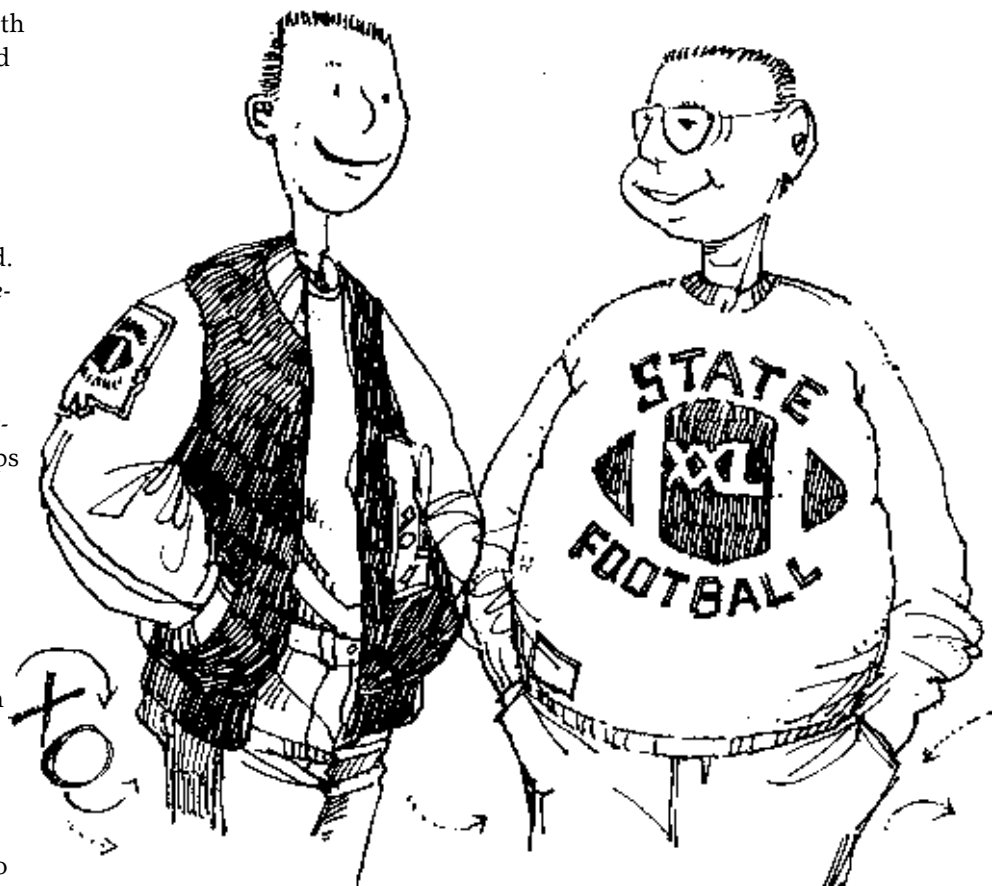


The things we say and do with our children determine the kind of relationship we have with them. For instance, when you think about your relationship with your parents as you were growing up, there are probably certain words that come to mind. Maybe *fear* or *happiness* or *closeness* or *anger* or *confusion*. How you feel about your childhood probably tells you a lot about your relationship with your parents. Some kinds of relationships help children develop. We call those positive relationships.

Relationships with our children may need to change.

Often our relationships with our children center on control and correction. When parents control their children, they are trying to get the children to do things the children don't want to do. Or they are trying to keep the children from doing things they want to do. For example, have you ever tried to force a struggling child into a car seat? Have you ever tried to keep children from eating candy before dinner? Have you tried to get your children to do their homework, eat their vegetables,



or stop fighting with each other?

Parents generally have more power than children. We are bigger and stronger. But it's hard to force people to do something they don't want to do. We can spend all of our time yelling at children and trying to bribe, convince, or force them to do what we want them to do. That's the trouble with control. It takes over the relationship. It can be the only thing that parents and their children seem to talk about. And it's not a very good basis for a relationship.

Sometimes our relationships with our children are based on correction. As parents, we spend a lot of time telling our children what they do wrong. Sometimes our correction even becomes insulting. "How can you be so dumb?" "Why can't you do anything right?" "Can't you think?"

Insults are damaging. They do not give children useful information. They only make them feel bad. Even when we avoid insults, too much correction can be bad. Correction should not be the main part of our relationship with our children. There are better things to talk about.

Are control and correction always bad?

