Helping Parents Deal With Children's Acute Disciplinary Problems Without Escalation: The Principle of Nonviolent Resistance*

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There are two kinds of escalation between parents and children with acute discipline problems: (a) complementary escalation, in which parental giving-in leads to a progressive increase in the child's demands, and (b) reciprocal escalation, in which hostility begets hostility. Extant programs for helping parents deal with children with such problems focus mainly on one kind of escalation to the neglect of the other. The systematic use of Gandhi's principle of "nonviolent resistance" allows for a parental attitude that counters both kinds of escalation. An intervention is described, which allows parents to put this principle into practice.

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WHEREAS the escalation of hostility between parents and children is a well-known problem, it is perhaps less obvious that there is also another kind of escalation that may be no less damaging: the one that obtains when the parent gives in to the child's demands, the child increases the demands, the parent gives in again, and so forth. Following Bateson (1972), we shall call these two kinds of escalation *reciprocal* (hostility increases hostility) and *complementary* (giving-in increases demands). The interplay between these two processes is one of the central insights of Patterson's *coercion theory* (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Specifically, Patterson showed that parental giving-in not only increases the child's demands (complementary escalation), but also the chances that either the parent or the child will display higher levels of hostility (reciprocal escalation) in the next bout. In this article, I shall propose a way for dealing with both kinds of escalation at once.

The impact of this double-escalation is manifold: (a) the child becomes progressively more power-sure and power-oriented, whereas the parent grows more and more hopeless and helpless; (b) there is a gradual habituation to less than maximal levels of disturbance, so that the helpless parent "learns" not to perceive many instances of child misbehavior

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(Patterson, 1980); (c) there is a narrowing down of the parent-child interaction, to the point that all there is left of the relationship is the conflict; (d) parental fear of further escalation often leads to lack of cooperation with treatment programs, and (e) an investment in escalation may lead the child to dangerous acts (in an attempt to validate threats).

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to review the large number of parental counseling and psychosocial programs for the parents of children with acute discipline problems[1] (see Kazdin, 1998, for a review), we must consider the chief attitudes of these programs regarding escalation. In this respect, we can roughly divide them into two categories: programs that focus on complementary (disregarding reciprocal) escalation and programs that focus on reciprocal (disregarding complementary) escalation. The best example of the first category is probably the parents' self-help program *Toughlove* (Everts, 1990; York, York, & Wachtel, 1997). In these groups, parents are encouraged to draw a line, making it clear to the child that they will not put up with any attempts to overstep it. If the child consistently rejects the parental limit, the parents, with the support of the group, may show the child the door. This approach has helped many parents regain their influence and many children have reacted well to the parents' determined stance. Not a few parents and professionals, however, have been deterred by what they view as the program's readiness to bring things not only to a head but also to a break.

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[1]Under the designation "children with acute discipline problems," I include children of all ages who display violent and antisocial behavior or defiant and oppositional patterns, both on clinical (DSM-IV conduct disorders and defiant-oppositional disorders) and subclinical levels.

Programs of the second kind try to help parents become more sensitive to their children and more apt to reason with them as equal to equal. The best-known of these programs is probably PET (Cedar & Levant, 1990). Although such programs have helped many parents reduce their negative attitudes and improve their communication with children, they have little to say about parental giving-in. Indeed, the messages of equality and unconditional acceptance may sometimes convince the child that the parents are not ready to put up a fight to stop the child's destructive behavior (Chamberlain & Patterson, 1995; Roberts, McMahon, Forehand, & Humphreys, 1975).

What about behavioral counseling for the parents of children with acute discipline problems? One would expect that, following Patterson's (1982) insight into the double nature of escalation, special care would be taken in his program to tackle both horns of the dilemma. Thus, Patterson takes reciprocal escalation seriously, warning against the dangers of spiraling arguments and hollow parental threats (that are only followed by the child's bigger threats). Needless to say, the program also tackles parental giving-in: after all, the gist of the behavioral message is that the child's misbehavior should not be reinforced. In spite of these attempts, however, many reinforcement programs run the risk of furthering reciprocal escalation, especially with adolescents.

This risk is linked to the behavioral principle that the child's negative behavior *must be* proportionately and immediately punished, otherwise it will be perpetuated. Behavior therapists have been very clear on this point: the parents must be encouraged to react to the child's aggressive behavior by an aversive consequence of "at least the same duration and intensity as the antecedent stimuli" (Patterson, Dishion, & Bank, 1984, p.

