KEEPING OUR Credibility AS PARENTS

by Robert Lichfield

For the last 25 years I have worked, either directly or indirectly, with hundreds of struggling, defiant, difficult, or troubled youth. Because of my experience, I have had countless parents come up to me and say, “I am having problems with my teen. He won’t listen to me.” Or they ask about a younger child: “My child doesn’t seem to pay attention to me. She ignores me. She is unresponsive and doesn’t follow through on anything I say. What can I do?”

In response, I tell them that they lack credibility with their child. Credibility is more of a struggle for parents today. It used to be that just being the parent would give you some level of credibility, but not so in today’s culture. Gone are the days when “Father knows best” or “children are to be seen but not heard.”

Many children today seem to believe that their parents’ main roles are to provide but not necessarily to preside. These children want their parents to provide them with their needs and wants but don’t want their parents to preside over them or have any input into how they live their lives. If you are able to properly preside in your home and have your children’s respect, it is because you have been able to establish a level of credibility with your children. While this is quite easy with some children as they just seem to naturally respect and revere their parents, for
many children credibility is something that is hard earned. This can even happen within the same family, with some children in the family easily accepting parental direction while others contest any parental boundaries. For those children who are resistive to parental authority, establishing credibility becomes even more crucial. Credibility is necessary for any parent to be effective.

One way parents can assess their level of credibility is to look at the word no. What does the word no mean to your children? Does it really mean no? To some children, no means “I asked the wrong way.” To other children it means, “I asked at the wrong time.” To others it means, “I asked the wrong parent.” And to others it even means, “I just haven’t asked enough times. Eventually, if I ask enough times, my parents will say yes.”

So every time we say no and then we end up changing it to a yes, what does that do to our credibility? What do our children believe? Do they believe no really means no? Of course not. Do we have credibility? No. Even worse, our children now have more of a basis to not accept no the next time. They are even becoming conditioned to never have to accept no as an answer.

The credibility problem also works in another way. That’s when we tell our children that if they do a certain thing there is going to be a consequence—and then we don’t follow through on the consequence.

As an example, you may say to your children, “We’re all going out Friday night for dinner and a movie. In order to go, you must keep your room clean all week.” So you have a daughter, and all week her room is a pigsty. Then on Friday night, she makes a token effort to clean it and promises to clean it better tomorrow.

Do you leave her behind? Or do you take her? In most cases, you would have to leave a spouse behind to stay with her. So, what do you end up doing? You take her. And what does she learn about your credibility?

Perhaps you’re angry because your son did something you didn’t appreciate, and you tell him, “You’re grounded for a month!” But a few days later, there is an important school activity that your son really wants to go to and he gets extra credit for attending. If you don’t let him go, you know he is to going sulk, whine, and pester you all night for not letting him go. And you were hoping for a nice relaxing night at home. Since he is getting extra credit, you rationalize and let him go. But, what does that do to your credibility? What is your child learning after this happens time and time again? Worse yet, your child begins to believe that they don’t have to follow through and there won’t be any consequences, making it harder to enforce them the next time. Little by little the threat of consequences begins to mean nothing to your child. They don’t believe you mean what you say. They believe that while you may make harsh and rash threats in moments of frustration, you won’t ever stick to them. You have reached the point of no credibility.

What to do? The solution is that we need to talk less and act more. The key to establishing and maintaining credibility with our children is consistent follow-through on whatever we say. When we consistently follow through, amazingly enough, we get consistent results. Children consistently respond to consistent follow-through. In fact, this is not only true with children, but researchers have found it true with laboratory rats. They found if rats go down a certain tube in a maze where they then consistently get shocked, the rats will quit going down that tube. Now, our kids are certainly smarter than rats, but even rats are smart enough to figure out that “Every time I go down that tube there is a consistent, negative consequence. So, I’ll quit going down that tube.”

So, if your children are going down a tube you would prefer they avoid, it only means one thing: there is not a consistent, negative consequence. Otherwise, they too would decide to quit going down that tube.

