

## *Using “Village Helpers” to Teach Discipline* By Karen L. Rancourt, Ph.D.

### **Introduction**

Ask parents what their greatest challenge is in raising children, and inevitably, their eyes roll heavenward, they take a deep breath, release it with a loud sigh, and say, “Discipline.” When a child is showing the discipline that makes a parent proud, we see controlled behavior that is age appropriate and doesn’t pose a threat, or cause inconvenience or disruption to others. It is behavior that shows a child’s willingness to try to abide by what the parent is looking for. The disciplined child has learned to curb or re-channel impulsive inclinations into behaviors that are socially acceptable – that is, the child behaves in ways that put a smile of contentment (and relief!) on a parent’s face.

In fairness to parents, it must be said that it’s easier to teach discipline to some children than it is to others, sometimes even in the same family. It is in some kids’ basic natures to find great peace and comfort in knowing the rules of the road and to abide by them; they like pleasing others, they like fitting in, and they like to get the praise that comes with these behaviors. With other children, they push back and exert a willfulness to do what they want to do, when they want to do it -- discipline and pleasing others be damned!

Because parents are always looking for strategies and techniques to help them discipline their children, especially with their children who are more resistant to being disciplined, I want to suggest an easy-to-use and effective disciplinary technique that builds on the old African proverb, “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child.” In its original usage, entire African villages literally did assume a collective responsibility for raising each and every child. However, I am using the statement “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child” as a metaphor to suggest that there are other adults in a child’s extended community or village, beyond the typical grandparents and teachers, who might be called upon in positive ways to help us teach discipline and appropriate behavior to our kids.

It is important to note that I am not suggesting parents abdicate their responsibilities for disciplining their children; rather, I am suggesting parents use in proactive ways other people who benefit from our kids being well behaved. As the examples below show, more often than not, these “village helpers” are strangers!

### **Stumbling Upon the Village Helpers!**

I initially realized the value of using “village helpers” to help with discipline many years ago when my husband and I were visiting a national park with our then three-year-old daughter, Heather. Much to our exasperation, Heather kept running away from us into a field of tall grass where we would lose sight of her. We’d eventually catch her and explain to her why we needed her to stay with us, how we couldn’t always see her in the high grass and how we needed to keep her safe by making sure she stayed in our sight. Heather thought it was just hilarious to walk beside us for a while and then to just take off at breakneck speed and disappear into the grass. As this frustrating cycle kept repeating itself, I noticed a forest ranger a few hundred feet away. We scooped Heather up and took her over to the ranger, a young man in full ranger uniform.

I wasn't quite sure what we were going to do once we were face-to-face with the ranger, but without much forethought, I introduced ourselves to the ranger and told him how Heather kept running away from us and that we would appreciate it if he would tell Heather what the park rules were regarding children staying with their children and not running off. I was, in effect, scripting him – letting him know what the problem was and how he could help. He immediately caught on and told her in a very stern voice that in his park all the children must stay with their parents and do whatever the parents asked their children to do. He then asked her if she understood the rule. She was very wide-eyed and a bit intimidated as she nodded, Yes, I Understand. Problem solved, as Heather stayed with us for the remainder of our walk.

Since that serendipitous incident of asking the authority figure in the national park, in this case, the forest ranger, a complete stranger, to help us discipline Heather, I have consciously and successfully used this “village model” myself, as well as sharing it with other parents.

### **Village Helpers: The Shoe Store Manager**

The scene is a shoe store, and I am with my sister, Ellen, and her then three-year-old daughter, Lori. The goal of trying to buy Lori a new pair of shoes is seriously hampered by the full-out, screaming tantrum Lori is throwing because she didn't want to be there. One option was, of course, to take Lori out of the store, but my sister was on a tight schedule and needed to buy some dress shoes for Lori that day because of a wedding coming up. (And without going into a lot of detail, it can accurately be said that Lori was not the easiest child, and probably would have behaved the exact same way on a future trip back to the shoe store. However, and happily, let the record show that Lori has since grown up to be a wonderful woman, as well as a great mother.)

Back to Lori in the shoe store finds her flailing on the floor and screaming non-stop. With my sister's permission, I lifted Lori up, plopped her down on the check-out counter, and asked for the manager, who quickly appeared. I read the manager's name tag and introduced him in a loud voice to Lori: “Lori, this is Mr. Vincent and this is his shoe store. He is going to tell you his rules for when you are in his shoe store.” Mr. Vincent was great! He looked Lori right in the eye and said, “Lori, you may not scream in my store. Do you understand?” Lori froze, quickly nodded her understanding to Mr. Vincent, and we were able to buy her new shoes without further incident, although Lori did keep a watchful eye on Mr. Vincent as he went about his business.

