

## **Love, Limits, and Lessons**

***An interview with author Bill Corbett, founder of Cooperative Kids and member of the API Resource Advisory Council***

*By Rita Brhel, editor of The Attached Family*

I am fascinated by the journeys people take to get to where they are in life, especially those people who have chosen to devote their lives to the betterment of others but also those people for whom life is full of frustration. As is referred to in Pam Leo's quote in her book, *Connection Parenting*, so aptly pointed out by API Reads Coordinator Stephanie Petters in a recent discussion on the online book club, "Why do some children grow up to become a Gandhi and others a Hitler? What happens from birth to adulthood that determines that difference?" While Gandhi and Hitler are rather extremes in outcomes, it's still a great question: Why are some people able to find a path to meaning and fulfillment, and others are not? Many of us wouldn't hesitate to say, it has everything to do with attachment and parenting.

By all accounts, API Resource Advisory Council member Bill Corbett "should" have grown into a terribly frustrated, unhappy man who used violence as an attempt to solve his relationship troubles. He was the oldest child of an alcoholic and an abuser. As the saying goes, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Instead, Bill grew up into a loving father, one who immersed himself in studying psychology and human behavior, including Attachment Parenting (AP), and specifically positive discipline. He chose to do something different than to carry on his father's legacy – and then he turned his life over to helping other parents do the same. Today, as founder of Cooperative Kids, he has reached parents around the United States and has positively and permanently changed the course of history – or perhaps we should say, the future -- for many of these families. Among the resources he offers through this organization are:

- A nine-hour "**Love, Limits, & Lessons**" **discipline course** for parents in a classroom setting.
- A new "**Creating Cooperative Kids**" **CD** to reach parents unable to attend a course.
- The newly released book, *Love, Limits, & Lessons: A Parent's Guide to Raising Cooperative Kids*, designed as a supplement for parents looking for advice specific to common discipline scenarios in today's fast-paced society, now available in a Spanish version, *Amor, Limites y Lecciones*.

Throughout his work, Bill emphasizes the unique relationship between discipline and attachment, increasingly so as a child grows older and seeks out more independence – that there simply cannot be effective discipline without a secure parent-child attachment bond, but that positive discipline used to teach rather than punish can actually strengthen the bond. Parents cannot graduate out of Attachment Parenting; it is an approach that is lifelong, and positive discipline is particularly central to this approach with the older child. If there is to be just one take-home message, it is this – that neither effective discipline nor secure attachment can survive alone.

**Bill, you grew up in an emotionally detached home where rage and hitting were used as the main forms of "discipline." What brought you to positive discipline?**

I'm the oldest of eight kids. Our father was a Golden Glove fighter, a boxer, and with that came alcohol, drug abuse, and violence. I spent much of my time growing up protecting my siblings. As I grew up, people would say, "You're the oldest of a child beater and a wife beater. You'll grow up to do that, too." But I received enough of a moral compass from other caregivers in my life.

Sometimes, those who grew up being spanked and want to change, they become overly permissive. They know they want to do something different, but they don't know what else to do. I knew I wanted to change, but I also knew I wanted to learn those tools. This was in the 1970s. I began reading books from child psychologists Rudolph Dreikurs and Alfred Adler. I couldn't understand why we had this access to these insights into what works with parenting and in families, and why the parenting advice being perpetuated at the time was contrary to this research. For example, Adler was a psychologist in the 1900s and said that the child should be raised in a democratic home, which would help the child find his place in the family, and this in turn would help him avoid the development of personality disorders or neurotic conditions such as depression or anxiety as an adult.

**So, these psychologists' findings really resonated with you. It certainly affected how you view family relations. How did you get to a place where you were able to help other parents?**

In the early 1990s, I came upon the International Network for Children and Families, which was offering a class to become a certified parent educator. I ended up taking all of the money out of my savings at the time to fly down to Florida to take this course on what they referred to as positive parenting. I ended up spending 12 years with them, as a parent educator and helping them write development curriculum.

In 1999, I started a radio show called "Parent Talk" in Nashville, Tennessee, that went on for three years on ClearChannel's WLAC 1510 AM. I was exposed to lots of organizations through this, one being Attachment Parenting International. API Co-founder Barbara Nicholson was a guest on my radio show – that's how I met her. I learned so much from Barbara and from being on the Resource Advisory Council. Attachment is such an important part of parenting.