257). This principle of proportional punishment carries a high risk of escalation, especially with older children, in spite of the therapist's attempts to keep the interaction as low-keyed, nonoffensive and nonprovocative as possible.

That this is no mere quibbling can be shown from the sharp decrease in the efficacy of behavioral programs with the parents of older children. As the child grows older, there is a sharp rise in parental drop-out and a decrease in success rate among those parents that do stay in treatment (Dishion & Patterson, 1992; Patterson, Dishion, & Chamberlain, 1993). The parents of older children are far more reluctant than those of younger children to undertake the required discipline measures, and even when they do try, they are far less successful.

This reluctance can be explained in different ways. Thus, the parents of older children have had a longer career of helplessness. After many failures and a long training in giving-in, one can expect them to be harder to change. There is, however, an additional possible explanation: the parents of older children may be simply afraid that punishment may lead to unbearable reprisals. They fear to clash with their children, because they do not feel they can "win." With adolescents especially, one can *never* be sure of "winning." Thus, the reluctance of parents of adolescents with acute discipline problems to join a behavioral program may be reality based!

Many older children, for instance, make the important discovery that when the parents punish them, they can punish the parents harder in return. In one of our cases (Omer, 2000), a violent 18-year old found an original way to punish his father. When the latter "misbehaved," he would park the father's car where the father could not find it, thus meting out retribution (from one day to two weeks without the car) to the extent of the parental provocation. The father might per-

haps react in an analogous, aversive manner, but we can infer that the son would not passively accept this development.

In what follows, I shall propose a way of addressing both complementary and reciprocal escalation. This proposal is deeply indebted to Patterson's analysis of escalation, while at the same time providing an alternative to a strict reinforcement-based model of parental counseling. As we shall see, the proposed model is not only different in practice but also involves a different conceptualization, which gives rise to different predictions from the classical behavioral ones.

THE DYNAMICS OF ESCALATION

The common experience that hostility begets hostility (reciprocal escalation) and that giving-in to aggressively backed demands increases the chances of new demands (complementary escalation) has been multiply attested by research (see, for instance, Cairns, Santoyo, & Holly, 1994; Orford, 1986). In what follows, we take this for granted, focusing instead on a number of propositions about escalation processes between parents and children that are particularly important for prevention.

Proposition I: The greater the dominance orientation of the participants in a conflictual interaction, the greater the risk of escalation.

By *dominance orientation,*[2] I refer to the tendency to think about the interaction in terms of "Who is the boss?" (Bugenthal, Lyon, Krantz, & Cortez, 1997). The dominance orientation of both chil-

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[2]The term *dominance orientation* is derived from the ethological literature on *dominance.* Although there have been attempts to dislodge the concept of *dominance* from its prominence in ethological theory, it has reasserted itself (Bernstein, 1981; Francis, 1988). One crucial ethological insight concerning dominance is that many patterns of conflict resolution in nature *do not* involve dominance (Hand, 1986).

dren and parents varies not only between individuals, but also within individuals at different times and in different contexts. The present hypothesis states that the risk of escalation at a given moment correlates positively with the dominance orientation of both parties. Thus, the risk of a parental aggressive outburst has been shown to rise steeply when the parent thinks in terms of "Who is the boss?" and, particularly, when the parent interprets the child's behavior as an attempt to achieve dominance (Bugental, Blue, & Cruzcosa, 1989). Children with acute discipline problems likewise react to what they experience as a threat to their dominant position by intensifying their own coercive and violent behaviors (Patterson et al., 1984). We would assume that, if one of the parties in the interaction (in the present case, the parents) could reduce its dominance orientation, the risk of escalation would diminish. This is true, for instance, in what concerns psychophysiological reactivity: thus, as I describe later, it suffices for one of the parties in a conflictual interaction to show lower levels of psychophysiological reactivity for the risk of escalation to be reduced.

Children and parents often express their dominance orientation openly. We noted many such expressions in families with children with discipline problems (Omer, 2000). "I am the strongest!" or "I am the king!" were common expressions with younger children; "Just try to stop me!" or "You think you can tell me what to do?" with older ones. Parents are also easily drawn into unhelpful declarations of the kind: "You'll do what I say, no matter what!" or "You think you are the boss? You'll see!" Many parents reveal their dominance orientation in their spontaneous reactions to our nondominance-oriented proposals: "But if we do so, he will win!" Another common parental expression is: "We cannot stop him! He is stronger than us!" These ways of talking show

that for the child and the parent there are only two options: either the child or the parent wins. The question for parental counseling would then be how to reduce the parents' dominance orientation without incurring a loss in parental influence.