As an addendum to this story, Lori threw one of her new shoes out the car window on the way to the wedding, but that's another story. The point is that by pulling in the shoe store manager the way I did, a potentially unpleasant situation was averted. It was in the store manager's best interests to play the role I had defined for him, that is, to clarify acceptable behavior because Lori's loud and obnoxious behavior was bothersome to his other customers.

### **Village Helpers: The Security Guard at the Museum**

A few months ago my daughter Heather and I took her sons (my grandsons) Christopher, age 6, and Nicholas, age 3 to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Both boys had been to the museum several times and were always well behaved. For whatever reasons, Nicholas disregarded all the good museum behavior he had demonstrated in previous visits, and was beginning to touch things he knew he should

not be touching. Several times we reminded him of proper museum behavior. All of a sudden, he took a running leap and started climbing up the side of a marble statue. Heather and I were absolutely horrified!

A security guard was standing a few feet away, so I picked Nicholas up, brought him over to the security guard and asked him to remind Nicholas of the museum rules. The guard looked at Nicholas with steely blue eyes and said in a deep voice with a Germanic accent, “Don’t you ever again touch anything in this museum.” Nicholas was definitely paying attention! Heather took him in her arms and said in a soothing voice, “Nicholas, do you remember the rules now?” Nicholas assured his mother that he did, indeed, now remember the rules.

This is another example of where the misbehavior was becoming repetitious and our involving someone in a position of authority was able to help instill the discipline that we were not successfully establishing. In our return visits to the museum, we begin our visit by reminding Nicholas of the rules that are enforced by the guards and we hope none of the guards (one in particular!) has to remind us of the rules. We have not had any problems in subsequent visits.

### **Using the Village with Older Children: Your Financial Planner**

Money matters, such as setting and sticking to a budget, or having to say no to certain expenditures a child wants to make, can be the cause of many a family battle. Again, it may be possible as a parent to get yourself out of the hot seat for having to nix your kids’ requests for purchases by calling on another potential village helper: your financial planner.

For example, six of my son-in-law’s extended families comprising 17 of us (12 adults and 5 children), all use the same financial planner. Darren happens to be a wonderfully gentle man who advises us about long- and short-term money matters. We all know him, including the youngest kids in our extended family. When one of the kids asks if they can go to Disney World, the response is: “We’ll have to check with Darren.” When one of the adults contemplates getting a new car or buying some new real estate, one of us will ask, “What does Darren say?”

When it comes to important financial matters involving the kids, instead of one of the parents in our family having to make a disappointing financial decision, the kids understand that the discipline of money management is not strictly a parental decision, but rather, involves input from our money expert, Darren. His expertise and guidance make him a very helpful and valued “village helper” when it comes to money matters.

### **Using the Village: The Chief of Police**

My final example of using the village to teach children discipline involves our now-grown goddaughter, Kylie, who, when she was about six, refused to put on her seat belt one day while riding in my car (this was before kids’ car seats were required). I said all the usual things about the use of seat belts being a safety issue, pointing out that it was the law – all to no avail. She was pushing me away and would not let me strap her in.

Rather than continue this battle, I said to her, “Kylie, wearing a seat belt is not my rule. It is Chief Perry’s rule.” (We lived in a small town and our police chief was known to all the kids.) I calmly told her that I was going to drive her, without her seat belt on, to Chief Perry so he could explain to her his

seat belt rule. I wasn't angry, and I was making an idle threat. I was describing in a very matter-of-fact way what I was going to do. Kylie could see the police station from where we were parked in front of the General Store (I told you it was a small town), and she made a quick decision. She stopped crying and pushing me away, told me she didn't need Chief Perry to talk to her, and let me strap her in. Click. Problem solved.

In this example, I did not actually have to request the help of a village helper, but rather, I only had to make it clear that I would do so, if necessary. Chief Perry, another member of the village, helped in absentia to solve a discipline problem quickly and effectively. And yes, I would have taken Kylie to the police station so someone there could review the rules with her.

### **Using the Village: Summary**

In each of the examples I've used, the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" is used as a metaphor to illustrate the value of a parent purposefully recruiting someone outside the usual cadre of disciplinarians to help discipline their child. It is not uncommon for a parent to get locked into a repetitious cycle where the child is misbehaving, the parent tries various interventions, nothing changes except, perhaps, the emotional pitch becomes more intense and what started as an annoying situation often escalates to one of anger and increased acting out.

In these situations, a parent deferring to someone with authority for clarification can get the parent out of the futile role of being "the bad guy or gal" and refocus the issue for both the parent and the child on what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Many times a child who is getting emotionally stuck, e.g., having a tantrum, welcomes the presence of someone new, different and in a position of authority. Even if these "village helpers" are strangers, if they are scripted correctly by the parent, they can be effective de facto disciplinarians.

In closing, I want to thank all the forest rangers, store owners, security guards, police, financial planners and the countless others I have called upon as "village helpers" through the decades, as they have always come through and helped with the ongoing and difficult challenge of teaching kids discipline.