

# Am I Pushing my Child Away? Balancing Control and Freedom

by Gregory Bland

'Pastor Greg, my parents do not trust me with anything! I feel as though they are suffocating me and simply want to ruin my life with all their rules and regulations. They don't let me make decisions for myself, they choose my friends, set my curfew, decide when and where I can go out, they are too controlling! I honestly cannot wait until I am old enough to move out, then I can begin to live my own life!'

I have heard these and similar statements from more youth than I care to admit. The pain etched on the faces of young people as they have spoken these words has left an indelible mark upon my psyche. Through the duration of my ministry, I have worked with more and more families who struggle with relational issues that pertain to control and freedom within the family unit. Listening as both youth and parents share their hearts has brought me to the following understanding: "Children and youth are longing for an authentic and open relationship with us as parents/adults, but some of us have inadvertently created an environment that naturally pushes them away."

Parents by nature are experts, they've had the experience, they've walked the road, and they're not really what their children think they are, 'out of touch with reality.' As a parent myself, I believe we are more 'aware' than our children sometimes give us credit for. Would you agree? Simply by virtue of our life experience; we have lived longer, experienced more, hurt deeper, and grown wiser through the school of hard knocks! Practically speaking, we are experts in our field. Some of you may feel, 'Expert may be too strong a word, but I do know more than my kids. That's for sure!' There is another aspect of our parenting style that plays into this. We desire to see our children make wiser decisions than we did ourselves and do not want to see them endure the same painful experiences we did. It is our responsibility right!? To protect our children from the pain of making wrong decisions, why else would we have experienced it, if it were not for protecting our children from making the same mistakes?

Our desire to protect them from the heartache, pain and consequences which we experienced in life, may subtly drive us toward embracing the vow, 'I will never let that happen to my children.' Our hearts say, 'I love you so much, I don't want anything to harm you.' 'I will do anything within my strength to protect you.' 'I will shelter you from the painful experience I had growing up.' 'I will go to the wall for you and if that means, strict guidelines, so be it, because one day young man, one day young woman, you'll wake up and know what I did was right and because I loved you.' With that we embark on a noble mission, protect our children at all cost! If I can say with a note of pride, 'We protect them well!'

While this may be our heart motive as parents, when we approach parenting in this way, I am curious how our children perceive it. How is that motive translated within our child's mind? What is their perception of our parenting? What might this approach be doing inside of them? Do they know the motive of our heart? Do they truly understand why we make the decisions we make? Is it remotely possible that our parenting style is communicating to our children that they are immature, irresponsible and need to be told what to do?

For just a moment, put yourself in the shoes of your child and try to understand their perspective. Or, if it helps, recall your own childhood experience. While you were maturing and growing in your personhood and independence . . .

How did you perceive your parents unilaterally enforcing rules upon you?  
What did you think as your parents made your decisions for you?  
How did you feel when your parents told you what to do and how to do it?  
Can you recall how you felt and reacted to your parents when this took place?  
What was your reaction, and feeling during this time?  
What does this tell you today in relation to your own parenting?

#### Understanding The Mixed Message:

Our children and youth have often received a mixed message. Their natural growth processes are communicating to them that they are maturing, and growing in their independence and ability to make decisions. As a result they naturally strive for and begin expressing a desire for independence and more control of their own lives. This can find itself conflicting with our parenting style which may sometimes inadvertently communicate to them that they are still 'children, immature and need to be told what to do.' (I use the word inadvertently, intentionally, because I honestly don't think many parents knowingly or consciously desire to communicate this to their children.) In light of this I have caught myself wondering: Do we sometimes misperceive the natural development of our children's independence as rebellion against our authority?

Maybe! It does seem possible. Further, if I do misperceive their intentions, is my reaction to the 'perceived rebellion' un-necessarily frustrating their natural growth pattern, adversely affecting our relationship, and pushing them away from me as they seek their independence? (I am NOT in any way endorsing a permissive parenting style but simply aim to highlight a potential misunderstanding that may be a source of relational conflict between parents and children.)

Our children are on a natural growth process toward independence. You will notice as they mature, their desire for independence increases, as does their ability to make decisions and carry responsibility. As our children mature, so must our parenting style! Continuing to parent by 'telling your child what to do' as your child grows in their independence, will leave both you and your child frustrated.

Transitioning from 'Expert/Protector' to 'Parent Coach' will assist you in maintaining health within your relationship; foster a deeper heart connection with your child; and embrace the natural growth pattern your child is enjoying.

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