

Table of Contents

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<i>CHAPTER 1</i>	1
Heart of the Matter	
<i>CHAPTER 2</i>	9
Beginnings	
<i>CHAPTER 3</i>	21
From There to Here	
<i>CHAPTER 4</i>	33
Tools of the Trade	
<i>CHAPTER 5</i>	53
Questions, not Answers	
<i>CHAPTER 6</i>	91
Watch Your Words and Your Silences	
<i>CHAPTER 7</i>	105
Raising Parents	
<i>CHAPTER 8</i>	121
Love and Order	
<i>RESOURCES</i>	129
<i>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</i>	149
<i>AFTERWORD</i>	157

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Disclaimer

PARENTS FORUM is not a substitute for medical, psychiatric or psychological advice, for professional parenting education or for other counseling.

Readers are urged to consult their health care advisors or other appropriate professionals about specific concerns or problems.

Dedication

To parents around the world and all those who care for children and support parents.

Love and Order

Chapter Eight

Some time ago a couple involved in PARENTS FORUM invited me over for a visit. We were sitting at the kitchen table when their almost six-year-old son sidled up to his mother. As he climbed into her lap, she said, "Why don't we ask Eve that question you asked me earlier?" and, with some encouragement, he asked, "Why are there big people who are mean?"

His mother told me she'd replied, "There are more good people than bad people in the world, but there still are some just plain mean folks." She was right, of course. The world is imperfect and people are imperfect. The underlying question I heard in her son's words, however, was, "How do people get to be mean?"

So, to my friend's response I added that I thought big people who are mean probably had parents who were mean to them when they were little. As we talked, I wondered aloud how mean parents probably punished their children harshly and weren't very loving. I recalled the PARENTS FORUM workshop lesson on thoughts and feelings. In that lesson we considered our behavior from the perspective of thoughts: how we keep order in our households, and from the perspective of feelings: how we express affection. Mean parents may establish too little order (or enforce it too harshly) and may give too little love (or show it inconsistently). Effective parents provide adequate measures

Near the end of a long stay-at-home day when my boys were little, I recall one of them nagging me for more cookies. These happened to be lemon-flavored cookies. Frustrated, I yelled, "There have to be limits!" and, confusing lemons with limits he replied, "I want more limits!" If only kids were this clear all the time. They need our love, and cookies sometimes, but they need order too, and limits on the cookies.

of both order and love. Love and order. That sounds oh-so-simple, but giving our kids enough of both and achieving a balance between the two on a day-to-day, sometimes minute-to-minute basis, can be difficult indeed.

When we are new parents, our lives are completely taken up with the baby. As parents of school kids, then parents of young adults, we learn to do less as our children learn to do more for themselves. Only by taking breaks now and then from the day-to-day work of raising children can we get the perspective we need on their progress and on our own.

Babies need immediate and nearly constant attention. A new father said, "There's no give and take. We give. He takes! It's total slavery." But he said this with a smile, knowing that as time passes there will be moments, and then longer and longer periods, when he can expect his son to wait. Just not now -- the baby is only six months old.

Our children always need our love, but they may want it expressed differently at different stages. Similarly, they need us to provide order in their lives in different ways at different ages. How can we judge whether we are doing a good job? To "keep tabs" on the balance of love and order in our parenting, we can benefit from reassurance, support and information from other adults. The order of these three elements is important: first, emotional reassurance, then practical support, and, finally, objective information. If the information the other person offers -- in whatever guise, either advice or instruction -- comes first, it may create a logjam, only increasing the frustration a parent feels from lack of either reassurance or support or both.

Think back to the exercise on expressing concern in "Tools of the Trade" where you used the formula "**I feel ___ about ___ because ___**". Remember that the feeling word comes first. Saying how you feel can, sometimes almost literally, take a "load off your chest." Describing the situation that caused the feeling can be a relief too. Even better is getting help with the situation.

Note that, while PARENTS FORUM does not offer specific services, as participants get to know one another and become friends, they may help each other out with childcare, housework, finances and that all important referral: the name of a dependable plumber.

After dealing with the two elements, reassurance and practical support, we can talk about the whys and wherefores and get the information we need to understand the situation and the feelings it brought up. Keeping these three elements in order, especially the part about monitoring our own feelings, is essential to maintaining a good balance in parenting. Expressing our feelings (to an appropriate person, at an appropriate time) opens the door to figuring out solutions to day-to-day challenges.

When I was expecting my second baby, I recall another expectant mother showing up at my door doing a city-sponsored survey of families' needs. She and I discovered that our first-borns had almost the same birthday and that our new babies were due about the same time. We became friends almost overnight and remain so today, having traded childcare in those early days and shared many concerns and joys over the years. We joke that our now-grown children will have to take us to visit each other in our nursing homes just as we arranged their "play dates" when they were little.

In parenting, unlike writing, there are no first drafts, no scribbling down a few trial words of mothering or fathering then pressing the delete key. Everything counts. "No back-talk, no recall," as my sons would yell upon claiming the preferred seat in the car. How many times have I heard words coming out of my mouth and known they were wrong? Too many to count. What do I do differently today, as a parent? I remember to breathe and I ask more questions, of myself and of my sons. I also talk often with other parents and listen to their insights, especially the unwelcome ones. The ability to accept criticism is a valuable trait to develop, one I am still working on. I sure wish I didn't encounter so many "teachable moments!"

While we work to strike that difficult balance in our own households, what is going on in our neighbors' homes and in the homes of our children's classmates? Do relatives and friends support us in setting rules and holding our kids accountable for following them? If they don't, we can ask for this support. When they do, we can say thanks. Do our communities offer us formal and informal support in meeting the many challenges of raising a family? If they don't, we can advocate for this support. When they do, we can share the experience: tell friends and neighbors and mention successful programs to others who can spread the word.

In 1956 my father, Richard Odiorne, wrote a book, *Why They Came*, for the centennial celebration of my home town, Yellow Springs, Ohio. His opening and closing words capture the spirit of community that I believe we all want for ourselves and our children wherever we happen to live. It is the spirit that PARENTS FORUM seeks to promote.

In the introduction, he stated the book's purpose as twofold: to present highlights of the town's history and

Love and Order

to affirm, for present and future residents, the town's "essential qualities of neighborliness, eagerness for new ideas, and simplicity of life in a busy world." In the closing paragraphs, he describes Yellow Springs as "a town in which quality of work can be more important than quantity; where people do not need to be caught in a race for bigness; where neighborliness promotes tolerance and understanding."

As our communities have become bigger, as our lives are too often invaded by news of violence if not directly by threat of violence or violence itself and as commercialism encroaches further into our communities and our lives, we can maintain a positive vision.

We can try to create loving and orderly homes. We can strive to be neighborly and tolerant. We can maintain an eagerness for new ideas. We can "live simply," as the expression goes, "so that others may simply live." I believe that we can and must do all of these things. I believe that PARENTS FORUM is a strong partner with many others who, individually and collectively, care for children and support parents.