Proposition II: The greater the psychophysiological arousal of the parties, the higher the risk of escalation.

That this is so has been clearly established by animal research. Reducing by pharmacological means the arousal level of one participant in a conflictual interaction, steeply lowers the aggressive behavior of *both* (Cairns et al., 1994). Studies on escalation processes between spouses has similarly shown that high-psychophysiological reactivity of the partners during a discussion was one of the strongest predictors of marital deterioration and divorce (Levenson & Gottman, 1983, 1985). High arousal predicted marital deterioration when the physiological reactions of both partners were positively correlated, but not when they were not so (Gottman, 1998). It has also been shown that parents who think in terms of "Who is the boss" tend to react with higher physiological arousal to situations in which they think the child is trying to control them (Bugental, Blue, Cortez, et al., 1993). These findings seem to back-up a common belief: that if one member in a conflictual interaction stays calm, the risk of violence is reduced.

Proposition III: Parental exhorting, entreating, and apologizing, increase the risk of complementary escalation; parental arguing, threatening, blaming, and screaming, increase the risk of reciprocal escalation.

Helpless parents often talk themselves hoarse in their attempt to convince or deter the child. This talking becomes a background drone that makes the parents count for less and less in the child's eyes, and also in their own. Actually, parental

talking may convince not only the child, but also the parents, that there will be no action taken. Parental exhorting, entreating, and apologizing are factors in complementary escalation: it is as if these forms of expression were a part of the parents' giving-in ritual. Parental arguing, threatening, blaming, and screaming, however, are grist for the mill of reciprocal escalation. The accusations do not even have to reach high vocal intensities to have an escalatory effect: it is enough that the tone becomes sarcastic. These two ineffective forms of parental talking are related: entreating and apologizing may easily turn into blaming and threatening, and vice versa. As Patterson and his colleagues (1992) cogently argued, parental submissiveness and aggression feed upon each other.

The older the child, the more averse he or she may become to the flow of parental talking. Adolescents, in particular, often view parental exhortations as if they were attempts to manipulate them into submission, and they react accordingly by increasing their oppositional behavior. This reaction may be due to the adolescents' perceiving the parental persuasion attempts as opposed to their age-appropriate desire to evolve their own individual values and goals. Indeed, adolescents feel most invaded when the parent tries to convince them to think and feel differently. Many adolescents would probably put up more easily with the decided enforcement of a prohibition, than with the parents' attempts to convince them that stopping the undesired behavior is actually for their own good. After all, the prohibition involves no attempt to get inside their heads and change their preferences. "Rational" persuasion may thus be experienced as far more invasive than external enforcement.

Proposition IV: Constant hostile interchanges tend to narrow the par- ent-child interaction to conflictual issues and conflictual patterns; this, in turn, reduces the options of conflict avoidance or of successful conflict resolution.

In their analysis of escalatory sequences, Cairns and his colleagues (1994) argued that, when conflict arises, each side attempts to force the actions of the other into line with those of the self. Our attempts to bring the other into line, however, ends by also restricting our own degrees of freedom, since the other reacts in kind. Thus, as the conflictual sequence progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to change our responses or to withdraw. This progressive escalatory constriction is one of the most characteristic patterns of distressed marital relationships (Gottman, 1998; Gottman & Levenson, 1998).

The recurrence of escalatory incidents thus tends to constrict the whole relationship to narrow conflictual patterns and themes. The tug-of-war between parents and children may all but eliminate the positive aspects of the relationship. Conversely, finding ways of expanding the relational repertoire may help counter escalation. The next proposition deals with this possibility.

Proposition V: Reconciliation measures may help overcome the narrowing-down process and increase the chances of successful conflict-resolution.

