

# HELPING MEND FAMILY FENCES

By Sally Tockey

Staff writer – *Tri-Valley Herald*, Wednesday, November 7, 1984

The scene is a familiar one: A bad day at the office, too much traffic on the way home, the mailman brings unexpected bills. And that's the day the kids act up, driving a parent crazy.

Or is it just that day.

Isn't it possible, just possible, the kids' behavior hasn't changed that much from day to day?

That their acting up has been going on for sometime. That, for some reason, it's been easier to ignore it. And much, much easier to blame the kids than accepting the responsibility for their actions.

“They think things should be going better but many parents blame the kids first, rather than themselves,” says Peter Haiman, an associate with Parental Stress Service, Inc. “They love their kids but they're always saying: ‘My kid is driving me nuts!’”

Haiman, who works with Parental Stress Service, Inc. in Pleasanton shows parents how to improve their own behavior, behavior that may improve life on the home front.

He says it's sometimes just a matter of giving parents insight into why they feel the way they do in highly charged situations, suggesting strategies to meet their expected values and then presenting practice sessions for the parents and children.

It's a technique Haiman began more than two decades ago when pursuing his doctorate at Case Western Reserve University.

He also received federal funds for the Cleveland Parent and Child Center for his work to help others improve their parenting behavior.

“As a student, I studied early childhood behavior and how to change adults' behavior” says Haiman, a Berkeley resident who was interviewed before his weekly session with parents at the Valley Volunteer Center.

“I learned that parenting really begins in childhood. That adults really live two psychological childhoods: one when they are children, and one when they become parents.” Hence, says Haiman, the high correlation between child abuse and child abusers. Those who were victims as children often become perpetrators as adults.

Parents need to learn how to break their old bad habits, habits learned at an early age, and to replace them with new practices that may take awhile to adopt, he says.

“I was working in Santa Rosa with the parent of a 3 ½ year-old girl. She had the child on a leash, like a dog. The little girl always wore a white lace dress that she couldn't get dirty and her speech was retarded. The mother constantly stifled the child's curiosity in the house with those expandable fences. Through counseling, she saw that she was just practicing her own parents' behavior.”

Haiman says that insight and a few positive suggestions for allowing the child to explore her territory vastly improved her life at home.

The counselor, who meets with parents on Thursday evenings, says he tries to show his clients that children's behavior is simply a signal, a sign of something much deeper.

With that knowledge, parents can play detective, looking beyond the behavior to see their children's motivation - and then address the motivation, not the behavior.

Haiman notes how some still tie together behavior with time and tides. “There was a time when people would say ‘our kids were acting up last week’ and they blamed the full moon.”

But, he says, calls to Parental Stress Hotline do increase after summer vacations, when children return to school, and in January, after busy holiday times.

Haiman finds his clients, who pay no fee to attend the sessions, do not fall into neat and tidy categories. Nor do their children. “There are fewer couples and the parents' ages are all different and the children range from the very young to the teenager. The child may be the first one or the fourth or the fifth.”

Haiman's next eight-week series will start Nov. 15<sup>th</sup>. There is no fee and childcare is available during the sessions. For further information or to pre-register contact Parental Stress at 484-1386.

#### *What parents say:*

“These classes are really helpful,” Carol says, “I like the talking about our feelings and asking questions and just listening.” Carol, not her real name, says she was part of another group when she realized Haiman's series better suited her needs. “I didn't like what I was doing with my kids,” she says. “It seem like I was trying to be too legalistic with them, and I didn't want them to be robots.”

Carol noted how the informal series helped her see that her children were young people who should be treated with as much dignity as others. Better though, she says, was gathering ideas and tools to pursue her new behavior. “I also learned how to recognize

one son's feelings. I discovered that he thought it was not okay to be angry with his mom and dad. Now we have accepted an agreement. It's all right for him to be angry with us, but it's not okay for him to be disrespectful about it. And I will try to except those feelings, too. It's not good to stuff those feelings, to bury them where they can't be seen and will come out later."

For Ed and Elaine, who also prefer anonymity, this series prompted other results. The parents of a "6-year-old going on 2" found they needed to understand his feelings and his actions. The young couple praised Haiman's sessions at the Volunteer Center, especially those where they could interact in a given situation with their offspring to practice new habits.

But the systematic training they received from Haiman could also be applied to others. "I found I didn't need to except others' actions," Ed says. "I have learned to give other people the responsibility for their own actions, though it's still right to except the responsibility for your own kids."