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## PARENTING; Don't Even Think About Saying 'Don't'

By MICHAEL WINERIP

IT was the beginning of the third and final session of the parenting course "Discipline Is Not a Dirty Word," and the instructor, Nancy Olsen-Harbich, wanted to know how people had done on their homework.

Cari Jacino, who has 2-year-old twin boys, was feeling overwhelmed. "I can see why some people take this course twice," she said. "There's so much to remember."

They were supposed to practice the 4 C's: staying calm, cool, collected and confident. They were supposed to practice not yelling. ("It's almost impossible for children to keep yelling at you if you're not yelling at them," Ms. Olsen-Harbich told them.)

They were supposed to stop saying, "If you clean your room, then you can go to the park" -- which makes the cleaning sound optional. They were supposed to start saying, "When you clean your room, then you can go to the park" -- which makes the cleaning sound inevitable.

They were supposed to tell their children what they can do, not what they can't do. And they were supposed to put a mark on a piece of paper every time they slipped up and uttered a negative word.

"Seeing any improvement?" Ms. Olsen-Harbich asked.

"Lots of marks, still," said Vanessa Goleski. Her son, Tristan, 2 -- "a very young 2" -- recently climbed onto the dining room table and swung from the chandelier. When she saw him, she yelled: "No! Don't! Get down!" which was a violation of about a hundred of Ms. Olsen-Harbich's rules.

"Now I know," said Ms. Goleski, "instead of screaming at the top of my lungs, I'm supposed to say, 'Tristan, I see you're in an energetic mood, but in our family we don't swing on chandeliers.' "

"Anyone getting better at not saying 'don't'?" Ms. Olsen-Harbich asked.

"I used to say, 'Don't hit your brother, don't throw your food,' " said Ms. Jacino, who describes her boys, Jared and Jaden, as "very energetic." "Now I'm saying, 'In this family, we keep our food on the tray.' "

There were murmurs of approval, and someone asked if it worked.

"No," she said, "they still threw their food."

Ms. Olsen-Harbich, who has run parenting workshops for Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County for 22 years, was not discouraged. "It's too new," she said. "Mostly what we get is funny stories about what doesn't work. This takes time."

At first, parents are surprised that this course on discipline doesn't seem to be that much about discipline. "Most people think they're coming to a class to learn what to do when a child's horrible," says Ms. Olsen-Harbich, who has a degree from Cornell in human development.

Instead, they get insights into how to raise a child so you don't get to the horrible moments. At core, she teaches that you have to make your child feel loved and capable, and then you have to do a ton of pre-emptive parenting to avoid situations that lead to bad behavior.

Kids act out when they're bored, so if you're taking your preschooler to a restaurant, bring lots to do. One of Ms. Olsen-Harbich's favorite parenting mottoes is, "Never go anywhere without a deck of cards and a can of Play-Doh."

In the tradition of cooperative extensions -- which started after the Civil War to support farmers and their families -- courses are inexpensive (\$10 for each two-hour session), open to all, intimate (about 20 per class) and welcoming. "People will talk if they know you won't think less of them because they can't get their child to go to bed," she says.

Most in the class are women. (At one point, Ms. Jacino's husband, Joe, asked one of the women: "How did your husband get out of this? I mean, I'm enjoying it, I really am, but I was just asking.")

Parenting is isolating, and in addition to seeing that they're not alone, people learn a lot of tricky techniques from a master. When Ms. Goleski talked about Tristan, Ms. Olsen-Harbich did not say, "Jeez, they're hanging from the ceiling at this lady's house." She said, "Their bodies are filled with the urge to climb," and suggested Ms. Goleski get a gymnastic toy. Ms. Goleski now keeps a teeter-totter in her dining room.

Ms. Jacino asked what to do when one of her twins starts wrestling and the other doesn't want to. "They're still learning to read each other's facial cues," Ms. Olsen-Harbich said. "Fifteen minutes before, he was wrestling with his brother and it was O.K., so he can't understand why it's not O.K. now."

For homework, Ms. Jacino worked on facial cues. "I said: 'Look, this is Mommy mad. This is mad. You push your brother, he gets mad.' "

A mother asked what to do about a 2-year-old who kicks her when she changes his diaper. "Change him standing up," Ms. Olsen-Harbich said.

"I do that," another woman said. "It works."

Someone asked what to do about kids who kick each other under the dinner table, and Ms. Olsen-Harbich suggested putting them at the far ends of the table and having the parents sit in the middle.

Listening to Ms. Olsen-Harbich, you get an image of the good parent as a person with the patience of Gandhi, the dogged perseverance of Madonna and the language skills of a \$500-an-hour corporate lawyer who knows how to use a couple of well-placed dependent clauses to get results.

She warned parents not to say "O.K.?" at the end of a sentence, as in: "We're going in five minutes, O.K.?" This implies a democratic process, when you really mean: "We're going in five minutes, buster."

She cautioned against saying, "What do you want for breakfast?" because a child hears, "I can have anything," when, in truth, the school bus is going to arrive in three minutes and, sad as it is, the only options are Cocoa Puffs or Shredded Wheat.

The parents asked how to control the intake of sweets, and Ms. Olsen-Harbich said, "Don't buy them." Or buy one bag of cookies and say, "This has to last all week."

They asked how to make their kids read, and she said: "If you want them to read, you have to read to them, and just as important, they have to see you reading. Boys especially need to see their fathers reading."

"That's so true," Ms. Jacino said. "My kids are only 2, they see a newspaper, they say, 'Daddy's newspaper.' "

"The scariest thing about parenting," Ms. Olsen-Harbich said, is that "we're modeling all the time.

"They watch you, they talk the way you talk, they take cues from you. Have you been a better person since you've been a parent?"

The abruptness of her question startled them, and the room grew so quiet they could hear Ms. Goleski whisper, "I hope so."

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