One of the most exciting developments in recent ethological research was the discovery of the extent and influence of reconciliatory gestures for the attenuation and control of hostile interchanges (de Waal, 1993). Thus, in most ape and macaque species, following a hostile interchange, there is a high probability that the aggressor, the victim or both will search for some kind of clearly nonhostile physical closeness with the other. These

reconcilatory moves may take the form of kissing, embracing, hold-out-hand invitations, gentle touching, and even fake mating or mutual penile stroking. The occurrence of such gestures reduces by as much as fourfold the probability of a renewal of hostilities. The reconciliation may also be initiated by a third party: the female of one of the agonists, for instance, may get close to one of them and pull it toward the other, then get close to the other and pull it toward the first. When both are already close together, the female may then unobtrusively leave the field. One very peculiar way of achieving reconciliation is through the mutual designation of a common foe, even if a "virtual" one. In a group of long-tailed macaques, for instance, whenever tensions in the group became too pronounced, the group would run to a pool and make threatening gestures towards their own reflections in the pool, a procedure that unfailingly reduced the hostile occurrences within the group (de Waal, 1989). Another hypothesis raised by de Waal is that the value of reconciliation is not only the diminution of mutual hostility within the group, but also the preservation of particularly valuable relationships. Thus, the stronger the bond between the agonists, the greater the frequency of reconciliation gestures following conflict.

These findings from ethological research suggest a possible similar role for reconciliatory gestures between parents and children. The difficulty experienced by many parents, however, is that the child or adolescent might interpret the gestures as "signs of weakness." This interpretation stems from the dominance orientation of parents and children. The question is then: How can reconciliation gestures be encouraged while avoiding the risk of having them be experienced as appeasement gestures caused by weakness, fear, or guilt?

Nonviolent Resistance

Our strategy for dealing with both kinds of escalation centers on the idea of *nonviolent resistance.* When faced with the child's destructive behaviors, the parents should respond with acts that convey the message: "*I cannot accept your behavior and will do all in my power to stop it, except for hitting you or attacking you.*" This idea, whose chief exponent was Gandhi,[3] fits a concept of parental authority that is not based on being stronger but on being present. (See Omer, 2000, for an extensive discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of parental presence.) In this view, the parents manifest presence vis-à-vis the child's destructive behavior by acts that say: "I will not give in to you and I will not give you up!" "I am your parent and will remain your parent!" "I shall not be removed, discounted, or shaken off!" Like Gandhi's political variety of nonviolent resistance, the present strategy is geared to helping the parents effectively oppose the child's unacceptable behaviors, while at the same time reducing the stimuli that evoke hostile counteractions.

The Sit-In

One major technique of parental nonviolent resistance is the *sit-in.* (For other methods, see Omer, 2000.) In the sit-in, the parents (or single-parent) enter the child's room and sit down, preferably on a chair that blocks the room's door. Once in the room, they say: "We cannot accept that you do so and so [specifying exactly what it is—a specification that has been discussed with the parents in the counseling session]. We will sit here and wait for any idea you may have on how this behav-

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[3] "Nonviolent resistance" is often referred to as "passive resistance." Gandhi came to view "passive resistance" as a misnomer since the practice of nonviolence demands far more active determination than the practice of violence (Iyer, 1991).

ior can be avoided." The parents then sit silently, refraining from explaining, exhorting, preaching, blaming or threatening. They refuse to be drawn into any kind of argument. Time, silence and determined presence carry the message of nonviolent resistance. If the child makes a proposal, the parents examine it with the child, asking for details and avoiding the temptation to get into an argument. If the proposal is of the kind: "If you buy me that I will do what you want!" or "My brother is to blame!" the parents answer curtly, but not accusingly, that they cannot accept it. If, however, the child makes any kind of positive proposal, even if only "I will pay attention and do my best!" the parents should take the proposal seriously (for instance, asking a number of questions that show goodwill, rather than suspicion, on their side, about how the child can make sure that he or she will "pay attention"), and then leave the room. When in doubt about whether a proposal is acceptable or not, it would be better to decide that it is. After all, if the proposal is not put into action, the parents can repeat the sit-in. When leaving the room, the parents should avoid all threatening or warning remarks, however subdued or implicit. If the child raises no proposals, the parents stay in the room for as long as they decided beforehand (from half an hour to 2 hours are common time frames).