Through the years, I learned about various parenting approaches, how they work together, and where there were gaps in the support they provided. I felt something was missing, so I decided to leave the International Network for Children and Families in 2005. In 2006, I started building my own program and organization, Cooperative Kids.

I wrote a nine-hour class, "Love, Limits, & Lessons," for parents and started training trainers. There are now three dozen trainers around the United States. I then wrote *Love, Limits, & Lessons* as a supplement to the class. In researching for the class, I learned that a nine-hour class, which is done in three three-hour sessions, is about as much as you can do. More than that and you overwhelm people. But I also found that during the class, parents typically have a lot of questions and it's easy to get off track. So I wrote the book to give parents answers to the most commonly asked questions.

Then the book took off. It became another way of reaching parents who are unable to attend the classes, or who learn better reading from a book. In fact, since the book came out, I've written another dozen or so scenarios and will be putting out a revised edition probably next year.

**It's a great book. I like how it's designed – a quick reference for parents who can easily flip to a certain scenario troubling them, like saying dirty words or visiting an adult website, and find effective, down-to-earth tips on ways to relate to their children while teaching them values. As you were writing this book, and as you have been working with parents through the years, what do you see as the most important tips parents need to remember as they approach discipline with their older child?**

Parents need to remember that the answers to a child's problems are usually within the child herself. I usually suggest that parents stop talking, that they get down on the child's eye level, and that when they ask questions, they don't be so quick to give an answer. Instead, say to them back, "I don't know. What do you think?"

We all would like someone to do everything for us, to talk for us and think for us. A classic scenario is when your child comes to you and complains that he's bored. You might say, "Why don't you try out that new puzzle I just bought, or go get that coloring book Grandma just gave you?" Then, the child whines, "No, I want to do that." Instead, allow the child to develop his own solutions to his problems. The child's brain and whole neurological system development depend on it: There is proof now that when a child has to go inside to solve their problems, it helps that development.

For example, when my son was little, he came home one day from school and said, "Dad, I don't know what to do for my book report." I said, "Really?" That's it. He then said, "Dad, don't be so mean! Tell me what to do." And I said, "Looks like you're frustrated." He repeated that he wanted me to tell him what to do, and I told him I could help him think of something but that he'd have to start. He then became upset, told me he hated me, and stomped to his room. Maybe an hour later, he came out and with the most mind-blowing ideas for his report. So then I began talking about some of them and he was so excited to tell me about what he came up with.

You got to stop doing everything for your children. We don't like to see our children in pain or frustrated, and at first, it'll be very comfortable for a parent to stop, especially if his parents did it. But by doing everything for them, we're robbing them of true development. This affects how their brain and neurological system develops, how they learn, and their development of self esteem and a sense of self worth.

**But parents believe they are helping their children develop their self esteem by doing just what you suggest they change. It can be difficult for parents to understand this concept.**

In my classes, I draw a diagram showing an upward-trending arrow beginning at the bottom when a child is a newborn and continuing to climb through the child's life. This arrow demonstrates the development of the child's sense of self. That's how children figure out who they are supposed to be in life.

If you use punitive, negative discipline or are too permissive, this exerts a downward force on that line. Those children will grow up feeling like something is missing. Eventually, they'll be tempted to turn to drugs, pornography, other people, and work to try to stuff that void they feel. You know who these people are once they become adults: They make the same mistakes over and over, they start sabotaging their own successes.

If you change a little bit of what you do now, you can influence whether that line goes up or down. That's what sits at the core of my methodology:

- Not answering for your child
- Not doing everything for your child
- No punishments.

**The research against spanking is becoming more and more known and accepted in society, but other forms of punishment are still widely accepted, such as timeouts. As you know, API does not advocate what I refer to as traditional timeouts – that is, having your child isolated from you as a form of punishment. But you have a particular view about timeouts to share.**

I promote a certain method of timeout. The timeout is not used effectively, because it is used arbitrarily. The timeout is designed only for parents who have a child who is out of control – a child who regularly is unable to regulate his anger and who bites, kicks, hits, and acts out in other out-of-control ways. The key with using timeouts is to let the child be part of the solution, not just the problem.

The parent starts by creating a special place for the child that the child helps to build. There are three items that must be a part of this special place:

- Either a bean bag or a big blanket
- Something visually stimulating like a poster, something that gives the child a sense of peace when he looks at it
- Something to touch and feel, like a squishy ball or a teddy bear.

Once the special place is ready, then it's time to role play to show the child that that's her special place. The parent starts by showing how it feels when out of control, such as growling and then going to the timeout spot. Then, the child takes a turn.

