," and he says, "No, no. Is it New Jersey or New

York?” You know, finding out where the kid’s coming from, and not be upset when they bring something up. If they use a gross sexual term to stop them in its tracks because that’s mean and cruel, and then get some help.

There’s some good programs out there. I know my oldest granddaughter is 11 and the hospital actually had several sessions for moms and daughters to attend and fathers and sons to attend about your changing body. They had it well developed and it provided an environment of lots of girls, and lots of women, and lots of boys, and lots of men, to help kids talk about this. Use those kinds of resources. Then when they notice their bodies, noticing if one is developing earlier than other girls, and do you need to get a little sanitary pack and have that ready so you’re ready and she won’t be afraid to tell you that she started her period. Or, “Mom, I want a bra.”

We’ve sexualized our young children and we’ve got to get away from that so that they can normally develop, just like development of everything else. The frontal portion of their brains, their emotions...and then become tuned into that “un-” age where they’re unable to be an adult and unable to be a child and wanting desperately to be both, and that’s that 13 through 15 years. Those are hard on everybody, including the kid. The wonder years weren’t so really wonderful when it comes to their identity, their self-identity, their sexual identity, and asking lots of questions.

Be open and you can honestly say, “I’m going to have to look that up,” or, “Talk to me about why it’s important for you to know that right now.” It’s being open and talking to them. They’re hearing things, they’re able to see things online that you and I were never exposed to for good and for ill. There’s good stuff that kids are finding out and it’s through media, but there’s also some stuff that’s not healthy.

Dr. Phil Zimbardo did some amazing work. He did the Stanford prison experiment, but he also did a TEDx Talk and you can look it up under Phil Zimbardo. I guess the name of the talk is scary, but it’s about our young boys and what pornography is doing to them and why it’s so dangerous...the kind that’s out there today and what it does to their sense of relationships with the real-world young girls that they hopefully will fall in love with.

### **I think it has a huge impact on adults too, doesn’t it?**

It does. We know it does. We know it does on relationships. So, you know, as an adult, your brain is fully developed. Theirs is not. Their own sexual identity, their sense of self in relation to other human beings is not. So it has really devastating effects and so we need to be tuned into those kinds of things. Again, age-appropriate, ability-appropriate, what their interests are. They do need to know how their body is developing and if you’re uncomfortable with it or you’re not sure—my generation, my mother didn’t know the words of all the proper body parts because they never used them and they were never told what they were.

So my generation was reading *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, you know, which I gave to my daughters when they were 15 and 16, but now there's a lot out there. Seek it out. Ask for help. Use your programs that you have in your community that will help you.

But being honest and open. Remember if your kids can tell you the good, the bad, and the ugly going back to, you know, not praising them, and not using rewards, and punishments, it will come much easier. Where they feel like they can talk to you about anything. Use humor, and I also—while we're on that with drugs and sex, you don't have to tell them everything you did wrong. You can deal them life lessons, but there are things your parents don't know. It's probably best that your kids don't know either unless there was a real teachable moment in it. You know, getting your kid out of the local jail and you ended up there once too, sharing that with them, but in a way of, you know, we can get through this and the like, and I'm here for you kind of thing. Telling them about all your experiences with drugs in the '80s probably isn't the best idea.

So, you know, we learn from those things. There are things you don't have to share. There's oversharing so and we want them to feel good about their sexuality regardless, you know, wherever they fit, on whatever spectrum there is, and to be open to them and let them know that we love them, that we're here for them, that they are who they are.

**I think that's a great spot to end this conversation, Barbara. Thank you so much. This was a phenomenal exploration of how to raise kids and how to think about it from a parenting and a teacher perspective, and I really appreciate you taking the time.**

Well, kids are worth it. They are worth our time, our energy, our resources to help them be all they can be because that's what matters.

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