On those occasions when they leave the room without hearing any proposal by the child, they say that they still have not reached a solution. In such cases (or when the child's proposals did not materialize), the procedure is repeated the next day or the day after. If the child attacks them physically, the parents should defend themselves (by holding the child). If the child attacks them verbally, they should stay silent, so as to avoid an escalatory sequence, but stay on for the planned time frame. If the parents fear they will be unable to defend themselves against a physical attack, they should ask for a third person (a friend or relative) to be present in the adjoining room during the procedure. The presence of this third person is communicated to the child. The functions of this third person are: (a) to inhibit the child's aggression by his or her mere presence (in all our cases, whenever a third person was present, the child refrained from physical violence); (b) in case of physical attack, to help the parents protect themselves; (c) to act as a go-between, helping parents and child to reach an agreement. We recommend that the third person come in as a go-between after at least 3 sit-in hours; the recommended procedure is that the parents step out of the room and the third person comes in, saying: "Look, maybe I can help, if you want. I believe your parents would accept a reasonable compromise. I also respect your need to safeguard your self-respect. What do you think?"

A few additional, practical details: (a) if the child tries to turn on the TV or the computer, the parents turn it off. If the child turns it on again, the parents wait in silence until the pre-stipulated time expires (like any kind of tit-for-tat or ping-pong interaction, turning-on and turning-off the TV might lead to escalation). Before the next entrance, however, the TV or computer must be disconnected; (b) the sit-in is not performed at the pitch of the conflict, but at a later, quieter time (this is termed the "Strike the iron when it is cold!" principle); (c) if the child screams triumphantly, as the parents leave the room, they can say quietly (or by a short written message) that they cannot defeat the child and do not desire to do so; (d) after the procedure, the parenting business goes on as usual without further manifestations of anger or pity; (e) in the next day or days, the parents may make reconciliation gestures like taking the child to school or to a meeting with friends, or cooking a dish that the child

likes. These reconciliation gestures are made with no mention of the previous events: all discussion about "the reason behind" the reconciliatory moves should be avoided. If the child so chooses, he or she is completely free to reject the parental moves. The parents should by no means blame him or her for this choice.

The support of the therapist (and also of at least another friend or relative of the parents) is often central to the success of the intervention. If, for instance, the parents find it difficult to decide on whether to accept a proposal by the child, or on whether it is time to ask for the go-between to come in, or on how to react to untoward events, they may discuss it with the therapist (by phone or in the next session). When the parents feel particularly anxious about the sit-in, the therapist may remain available for phone-calls at the time the sit-in is performed (one of the parents leaves the room for this purpose). The parents usually decide on their own when to stop with the sit-in, but if they feel the need, they may discuss the issue with the therapist.

The principles of the sit-in are usually explained to the parents (or single-parent) in the second session of parental counseling. Out of the initial 40 cases in which we proposed the sit-in, the parents tried it out in 32. The maximum number of sittings was 6. In most cases there was no need for more than 2. In 2 of the 32 cases, the parents felt that the intervention had had no impact on the problem behavior. In half of the remaining 30 cases, the parents said that the problem behavior had stopped, and in the other half that there was significant improvement. In addition, the sit-in had a positive, moderating effect on escalation processes, probably for the following reasons.

First, the sit-in is designed to break the spiral of complementary escalation: the parents clearly show that they will not give-in to threats and disturbances. In their silent persevering manner, they say: "We don't give in! You can't get rid of us! We stay!" Parental presence is thus evinced in its concretest manner. Not only the child comes to feel the parents' strength in the wake of the sit-in. The parents also feel it: many parents are surprised that they can carry it through and they react to it by a feeling that they will no longer give-in as in the past. In distinction from other forms of parental strengthening, however, the sit-in is also designed to counter the factors that contribute to reciprocal escalation.

The sit-in gradually induces in the parents an attitude that is the opposite of dominance orientation. Thus, the therapist stresses the point that the goal of the sit-in is not to defeat the child. On the contrary, the parents are explicitly told that the sit-in may be effective in stopping the problem behavior and reducing escalation, even if the child feels he or she "has won." Sometimes, when the child has a particularly stubborn dominance orientation, it may be advisable to prepare the parents beforehand to "lose" at every single sit-in (for instance, by expecting beforehand that the child will raise no proposals and will maintain some kind of provocative behavior throughout the sit-in). In a few cases, we have even proposed that the parents give the child a written declaration to the effect that they know they cannot defeat him or her or change his or her thoughts and preferences. If the child asks them, why then are they continuing with the sit-in, the parents answer that they do it because they must. All additional explanations are kept to an absolute minimum. A declaration that the child cannot be defeated or changed by the parents often reduces the child's attempts to show who is the boss. After all, what is the use of proving he or she is the boss to parents who admit beforehand that they are out of the competition? Of course, any assertion of the kind "You will

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see!" or "I will show you!" will once again raise the child's (and the parents') dominance orientation.

