

Start by Listening, Not Dictating

I recently wrote an article for the View Points page in this newspaper about my opinions of the new Obama presidency. I focused on the real-life family values they will be modeling for families across the nation and the world. The other day, I was struck again by his message to the middle east and how it reflects the family values we all can learn from.

The New York Times on Jan. 27, 2009 carried an article called *Obama Signals New Tone in Relations with Islamic World*. President Obama sent his special Middle East envoy, George J. Mitchell, to Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, France and Britain. His instructions to Mr. Mitchell: "Start by listening, because all too often the United States starts by dictating." What a concept!

How often do we start by dictating to our children? How often do we listen to what our children have to say first when we know they have done something wrong? We think we must be tough and give the orders in order to teach our children respect for authority. And when they don't listen to us, we assume it is because we are not tough enough. And we hope that our children will do what we say, not what we do. We stop them up and shut them down while we go on our tirades about their behavior, but then tell them not to be bossy, manipulative, or to bully another. We bully, control, and manipulate our children all day long when we insist they do what we want when we want it done, when we shove them off to their rooms or the time out chair, when we take away their favorite things. We think parents who listen to their children are weak and indulgent, letting their children get away with anything. But there is middle ground to be found if we take the time to listen and find it.

We think that we must teach our children something of value all the time. Think back to the best moments you remember with either of your parents. What were you doing? Why do you remember it? I'd bet my life it was not a moment when your parent was trying to teach you something. It was a moment free of dictating, free of tension, free of teaching—it was a moment of connection and fun. Those are the moments that last, that convince us we are important, accepted, and valued.

Can we learn from the power of Obama's willingness to listen—even to our enemies. Some think it will make us look weak. I believe it is the only direction to world peace. So what about family peace? Can we risk *not* being the dictator, the decider, the one who always knows best? You allow your children to rise to the occasion, to think for themselves, to solve their problems and conflicts when you are willing to listen first. Your drive to constantly teach assumes their unwillingness to do right.

Check out your child's response when you want her opinion before laying on your own or when you ask for his instruction on playing a certain video game. Instead of cutting your child off by telling her what she should say and do to a friend or sibling who has put her down, empathize with how hurt she must feel and simply listen to her anger and hurt. Then watch her whole body relax and be able to resolve her conflict and start again.

If George Mitchell follows Obama's advice, he will likely hear again and again the frustrations and anger of the world leaders who are stuck in generations-old conflicts. Most of us just want to be heard and given permission to vent. It is only after the venting that true resolution can be found, when we are more willing to come to the middle, to consider another point of view, to negotiate a plan after our side has been heard and acknowledged—not agreed with, just acknowledged and understood. They may have less mature (but more creative) ways of handling conflict, but if we want those methods to mature, we need to allow them practice.

Look what happens in the world when the powers that be are not heard, only attacked again and again. Their methods of resolving conflict are far less mature and humane than any of our children would likely suggest. Obama continued to say, "We can have legitimate disagreements but still be respectful." Our families will be better off when we can take that same advice.