

## EMPOWERING TO EXCEL

### WHY A CHILD'S SUCCESS BEGINS AT HOME

BY VERONICA BOODHAN

With the busy lives many parents lead today, it can be easy to take life's simple pleasures for granted. But for a child, it's these simple pleasures that mean the world to them.

From failing to acknowledge an academic achievement or offer support, to deeply expressing anger and frustration, parents who exhibit this type of disregarding behaviour can have tremendous effects on a child, who may view these actions as neglect.

"Parenting is a challenge and reward, and most parents will express their frustration non-optimally to the child at some time or another... Very stressed, angry, depressed and/or anxious parents are not able to track their environments in a balanced way, tending to over-attend to negatives, and under-attend to positives," says Christine Wekerle, a doctor of clinical psychology. "These parents may not realize the extent to which they are directing fear and hostility to the child or adolescent, when emotionality is under-controlled. From about age 12 onwards, normative independence-striving can be experienced as threat to authority, however, the youth is developing self-sufficiency skills and look to parents to still be the family CEOs."

Wekerle, who is also an associate professor of pediatrics, and clinical psychology researcher at McMaster University, as well as an associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto, has extensively studied child

maltreatment and child welfare, and has contributed to several scholarly health journals.

She says that a child's reactive response to issues within the household can speak volumes of how they are coping with them.

"A vicious cycle of power struggle can get created because the developing child is more reflexive than reflective — adults are more thoughtful and reflective, using their higher-order brain functions that are yet developing in the child and adolescent," explains Wekerle. "Research shows that parents who do not match the child tit-for-tat in negatives — escalating the situation over time — tend to also not report child behaviours as clinically problematic. What that means is that the adult is in charge of interactions and must be the one to exit negativity first."

Although these actions, which can often include lashing out — either verbally or physically — as a result of anger or frustration may appear harmless, often times they have lasting impacts on a child. Wekerle says it is these types of actions that may cause the child to internalize these same feelings of anger and hostility, which may be applied to relationships that develop later in life.

"Childhood memories of interactions with significant others — parent [or] sibling — [can be] painful, and the lack of positive regard may engender feeling empty, lonely, disconnected, anxious, or fearful in



relationships," she says. "Our Maltreatment and Adolescent Pathways [MAP] Longitudinal Study — funded by Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services, and the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health — highlights some of the factors that may keep a youth's stress system on [the] 'go.'"

MAP examined teens, aged 14 to 16, who for two years were routinely assessed for their mental health and other socioeconomic issues. The study looked at resilience skills such as the cognitive-affective approach to oneself, self-compassion, and the tolerance of personal adversity and trauma.

"Resilience requires adversity. When a stressor is overwhelming, the individual needs to interact with the available external resources. Ideally, the social safety nets and the resources they provide are to be empowering the individual to repair, recover, and rebound robustly," she says. "Self-compassion is a newer focus within mindfulness and meditation approaches, recognized as a trainable skill... Those with higher self-compassion, the ability to experience love, kindness and tolerance towards the self, appear to be less distressed and [less] engaged in self-harming behaviours."

To increase awareness of the power of resilience, Wekerle is leading a Building Resilience Speaker Series, with the first session scheduled at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto this September. She is also creating a new open access journal, *International Journal of Child and Adolescent Resilience*, as a feature of the *International Society of Child and Adolescent Resilience*. The journal is also being established in partnership with Dr. Masood Zangeneh, editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, to focus on global resilience efforts.



Christine Wekerle, doctor of clinical psychology



Wekerle says children's relationships at home can often affect social relationships at school, which can ultimately transition into bullying.

"[Bullying] works from an imbalance in power. Many people may consider bullying to be an elementary school problem, but it is [also] very much a high school problem... Our research shows that adolescents' victimization in high school is related to maltreating experiences for both males and females. If in your home, you are victimized, and develop a view of yourself as a victim or someone to expect victimization from others, then in other settings, like school, these already familiar roles may play out," she explains. "All children experience bullying at one time or another, and the approach of extending positive expectations and experiences to the children involved has never faltered. Every child and adolescent deserves the chance to have a positive outcome and to repair interactions."

To correct these types of behaviour and patterns of anger, household rules may be helpful for parents just as they are for children, with the parental figures of the home abiding by the same rules they have set out, to set a positive example within the home.

"All parents find it hard to be consistent with house rules, but if you pick a couple of key ones, then you'll find that being consistent on these creates a safe and emotionally positive climate for your children of all ages... Words really do have an impact and being mindful with words is an important skill to keep developing," she says. "Kids are primarily doers and learn from watching the

parent act. The job of a child or adolescent is to 'try out' different behaviours and get the feedback from the environment as to whether that behaviour is worth repeating. The ideal in parenting is to not have the child exit the 'corrective learning' feeling bad about who they are. They may feel bad about what they did, which should be paired with what to do next time, as well as what not to do... This part comes from a discussion with the parent about the behaviour and positive reinforcement, that the parent has confidence in the child's competence to do better next time and to show appropriate "repair" actions; for example, say sorry for the wrongdoing and do an action that restores the problem situation, like replace a broken item."

The benefits of correcting this type of behaviour early on are immense, with vast improvements related to the child's mental health — helping their intelligence, resilience, self-worth, and sense of self.

"The childhood to young adult years are the largest growth period of a lifetime, with the most new acquisitions, the most transitions, and the most malleability, recovery, and rebound potential. The investment in these years to ensure healthy development is an investment for the long-term," says Wekerle. "The more we learn, the more we understand that habit-setting for health is something we can provide assistance to the child directly in so many locales — the doctor's office, the school, the community. Resources to the adolescent may be an important developmentally timed investment,