

## Resisting Control

Written by John Breeding, Ph.D.

Monday, 01 June 2015 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 08:18

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I once heard a parenting educator say that it is more important for young people to resist control than to have things go well in their lives. This truth has stayed with me. I see it, for example, in the long two- or three-hour ordeals between parents and their children over homework that might take 20 minutes if it were simply and directly handled. Self-determination is a fundamental aspect of human nature. Failure to know and honor this breeds conflict and distress. A corollary I learned from another teacher is that unfair use of rank creates revenge; failure to understand this can wreak havoc between adults and young people.

My first book is called *The Wildest Colts Make the Best Horses*. Spirited children make spirited adults; they also make for challenging parenting and schooling and all other manner of “socialization.” As a psychologist, I certainly learned about “managing” children through “behavior modification” methods of reward and punishment. Our society too often emphasizes an even more potent method of controlling children’s behavior by using extremely powerful mood- and behavior-controlling drugs. After all, psychotropic means “aimed toward the psyche.”

A revealing look at the word manager that I learned from the poet David Whyte expands my point about managing children. Whyte says that the word manager comes from the Italian maneggio and the French manege; they mean the training, riding and handling of a horse. He elaborates:

*It is strange to think that the whole spirit of management is derived from the image of getting on the back of a beast, digging your knees in and heading it in a certain direction. The word manager conjures images of domination, command, and ultimate control, and the taming of a potentially wild energy. It also implies a basic unwillingness on the part of people to be managed, a force to be corralled and reined in. All appropriate things if you wish to ride a horse, but most people don't respond very passionately or very creatively to being ridden, and the words “giddy up, there” only go so far in creating the kind of responsive participation we now look for.*

Please do spend a few minutes contemplating the words of David Whyte. Then consider the following response from mountain guide Jack Turner, when asked, “What exactly do you mean by wild?”

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*I mean something that is self-willed, autonomous, self-organized. Basically it's the opposite of controlled. You can see wildness in the movement of glaciers, you can track it in star-forming regions in the Orion Nebula. Wildness is everywhere. It starts with microscopic particles, and it goes more than 13 billion light-years into the cosmos. It's in the soil and in the air, it's in our hands, it's in our immune system, it's in our lungs—where there are two thousand bacteria per square centimeter! In a certain respect, much of what we consider us is in fact not us. We breathe, and wildness comes in. We don't control it.*

To the extent that our true nature includes this kind of wildness, and my own work is bet on the notion that it is, then my favorite parenting—to see your children through “the eyes of delight”—is especially vital in witnessing and responding to their being “self-willed, autonomous, self-organized” beings. Anything that gets in the way of adults seeing young people in this light generally says less about the young person's behavior than it does about the state of the adult. The path I recommend is called “parenting's emotional healing.”

My most recent book is titled *Leaving Home: The Journey from Birth to Emerging Adulthood*. Central to the book is the work of developmental psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, who coined the term “emerging adulthood” to refer to the period, generally in their 20s, when young adults gradually move to fuller autonomy in their relational, work and financial lives.

In the book, I have a chapter called “Treacherous Leavings.” Today, the majority of young people in our country go off to college, at least for awhile, and for some this can be treacherous, especially taking into consideration that a large number of students enter college already on psychiatric drugs, or start taking them while there. Psychologist Leighton Whitaker takes a look at the numbers. Whitaker points out that by 1992 it was already common for college students to present on psychiatric drugs. By 2003, forty percent of those seeking help were already taking one or more psychotropic drugs. In 2005, they were often prescribing for themselves and each other.

This is both treacherous and tragic, and a severe hindrance to success. When we are caught in the throes of dealing with challenging young people in the midst of our own struggles to survive in a very challenging world, I think it is crucial to think beyond the current stress or crisis and to remember the big picture—to recall and hold the image of a child or adolescent as a self-willed, autonomous, self-organizing young adult. That is success, and it is a very far cry from the role of drug-dependent mental patient. From that view, behavior management is considerably less important than maturity coaching, and the principles and techniques of that endeavor are all about supporting and encouraging self-will, autonomy and self-organization. That's very different than being controlled by drugs or by endless variations on the theme of reward and

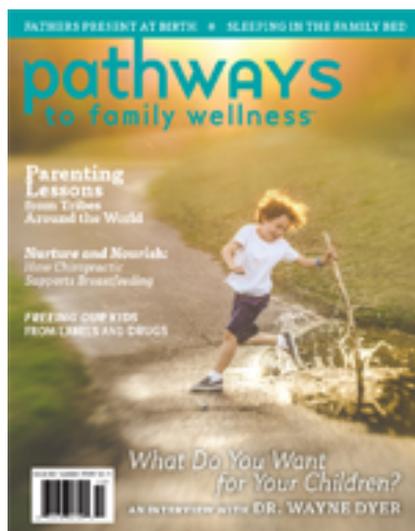
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punishment.



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