Some parents, who are themselves very high in dominance orientation, may find it hard to understand that "winning" has nothing to do with the sit-in. The therapist must then elaborate further on the dynamics of escalation in the parents' interactions with child. Use may also be made of expressions such as "silent strength" and "quiet influence," which are contrasted to expressions like "empty provocations," "the mere trappings of power," and "hollow-sounding cries." More convincing than any argument, however, is the parents' beginning experience of real influence. Once apparent, this influence helps to remove at least the most blatant manifestations of the parents' dominance orientation.

The sit-in is further designed to minimize psychophysiological arousal. Thus, it is not undertaken in immediate response to the child's provocation ("Strike the iron when it is cold!"). The parents are to enter the child's room when everyone is in no particular state of excitation. Although the level of arousal will surely rise with the sit-in, chances are that the boiling point (at least so far as the parents are concerned) will not be reached as easily. Also the fact that the parents sit and stay silent tends to reduce arousal: in effect, kicking or hitting someone who sits passively is particularly difficult. One might object that the punishment that the sit-in constitutes will be less effective for not being administered immediately after the problem behavior. The sit-in, however, is not intended as a punishment, but as an intervention that carries a message. In distinction from most discipline- and punishment-oriented approaches, the present approach would predict that when the iron is hit when it is cold, the intervention will be no less effective and will lead to less escalation.

As parental counselors know, it may be hard to convince parents to control their negative talk. It becomes easier, however, once the parents feel that they are no longer helpless, a goal that is often achieved by the sit-in. In effect, many of the parents in our project were surprised at how effectively they succeeded in avoiding the talking-trap: both the submissive parental talk that is conducive to complementary escalation and the hostile parental talk that is conducive to reciprocal escalation.

Particularly with adolescents, a parental message that they cannot and will not try to change the child's thoughts and preferences often has a reassuring effect. The message helps to reduce the teenagers' feeling that their right to have a mind of their own is under threat. Parents have often asked if this is not tantamount to giving up: after all, their goal is to help the child develop better values and not only externally conforming acts. Parents understand, however, that with adolescents in particular, preaching and exhorting is not a very effective way of conveying values. If anything, this kind of talk may actually innoculate the teenager against the parents' values. The only way to convey values effectively to a defiant teenager is through a decided parental stance and by personal example. These two are clearly evinced by the parents' nonviolent resistance.

The "business as usual" atmosphere that should follow the sit-in aims to prevent the narrowing down of the parent-child interaction. Burdening the sit-in with additional punitive measures or by an angry cut-off from the child would in all probability lead to escalation. The parents are also encouraged to make positive reconciliatory gestures, preferably a day or two after the sit-in: these gestures would indicate that conflict is not all there is to the parent-child relationship. Reconciliation, however, is not the same as ap-

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peasement. Appeasement involves giving-in to the demands of the threatening or violent child, reconciliation does not. In addition, the sit-in is often repeated after the reconciliation measures (something that would be unthinkable with appeasement gestures).

Although not directly derived from the concept of nonviolent resistance, reconciliation gestures reinforce its workings. Conceptually, reconciliation steps are linked to the concept of parental presence: with an expansion of the parent-child relationship (such as is furthered by these steps), a richer experience of parental presence is made possible. Conversely, when the interaction is narrowed down to the conflictual patterns and issues, the experience of parental presence becomes a flat caricature of itself. A fuller parental presence, in turn, increases the impact of nonviolent resistance: after all, the richer the child's relationship with the parents, the greater the significance for the child of the parents' determined stance.

Sometimes, especially when the unacceptable behavior occurs outside the home, it may be necessary to follow the sit-in by parental visits to the places where the child displays his or her problem behaviors (discotheque, street-corner, acid party, video-game parlor). The parents should arrive and remain in place, until the child agrees to come home with them (or runs away, in which case the visit is repeated on a later occasion). This kind of "movable sit-in" requires a larger supportive network and more detailed preparation (see Omer, 2000, for various examples).

The sit-in can also be used with more than one child at a time. In one of our cases the parents of twelve children performed sit-ins with ten of them at once, achieving a deep change in the home atmosphere (Omer, 2000). The sit-in can also be of help in dealing with fights between siblings. I usually propose that the parents sit in silence with both children together, refusing to be drawn into any discussion about who is to blame. We are currently using the sit-in as a community project for dealing with youth vandalism. The whole class in which the vandalism occurred is brought together, and the teachers, a number of parents, and a pupils' committee from the whole school (who agreed to further the project), are to sit with the class members for an hour and a half, after first declaring that they have decided that vandalism is a foe to all of them and that they are coming together to think of ways to stop it. The pupils are not to be blamed or preached to.

