

HELPING OTHERS

We all have people in our lives that we love and care about; whether parents, children, spouses, friends or co-workers. When they are having problems or struggling we want to help, to fix or to rescue them. We really feel great about ourselves when we help someone else. Why is it then that sometimes our best efforts actually do more harm than good? What is that fine line between helping someone and enabling them to continue in self-destructive behaviors?

When attempting to help children just remember that they only learn what you teach them. When a well-meaning adult intervenes to prevent a child from experiencing the natural consequences of his/her behavior it may be necessary in order to prevent physical or emotional damage to the child. However, in situations when the adult intervenes in such a way that the child is not held accountable or responsible for their own behaviors or to prevent natural consequences that would teach a lesson, the adult is actually harming the child. This might occur in the instance that a parent does a child's homework or completes a school project for them. It could also be when a parent does not teach a child courtesy and respect for others or for property. Sometimes it takes the form of parents covering up or lying for a child to prevent legal, educational or social consequences arising from child's behavior. This has the effect of teaching children that they can do anything they want and it does not matter if they hurt people or property. A more subtle effect is the message children internalize that their parents do not care what they do since the parents will not set boundaries or limits, and this means the parents do not care about them! A child raised this way will grow up feeling entitled and unloved at the same time. It causes them tremendous social problems as well because they will not be liked and accepted in their peer group at school and teachers and community members will find these children "unlikable" and difficult to deal with. As the child grows up the parents will experience increasing difficulty in attempting to deal with the escalating problems which can include drug/alcohol abuse and criminal behavior. These parents tend to blame the behaviors on the child's peers, seldom seeing their own child as the ringleader not the follower and totally unable to see their own part in the process.

As adults we have an obligation to teach our children socially acceptable behaviors and to help them develop more appropriate behaviors when they make mistakes. A normal, healthy child who procrastinates and does not complete homework, or household chores is making a choice of behaviors and will experience consequences for not completing or not completing on time. As a parent or responsible adult you can facilitate this process by expressing regret that the child made this choice and by exploring with him/her options or ways for making a different choice in the future. The positive impact is that the child will develop better problem solving skills, be more socially responsible and will develop more self confidence and self-esteem in knowing he/she is capable of making different choices and that it is OK to make mistakes and learn from them.

When the person you are attempting to help is an adult the best rule of thumb is to hold them accountable and responsible for their actions and behaviors. Do not make excuses for them, cover up their mistakes or rescue them from experiencing the natural consequences of their behaviors/actions. If there are drugs or alcohol involved do not give the person any money! If they are hungry, buy them food, if they are being evicted

contact the landlord and arrange to pay the rent directly to him. This way you are not giving them money that will enable them to continue their substance abuse problem. It is possible in this instance for well meaning, loving, friends and family members to literally *help someone to death!* Some people believe they can control another person's behavior through persistence and nagging. Far from it! Anyone forced into a situation they do not agree with will be resistive and resentful and not get much help. Sometimes the well meaning efforts at controlling another have exactly the opposite effect and the person involved will react by increasing the behavior such as addiction rather than be controlled. AA has a saying that people do not get well until they "hit bottom". This is true for all people, we do not make necessary changes in our lives until the consequences from our behaviors outweigh what we perceive to be the benefits of those behaviors. This is true in addictions and it is also true in our daily lives. Most of us know about healthy diets and the need for exercise, but how many of us heed this until our medical provider informs us that we have serious health problems? Once informed, the responsibility is our own, not the doctors. We cannot be forced and coerced into healthy behaviors, they must be our choice.

If you truly want to help someone, give some thought to the long term consequences and whether or not help is appropriate in this situation. Using tough love and not rescuing someone, allowing them to experience their own consequences, is sometimes the best and most needed help of all. Tough love really means it is tougher for me to see someone I love experience pain and disappointment so they can learn a life lesson and choose to make a change than for me to just jump in and rescue them from that painful situation.

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