The first time the child loses control, the parent calmly says that the child needs a timeout. The child usually protests, but the parent then repeats herself and then peacefully, lovingly leads the child to timeout. And if the child comes out, the parent leads the child back to his special place, over and over, until the child stays and usually falls asleep. The first couple of times are the hardest.

I advised one woman to do this who was desperate for a way to deal with her out-of-control son. A few weeks later, she left a voice mail crying. Her son had become really angry and wanted to hit her, but then stopped suddenly and screamed at the top of his lungs, "I want to go to my special place!" He then went on his own and fell asleep. This mother was so happy that it worked

to give her son a way to deal with his emotions. It's great to hear stories like this from parents who try my ideas and find success in them.

The thing to remember with timeouts, is that they are only to be used when a child is out of control and never as punishment.

**So, punishment is never a correct way for parents to discipline their children.**

When I do a lecture, I put a toolbox up on the table in front of me to symbolize a parent's discipline toolbox. The items inside are all the tools parents come to the classes with, that they learned from their own parents or from cultural influences. As I take out each item, I explain a little bit about why the tool is ineffective:

- A paddle, which is a symbol for spanking and punishments
- A giant ace of diamonds for timeouts; a big card with guilt written on it, for using guilt trips
- A magic wand for those parents who want to do everything for their children, talk for them, put on their socks, do their homework, etc.
- Candy to symbolize using bribery and rewards
- A megaphone for yelling and screaming.

**You describe your book as a guide for parents in today's fast-paced world. What specific challenges do parents face because of this?**

First, parents are so busy, and the world is moving so fast. They're just trying to keep up and pay the mortgage. But while the world can always go faster, the child cannot.

For example, a mom called me because her boys, ages four and six, were always fighting at the table in the morning and she couldn't seem to get anything done. My thought was that there was a chance that all the boys needed was a feeling of connection with their mom, so I told her to get a self timer and to set it for 10 minutes, then sit at the table and instead of talking, to try to connect nonverbally. Right away, she objected, saying she didn't have 10 minutes. I told her then that I couldn't help her, and she finally agreed to try. The first time she did it, the boys were so excited. After two weeks, she called and told me how wonderful things were.

Children need that connection, and without talking. They don't want you to talk; they just want you to spend time with them. There are just so many things parents can do without speaking or with very little speaking.

Second, children are much more high-spirited today. Some are mistakenly diagnosed as ADD [having Attention Deficit Disorder]. Also, there is the whole Indigo Child idea, and now the Crystal Child, which is supposed to be far more sensitive than the Indigo Child. Whether you believe in that or not, the truth is that today's children do tend to be more sensitive.

Why? I'm still struggling with the reason, and am continuing my research, but I think it has to do with the whole nature versus nurture concept, that it's something in these children's environments. I think high-spiritedness is a reaction to not getting nutritionally fed with

connection. Parents are told to give their children attention, but not necessarily connection. Connection and attention are two different things. Connection is a sense that someone is truly listening and understanding me.

Connection is easy to lose in today's world, with television, computers, Nintendo, and other electronic devices designed to hold our attention but without regard to preserving our connection with one another. I recommend no more than one hour of entertainment electronics per day and two hours on holidays and weekends. Also, I recommend absolutely no cell phones. Not many people agree with me on this, but I've seen the positive results in many families.

For example, when I enforced this rule with my 11-year-old step-daughter, I saw a big change. She started reading more and writing more, and riding her bike more.

### **What tips do you have for parents in beginning to overcome these challenges?**

Parents have got to teach their children cooperation early. Make it a matter-of-fact rule. Thank them for cooperating. A big frustration for parents is trying to get their children to do things that they don't care about; for example, picking up toys that are all over the floor. The child doesn't care that the toys are all over the floor, so the parents need to focus on cooperation. They can say afterwards, "Thank you for cooperating with me in picking up the toys. Sometimes, you need me to cooperate with you, and other times, I need you to cooperate with me." Just make cooperation something that you do.

Parents have got to refrain from walking up to a child and saying, "Go do this." They need to rely on cooperation and agreements.

And parents need to try to avoid having everything perfect. Nothing can be perfect all the time, especially with children. Expecting this makes it easy for both parents and children to become frustrated.

### **Thank you for your time and insights, Bill. Do you have any closing thoughts?**

The most important thing parents can do in practicing positive discipline is to concentrate on the relationship they have with the child. This is very important. A formula I like to give out to parents is: Rules without Relationship equals Rebellion.