

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My sister and brother-in-law are strict and extremely hard on their ten-year-old daughter, Hillary. They don't hit her and so I can't say they are "abusive," but they are impatient, constantly critical, and put her down all the time. I've never once heard them praise her. She's a good kid, but I can see Hillary's self-esteem and confidence decreasing with each passing year. This same faultfinding parenting style is the way my sister and I were raised by our parents but she doesn't seem to remember all the problems it caused us. I have children of my own, and I know it is tough. But, I love my niece and I can't stand to see what is happening to her. What can I do?

-- Concerned Aunt

Dear Concerned Aunt,

One of the most difficult conversations a person can have is the one with relatives about how they are raising their kids. For some reason, many parents – no matter how misguided – seem to think that their parenting skills and philosophies are the right ones. But remember, parents don't have to physically hurt their children in order to be considered abusive. Negativity, constant criticism, and a failure to show love and respect injure a child in ways that leave invisible, but real and long-lasting scars.

When a child's well-being is at stake, as you are observing with your niece, you'll have to screw up the courage to have exactly that conversation with your sister. Be kind and compassionate. Keep in mind that your sister learned to be a mother by what she observed in her own life. You've obviously worked harder to have a different consciousness – an enlightened awareness – about how your history affected you and your sister, and how it might be affecting Hillary. Your sister is not so aware yet.

I would begin the conversation with your sister unless you are equally close to your brother-in-law. If so, then have this conversation with both of them. But let's assume that you are more comfortable talking with you sister, at least at first.

Begin by reminding your sister about your own shared childhood experiences while growing up. Disclose to her how you think these experiences affected you. Ask your sister how she thinks being constantly criticized and put-down as a kid has influenced her as an adult. Then listen to her. When possible, let your sister make some of the connections between how she was raised and how she is now raising her daughter without your having to do so directly. People are more likely to experience new awareness when they come to conclusions through their own process rather than being told.

Are there aspects of your sister's parenting that you perceive to be good? For example, think about whether she always goes to Hillary's sporting events or sews clothes for her daughter or teaches her to play the piano. Find something positive, if you can, and praise your sister for that. Say something like, "I love to see the two of you playing the piano together. That seems to be a time when Hillary is really happy and confident."

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9/5/02

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Assure her that you too have struggled with finding new ways to parent, ways outside your own childhood experience. Can you offer her examples of choices you have made, or practices that you have adopted as a parent, that are consciously different from the way you both were raised, and why?

Tell her how much you love Hillary but that you are concerned that your niece's self-esteem seems to be dropping fast. Tell your sister that you have observed that she and her husband are extremely critical. Offer her some specific and recent examples of this behavior that you personally witnessed. Express your belief that self-esteem -- especially in children and young people -- is a fragile and growing aspect of personality that is easily wounded with constant criticism and a lack of praise.

Assure your sister that there are many excellent resources for parents. The Internet has thousands of websites devoted to healthy parenting. I especially like the National Parenting Center's site at www.tnpc.com. You will also find many good books at your local bookstore. Check them out, buy one, and offer it to your sister as a gift to help her make changes.

Ask your sister if you can do anything to assist her in changing his negative part of her parenting style. For example, would it help your sister if you quietly pointed out her put-downs of Hillary when you observe them? Is your sister stressed out, and is that a factor in her lack of patience with her daughter? If so, could you take Hillary to your house on Friday nights for a sleepover so that your sister could have little more time for herself?

This idea of spending more alone time with Hillary is a good suggestion under any circumstances. Your letter clearly tells me that you love Hillary. You can make a big difference in her life by spending special time with her, letting her know just how much you do love her, and praising her not only for her accomplishments but for just being such a great kid and terrific niece. Spending even a little time with a child, giving her your attention and love, will give her a legacy that is worth more than gold as she grows up.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949.

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