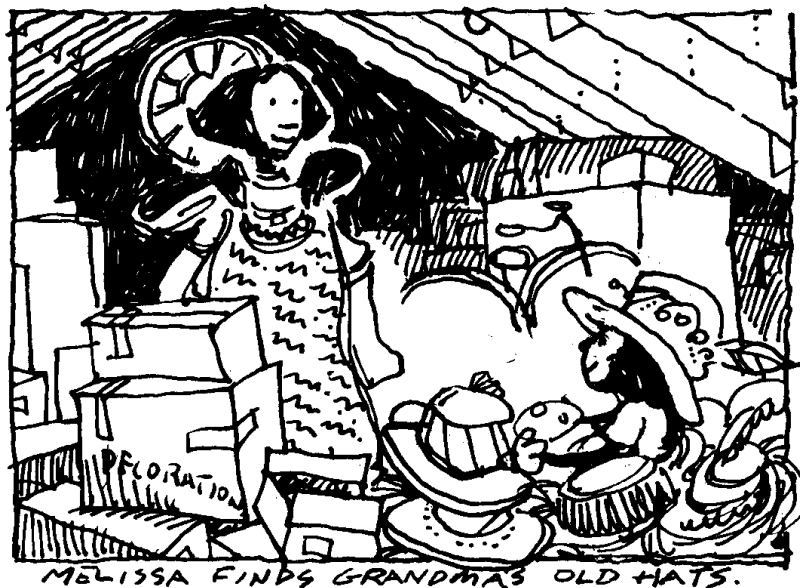
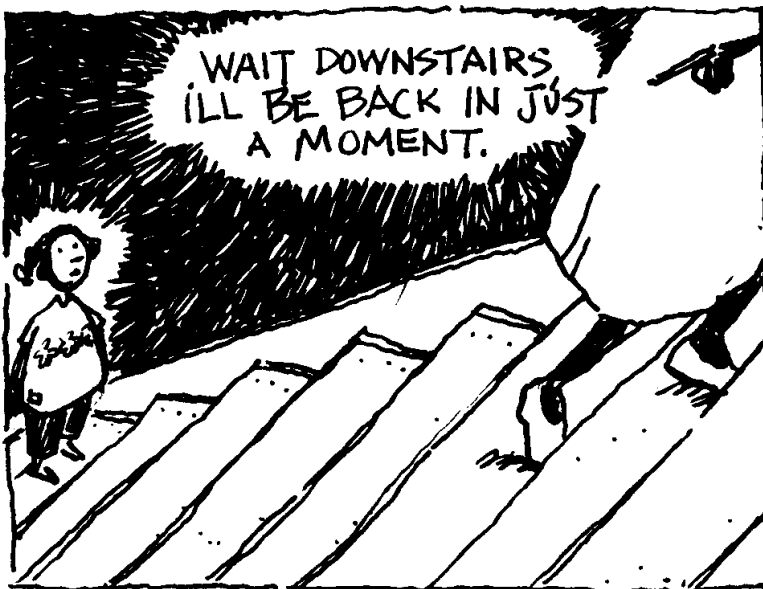
No. It is necessary for parents to control and correct their children. But when control and correction are all that a child gets from parents, the child may become discouraged or rebellious. Control and correction should not take over the relationship.



What can work better than control and correction?

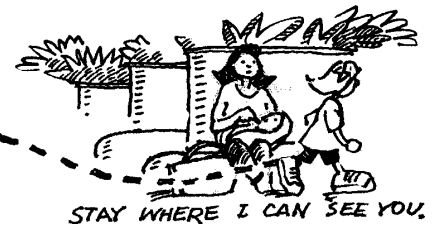
Recently I asked a friend what she wanted her relationship with her strong-willed daughter to be like. She said that she was trying to make the relationship center on "opportunity." She gave some examples.

Normally when Melissa has wanted to follow me up to the attic I have told her, "No. You're too little. Go do something else." Melissa would get mad and complain. I would yell at her. One particular day when I went up in the attic I decided to change how I acted. I invited Melissa to go up with me. I helped her climb the stairs, and I showed her the things we had stored. We looked in some of the boxes. We had fun together, and it only took a few extra minutes.



Opportunity is an excellent theme for a relationship. When children want to try something, we may be tempted to tell them "no." But maybe we should find an acceptable way for them to try it.

I went to the mall with my baby and my 4-year-old. The 4-year-old wanted to explore the sitting area in the center of the mall. My natural answer was to tell her "later" and hurry on. Instead, I decided to sit with the baby for a few minutes and let the older girl explore. It only took a few minutes, and she loved it.



This wise mother took a few minutes to build a positive relationship with her child.

Affection is another excellent theme for a relationship. One good way you can build affection into relationships with your children is by taking time to do things that the children like to do. For example, little Andy loves to hike. Periodically his mother takes him for a hike. Once in a while his dad takes him for a campout. Andy gets the feeling that his parents really care about him. He feels their affection.

Another good way to show affection is to take time to read to and talk with children when you tuck them in at night. (Additional ideas for building a positive relationship can be found in SP488-C in this series, "Sending Messages Of Love.")

But how do I control my child?

It is still necessary to keep children from doing damaging things. How can that be done and still keep opportunity and affection at the center of the relationship?

With small children, distraction is an extremely important tool. If a child starts to grab a forbidden object, the parent might try to distract the child with some other interesting object.

Amy was trying to grab the game pieces for the game we were playing. Usually we would yell at her or slap her hands. But we tried something different. I said, "Amy, would you be in charge of rolling the dice for us?" Each time one of us had a turn, we would have Amy roll the dice and then we would count out our moves and tell her what we were doing. She felt very involved.



Even as children get older it's good to redirect them toward acceptable choices. For instance, I might not feel good about my early-teen daughter going to a high school dance, but we can consider having a party for her and her friends at our house. We can look for an opportunity that we both feel good about.

There are other tools that can help parents have appropriate control in their relationships with their children. If you don't seem to be able to control your children, you may want to read SP489-C in this series, "Something Better Than Punishment."

How can I have positive relationships with my children?

In order to make your relationships with your children more positive, think about what you want your relationships to be like. Would you like to have more fun time with each child? Would you like to nag less often? Think about the way you would like your relationship to be. Then notice when you say "no" without thinking. Is there some other way you can think to react? Can you distract or redirect the child? Can you get her busy doing something she likes to do? Can you take time to do something with him? How can you build more opportunity and affection into your relationships and remove some of the control and correction?

Go back to the list you made at the beginning of this publication. Notice whether the things you talked about with your children showed control and correction or opportunity and affection. Think about how you can make your relationship with each child more positive.

As you change your relationships with your children, be patient with yourself. It takes time to make changes. Keep working at it. When you make a mistake, learn from it. Discover better ways to have a healthy, joyous, positive relationship with your children.

This publication was originally written by H. Wallace Goddard, Extension Family and Child Development specialist, Auburn University, for the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service. It was adapted for use in Tennessee by Kathleen Rodgers, former Assistant Professor, Family Life.



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Billy G. Hicks, Dean