One should keep in mind that the sit-in is just a method to implement the ideas of nonviolent resistance. In the counseling sessions, the therapist should try to make these ideas manifest in all interactions with the child. Thus, the avoidance of verbal battles and of threatening postures, the interruption of the giving-in/resentment cycle, and the attempts to broaden the areas and patterns of interaction are pursued throughout the day and the week in all the parents' contacts with the child.

Case Example

For more than a year, the parents of M (a 12-year old boy) had not dared to leave him alone at home with his younger sister (aged 8). He was physically and psychologically abusive toward her. Sometimes he would dress-up as a ghost or vampire and wake her up in the middle of the night with frightening noises and gestures, causing her extreme anxiety that might take many days to dissipate. He was verbally aggressive toward both parents (especially the mother). For the last 2 months he and the father had stopped communicating, after M had called him obscene names at the dinner table. At school he was totally isolated, especially after having clashed with two other children who had previously accepted his

leadership. The parents described him as defiant, stubborn, and dominant-oriented, almost from birth. In addition, he had obsessive-compulsive traits, becoming anxious and violent if any of his books, games, or clothes touched the ground or touched any "polluted" objects that had been in touch with the ground. Everything in his room had to be maintained in the most absolute order.

The sit-in was undertaken after three sessions had been devoted to clarifying to the parents the principles of parental presence (Omer, 2000) and to achieving a marital cease-fire in their mutual accusations about M's condition. (See Chapter 4 of Omer, 2000, for a procedure to achieve cease-fires.) The parents were averse to the idea of getting a third person involved. They wanted to keep the family and M as free from social stigma as possible. They entered M's room at 9 P.M. and told him they could not accept his attacks against his sister. They gave him examples of the kind of physical and psychological abuse toward the sister they could not put up with. They said they would wait for his proposals on how to stop the attacks. M quickly became aroused and tried to expel them from the room. As the parents refused to budge or to fight back, he came close to the mother and made as if he would hit her. The father prevented him and held M's hands for about 2 minutes. M disengaged himself and started to hurl his books and clothes to the floor (occasionally throwing one in the direction of the parents, but without really aiming at them), screaming at the parents, and crying in a fury. Within minutes the room was a total mess. The parents refrained from telling him that he would feel bad with his things on the floor. He then alternated between hurling offensive epithets and screaming disconsolately for the rest of the hour. After an hour, the parents got up to leave and said they had reached no solution. M

met this declaration with a spate of obscene epithets and declared that they would never, never, never defeat him. He went on crying for 2 hours, sometimes kicking the door of his room. He fell asleep late at night and did not go to school the next day.

In the next morning, the mother came in and offered him help in sorting out the mess and rearranging the room. Initially M refused to cooperate, but as the mother started to rearrange his things, he joined in, first by telling her where the things belonged and then by actually helping her. In a session with the therapist 2 days after the sit-in, the parents and the therapist agreed, that if at the time of the second sit-in M were to behave as violently as in the first, they might have to get the help of a third person (in the end there was no need). The day after this session, the father found occasion to tell M that he respected him for his strength in bearing his loneliness and social difficulties at school: other children would have long given in or broken down. The father did not wait for any discussion to evolve. The next day he told M that he knew M was the kind of boy that never gave in, under no circumstances, and that he respected M's strength and determination. In the course of the week, M resumed conversation with the father.

The second sit-in was undertaken a week after the first (a few hours after M had hit his sister again). This time M confined himself to screaming and cursing, without throwing his things about. He made no proposals and yelled triumphantly as the parents left. A therapeutic session after this sit-in led to a number of new reconciliation gestures from the mother (she cooked his favorite dish three times, and did not insist that he eat with them at the table). M's smoother relationship with the father continued. A third sit-in took place two weeks later, after M. startled his sister when she came home

from her piano lesson, by hiding behind the door and yelling "Boo!" suddenly: a far cry from his usual abuse. This sit-in also ended with M's hurling offensive epithets as the parents left and without any constructive proposal on his part. Two days after this sit-in, the father handed M a written declaration that the parents knew that M was undefeatable, because he would probably be ready to die rather than give in; therefore, they did not expect M ever to give in to them or to anyone else. There was no need for further sit-ins. The attacks against the sister stopped completely (and were replaced by loud discussions and occasional mutual screaming that were much more acceptable to the parents). The parents felt free to leave the kids alone at home and even to travel abroad for a week, leaving the children with their grandmother. The relationship between M and both parents improved. There were no longer cut-offs between M and his father and verbal abuse toward his parents became rare. On a followup 6 months later, the gains had been maintained and he was less isolated at school.