Researchers made another interesting finding. Working with three groups of pigeons, they put each group in a cage with a button. With the first group, when the pigeons would push the button, food would appear. With the next group, every time they pushed the button, nothing happened. With the third group, when they pushed the button, sometimes they would get food and sometimes they wouldn’t. And, when they did get food, sometimes they would get a small amount, and other times they would get a very large amount.
What the researchers found was that the first group was pretty consistent at going and hitting the button—until they got full or bored. Then they would no longer hit the button. With the second group, the pigeons quickly came to the point where they didn’t even care about the button. In fact, they acted like it didn’t even exist. The pigeons in the third group, interestingly, were the ones that hit the button the most times—and were the most vigorous and the most enthusiastic in doing so.

So, what the researchers learned is that intermittent reinforcements—in other words, sporadic rewards—are very powerful. They found out with pigeons what Las Vegas found out a long time ago: that people are willing to risk a very painful experience (losing their money) if there’s a chance of a great reward.

What I learn from that study is that children, in order to get what they want, are willing to risk getting some hassles, some conflict, and even some token consequences if there is a chance—or, better yet, a history—of occasionally getting what they want. Understanding this makes consistent follow-through even more important.

So, if consistent follow-through is so critical, why do we not follow through? What stops us from doing what we know would be best for our children? Some suggestions I’ve heard are:

- We get tired.
- It’s difficult.
- It takes time.
- It is emotionally draining.
- We are not sure we know what we are doing.

Many times, we don’t follow through because we don’t want our children to have consequences. So we avoid trying to give our kids any consequences. While I understand how parents feel, what I tell those who are struggling with their children is, the minute your child is as interested in not getting consequences as you are in not giving consequences, the game is over. It’s a done deal. The problem will be solved. You see, we’re the ones who are trying to not give the consequences. Why? Because we love our children. When they bleed, we bleed. So we don’t want to give our children consequences. In fact, we go to great lengths to not give our children consequences—often to their own detriment.

How do we do that? We tend to use talk instead of using consequences. We lecture. We yell. We scold. We lay guilt trips. We warn. We threaten, sometimes even with rage. And, we remind. Basically, we talk, hoping we don’t have to take any action.

We use the term “reminding our children.” But what do our children call it? “Nagging!” We’re not reminding, we’re nagging, which actually hurts relationships.

How many of you have had the experience of a child saying, “Thanks, Dad, for that lecture. I now understand things better”? Lectures don’t help. Scolding and guilt trips often shame and hurt the child. The solution is to talk less, and act more.

The best example of this is when our Heavenly Father introduced Adam and Eve into the Garden of Eden. He said to Adam, “Here are all these trees you may freely eat of. But here is one tree that you are not to eat of.” Then what does God do? He leaves. And, when He comes back, Adam and Eve have partaken of the fruit. So, what did God do? Lecture? Yell? Call them names? Lay a guilt trip on them? Remind them of what He had said? Give them a warning, and another chance?

No, He followed through on what He had told them. He acted, instead of talking about it. If we are going to be successful with our children, we have to follow the same example.

If we try to avoid imposing consequences on our children, we are ignoring the fact that
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consequences are a necessary part of their development. No one knows this better than God. God could save us from all of the consequences of our actions. He could save us from all of our pain. But He loves us and is committed to our growth to the point that no matter how much He loves us, He very seldom intervenes. Even when He extends mercy, He is going to let us, for the most part, suffer the consequences for our decisions so we can learn from them.

Let me suggest some techniques that will help us avoid losing credibility. The first one goes back to that little word I referred to at the first, the word no.

It’s very important that when you say no, you follow through with your no. In order to do that, you must become much better at not using no except when you really mean it. If you use no too quickly and too frequently, it will end up meaning yes to the child, just with a slight detour between what they want and when they get there.

Years ago I worked with a man who said, “Whenever kids ask a question, just tell them ‘No!’ because it’s right 80 percent of the time.” And while there may be some truth to that, if you go around saying, “no, no, no,” then you will completely lose your credibility over a period of time. Sometimes, the things our children ask to do really are okay! So, don’t use no until you know for sure that you mean it and are going to stick to it.

