

Are You Parenting Like a Caveman?

By Lauren Bondy, MSW

Upon discovering that you've made a mistake or a bad decision, how do you react? Are you kind, forgiving, and loving toward yourself? Do you reflect on your choices and objectively analyze how you can do better next time? Or, do you react with negative self talk cursing your stupidity under your breath? Or worse? Don't think about it too hard. Many people, most people even, punish themselves through destructive behavior, negative self-talk and feelings of victimization, sometimes even numbing themselves with food, drugs or alcohol. Why this universal phenomenon?

Let's look at what typically happens when children misbehave. Picture a caveman's family sitting around the fire having just finished their supper of mammoth stew. Little Oog picks up daddy's spear and decides to jab his little brother in the back. It doesn't take much imagination to picture CaveMom's reaction and her leaping up to grab the spear, smack her son and bark at him. 25,000 years of evolution and parenting tradition have led us to punishment as a norm.

Parenting is a tremendous and awesome responsibility. As parents we are easily triggered into a reactive state of worry, fear and concern. We leap into the future imagining our child much older, behaving without social skills, a conscience, or sense of morality. In an attempt to alleviate our fears, we panic knowing that it is our responsibility to raise a child who knows right from wrong. The result is that much like Oog's mom, we will resort to punitive forms of discipline; we yell, punish, scold, shame, take away privileges, or even become physically or verbally abusive. All of this is an attempt to control our child's *savage beast* impulses.

Let's examine the two main reasons that parents do this. First, punitive parenting feels familiar since most parents were recipients of punishment as children. It is what we know. In fact punitive parenting has been handed down from generation to generation. As a result, most of us don't really know what else to do when our children misbehave, so we resort to the methodology of our parents. Parents simply don't have conscious parenting tools to get the results they want with their children. There are literally hundreds of conscious parenting tools that can be taught (I know because I teach them). Some examples are limit setting, empathy, accepting feelings, self calming, etc. Second, as a result of being raised with punitive methods, parents have subconsciously adopted limiting beliefs about themselves and subsequently their children's negative behavior. Our limiting beliefs may say, "I am bad", "I'm not good enough", "I'm unworthy of love", "My parents only love me when I'm good", "I deserve to suffer", etc. These beliefs are stored in the subconscious and show up as reactive parenting rather than conscious parenting.

The underlying belief is that children need to be punished when they behave in negative ways. This is based on thinking that humans on some level are inherently *bad* and that we need to stamp out unwanted tendencies. Or, that children (and adults) need to suffer in order to learn. Several thousand years of religious doctrine and practice discuss man's tendency toward evil. In my teaching I have asked hundreds of parents, "Where is it written that children need to suffer in order to learn?" No one has come up with an answer. One dad, perhaps a descendent

of Oog, proudly said, “Lauren, this is what parents have been doing for centuries. Are you saying that we should go against what has been happening for thousands of years?” Simply, yes, that is what I’m saying.

We can affect great change in our world by beginning on a personal level. Real peace begins at home with parents shifting their long-held limiting beliefs. What if, rather than punishing, we helped our children know or remember their true identity?

Several well-known authors have cited the following: *“In the Babemba tribe of South Africa, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he is placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered. All work ceases and every man, woman and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual. Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, about all the good things the person in the center of the circle has done in his or her lifetime. Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any and every detail and accuracy is recounted. All his positive attributes, good deeds, strengths and kindness are recited carefully and at length. This often will last for several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe.”*

When we believe that our truth as humans is love rather than evil, everything changes. We must respond to our children in ways that help them learn, grow and know themselves. Research has shown that children learn best when they are relaxed, feel good about themselves, and feel connected to their parents. Punishment has the opposite effect and actually creates more misbehavior and revenge cycles over time. To be fair, punishment may work to control your child’s behavior temporarily, but at what cost? Children may comply out of fear (at least for a while) but it does not teach good decision-making, self-management or responsibility. Even more, we pass on the *limiting belief baton* to our children that we have been carrying since our childhood.

Parents are constantly influencing their children’s identities by the things we say and do--- especially in the most challenging moments. If we want to influence healthy identities so that our children will know that they are spirits of pure love, our words and actions must reflect this. Parents must do three things. First, we need to examine our beliefs and set a clear intention for the messages we choose to send our children. Second, parents must heal their own limiting beliefs that they have carried since childhood. Third, parents must learn conscious parenting tools that teach children self-control, responsibility, resiliency and respect for self and others. Discipline means to *teach*. Parenting tools allow them to parent consciously rather than reactively.

Now ask yourself if you are parenting with a caveman or Babemba mindset. If you are stuck in the reactive mode of the caveman, it may be time to come out of the cave and into the world of enlightenment. Like the Babemba, parents can view children’s misbehavior as an opportunity to hold a mirror so that children can see the reflection of just how beautiful their hearts really are. Or, just club them. The choice is yours.