CONCLUSION

The question whether the present means of parental resistance are really nonviolent is debatable. In effect, perhaps the only agreement concerning the definition of *violence* is that it is virtually undefinable (Silverberg & Gray, 1992). My usage is rather circumscribed: I designate as *violent* those behaviors that involve direct physical and verbal attack. The rationale for so limiting my usage is that these characteristics (hitting, cursing, demeaning) are the ones that are most clearly involved in escalation. In this restricted sense, the practices here proposed are nonviolent.

Linked to the question whether the present approach is nonviolent is the question whether it may not simply be

understood as a form of punishment, for example, as a variation in the behavioral technique of time-out. In effect, parental nonviolent resistance, as evinced by the sit-in, is often unpleasant. And yet, the parental attitude that it fosters, the manner in which it is carried out, and the predictions derived from the approach differ on many counts from any discipline- or punishment-oriented parental strategy. Precisely these differences account for its anti-escalatory effects. Consider the following points:

1. The principle that one should "strike the iron when it is cold" is actually opposed to usual views on punishment, according to which the punishment should always follow as closely as possible upon the misbehavior. From the point of view of learning theory, for instance, a sit-in that occurred hours or even days after the misbehavior should be much less effective. Following our analysis of escalation dynamics, however, we reach the opposite conclusion: a postponed sit-in would be characterized by less psychophysiological arousal (at least so far as the parents are concerned) and therefore be less escalation prone. We would therefore expect it to be more beneficial than any immediate parental response.

2. There are forms of nonviolent resistance that are not particularly aversive or punitive. For instance, with children who threatened, screamed at, or offended the teacher at school, I have often used the following procedure. When the child behaved obstreperously to the teacher, he or she would have to stay the next day with one of the parents at his or her place of work. The parents were instructed not to turn the occasion into a party, but also not to act in any punitive manner. The child should stay with

the parent the whole day long. The parents and school personnel to whom I made this proposal were quite stunned, objecting that the child was getting a prize! Arguing from the principles of parental presence and nonviolent resistance, I convinced them to try out the procedure. In the five cases in which the procedure was tried, the child's outbursts against the teacher stopped after at most three applications of the intervention.

3. Our emphasis on reconciliation steps aims at fostering an atmosphere that is opposed to that of escalation. Reconciliation gestures, however, make little sense from a discipline- or punishment-oriented perspective. Actually, from such a perspective, one should expect reconciliation steps to lessen the sit-in's effectiveness. From the perspective of parental presence and nonviolent resistance, one should expect an increase in effectiveness.

This contrast between nonviolent resistance and punishment-oriented approaches is not merely academic. There is a deep difference, for the parents and for the child, between the messages: "If you do so and so I will punish you!" and "I will do all I can to stop this behavior, except for hitting you or attacking you!" The first message is more controlling, more hierarchical, more invasive and more hostile. As the parents, in contrast, learn to convey the second kind of message, they not only come to sound less controlling, superior, invasive, and hostile, but gradually also learn to feel so. The child, in turn, gradually comes to feel less threatened and provoked. Sometimes the child feels that the parents are also conveying to him a positive attitude of respect. This mental change is one of the optimal results of a

successful process of nonviolent resistance.

One last comment about when should nonviolent resistance be adopted and when does it fail. Nonviolent resistance is not a technique, but an attitude, incorporating a number of principles. The sit-in is one of the techniques by which this attitude can be put into practice. The sit-in may fail, for instance, if the child runs away in spite of the parents attempts to prevent it; if the child becomes violent again and again in spite of the minimal provocation, or if the child successfully succeeds in ignoring the procedure. What has failed, however, is not the attitude of nonviolent resistance, but the technique of the sit-in. In the literature there are a number of additional procedures that might then be implemented (see Omer, 2000). I would predict that the more any of these procedures fit with or are implemented in the spirit of nonviolent resistance, the lower the chances of escalation of both kinds.

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