There are times when, before you answer, you should use the simple technique of “buying time.” This is done by saying, “Let me think about it,” rather than rushing into a decision. Take the time to make sure you’ve thought through the issue completely. And make sure that your spouse is on board so that they’re not learning, “I asked the wrong parent.” Then you can say with confidence, “We have thought about it, and the answer is no.”

There are times when your children will ask a question that you want to think about, but you don’t want to give them any false hope. In these cases you may want to say, “I doubt it, but let me think about it.” Then you maintain your flexibility, but you haven’t given them false encouragement or hope that they are eventually going to get the answer they want. Again, use no when you need to; but when you say it, mean it.

The next way in which we hurt our credibility is by using bluffs or exaggerated threats: “You do that, and you’ll be grounded for a year.” “Do that again, and you’re going to live to regret it.” Your children likely know you’re not going to follow through, and so you once again lose credibility. To avoid that, I suggest two things. The first is to not use consequences that penalize you too much because you won’t deliver on them. The second is, wherever possible, don’t identify the consequences. Just let them know, “If you make those kinds of choices, there will be consequences.” The reason is, as soon as you identify the consequence, what have you done? You have committed yourself. You have taken away your flexibility because your only choice at that point is to either follow through—or not follow through and lose credibility. By not identifying the consequences (beyond, “there will be consequences”)
you maintain your flexibility, and you can then think through and create consequences that conform to what you want to do, what you feel you can do, and what fits the situation. In addition, fear of the unknown is often greater than fear of the known. There are times, though, that you want your child to clearly understand the severity of the potential consequences. In these cases, you may want to clearly outline what action you will take as long as you are prepared to deliver. This is what God did in His statement to Adam, “In the day you eat the fruit, you shall surely die.”

Another way to maintain your credibility is to avoid making decisions hastily or under pressure. And children will always try to press you to make a decision right then. “Can I go? Can I go? Can I go?” In situations like that, you’re going to make bad decisions that you’ll later have to reverse—and that hurts your credibility. Again, buy time in order to avoid making decisions based on pressure.

The last way in which we damage our credibility is by rescuing our children from their consequences. It’s very hard, as parents, not to do that, and it’s something we all have to work on.

Watching parents try to rescue their children reminds me of the story of the little boy who watched a butterfly try to break out of a cocoon. He watched as it struggled and fought its way out, and the boy finally decided that it just wasn’t going to get out by itself. Finally, out of compassion, the boy helped the butterfly break free. Then he threw it up in the air, where the butterfly flew for a ways, and then fell to the earth and died.

The grandfather who had watched all of this came over to the boy and said, “Son, a butterfly needs to exercise its wings to the full extent in getting out of its cocoon. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t develop the strength it needs, and so it dies.”

That’s what we do many times when we try to rescue our children from the consequences of their actions. As we try to avoid that tendency, our best example, once again, is God. No one loves us more than God loves us. But He lets us struggle through the cocoons of life until we develop the strength that will carry us through. We must learn to do the same with our own children.

Within reasonable limits, we need to let our children learn from natural consequences. If they leave their lunch at home, there is a natural consequence that will likely result in their being much more attentive to remembering to pick it up before they walk out the door in the morning. If a child has blown off opportunities to earn enough money to go on an activity Friday night, there is a natural consequence that will help them learn about work, budgets, and saving at an early age. We will do our children a favor by letting them experience natural consequences.

Of course, there are situations where you have to intervene. If a three-year-old runs out into a busy street, it’s not a good time to say, “Well, Johnny is going to learn from natural consequences today, and what a lesson he’ll learn.” Or, if a child is using drugs or drinking or creating other serious risks to themselves or others, this would be a time to intervene. There are certainly those moments, but, wherever you can, you need to let your child learn from natural consequences.

In order to be effective with our children, we need to also have a relationship with them. It can’t all be about consequences and rules. A warm relationship is also critical. But parents sometimes get confused over what the word relationship means. In my experience, there are right kinds of relationships and there are wrong kinds of
relationship. The wrong kind of relationship is where the parent is more concerned about being liked by the child than being credible, or more concerned about being accepted and approved by the child than being respected. To use God as the example again, He loves us and He wants us to love Him. But God will never put His desire for our acceptance and approval ahead of His credibility or principles. He doesn’t bend his rules so we will like Him more.

Sometimes parents are trying to develop the wrong kind of relationship. They are looking for approval or acceptance. They want to be viewed as a friend or as cool. That can end up giving us the wrong kind of relationship. One where we only have a relationship when we give our children what they want.

Another vital part of having the right kind of relationship with our children is that we need to be very nurturing. There are those who believe that if you have a lot of rules and a lot of expectations, you are just going to make your kids rebel and they will end up as juvenile delinquents. If that were really the case, then there would be an extremely high rate of juvenile delinquency among the Amish, which is not the case. What I’ve found over the years is that it’s not so much the rules that turn kids off as it is a lack of nurturing.

When you have a good mixture of accountability and nurturing, you have the ingredients you need for success. You can readily see how the two work together by looking at the workplace. Imagine having a job where there is no accountability. No one really cares about when you show up or even if you show up. And it doesn’t seem to matter to anyone if you get your work done, or if you do it very well. Obviously, that business is not going to succeed. You have to have accountability. But now consider working in an environment where there is a lot of accountability, but there is no nurturing. There is no appreciation and certainly no recognition of what you contribute. In that environment, most people just check out. A family is much the same. As parents, you need to encourage that sense of accountability, but you also need to provide regular, ongoing nurturing.

Here are some suggestions on how to do that. First, look for opportunities to express appreciation or validation and then express it whenever you can. With some children, that may mean taking them by the hand and helping them take the garbage out. But once the garbage is out, make sure you tell them, “Thanks for helping me with the garbage.”

Second, create the right kind of atmosphere in your home. In my view, there are three critical times when you can most effectively create the right kind of atmosphere in your home: The first thing in the morning; the last thing at night; and, as often as possible, when the kids come home from school.

In the morning, you have the opportunity to set the tone for the day. Warm encouraging interaction at the beginning of the day can go a long ways in creating a loving, nurturing environment in your home.

In the evening, you have an opportunity to ask each child how their day went and let them know how much you appreciate them. Children love this personal attention, and it allows them to go to bed knowing they have parents who care for them.

When your children first get home from school—before all the competing demands set in—you have an opportunity to ask your children how their day at school went, and you are there for them if needed.
I have found that if your children feel you care about them and are on their team, they will work with you when problems arise. It’s when they feel you are not on their team—that you are frequently angry, frustrated, or upset with them, or that you’re not interested in their lives—that’s when they will struggle.

Third, spend time together. In working with hundreds of struggling, troubled teenagers, I have invariably found that when teens first began to be headed for problems, they were isolating themselves from their parents and the rest of their family, whether it was through computer games, loud music, non-stop videos, or spending every possible minute with their friends. Spend time together. Get your children out of their rooms. Limit the time they spend watching television or playing on the computer or whatever it is that allows them to cut themselves off from the family. When a child is isolated, your relationship is headed downhill, and the problems are on the way up.

Finally, provide physical expressions of your love through hugs, a touch on the shoulder, a pat on the back, or other appropriate ways of letting them know that you care about them. Touch validates. It lets your children know you care about them.

To tie all of this together, we need to develop credibility. We need to create accountability in our homes, but we also need to create a nurturing, warm influence. Family life is like a football game. Rules and penalties are important to a football game, but no one wants to go to a game where it is dominated by rules, penalties, or refereeing. Refereeing and penalties are necessary so that the game doesn’t break down. In like manner, families need parents who referee and provide enough penalties that the family doesn’t break down, but the home should be more about fun, personal growth, progress, involvement, and joy. This can only happen when children feel loved, valued, needed, and involved. If children get the right kind of nurturing, they will respond well to accountability. And it’s our job, as parents, to provide an appropriate measure of each.

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