

## **MBYB: Parents' Lack of Reasoning with Kids is Reactive, Not Conscious**

By Ed Lisbe

“You can’t \_\_\_\_\_.”

“I won’t let you \_\_\_\_\_.”

“You’re not allowed to \_\_\_\_\_.”

“If you so much as *think* about \_\_\_\_.”

Adults give orders like these when we worry about childrens’ behavior, especially when something might affect their safety or well-being. This is the default mode of adult “problem solving.” Having a reasoned conversation about a young person’s possible choices doesn’t seem to be on the typical adults’ radar screen.

Why so much instant order-giving? The 5 most common reasons given by adults for telling kids what to do instead of talking and reasoning things out with them seem to be:

- (1) Too Young “He isn’t old enough to understand the consequences.”
- (2) Too Stupid “She isn’t smart enough to make those kinds of decisions.”
- (3) No Time “I don’t have all the time in the world to sit and work through every single thing with him all the time
- (4) Too tired “Sometimes I just don’t have the energy. I’m too tired to get into the issue and I just want her to do it. It’s exhausting to have to explain everything I want.”
- (5) Bad History “You don’t know her like I do. You just see this one thing, here. Her own choices are always bad and get her into trouble”.

These are typical adult responses when asked, after the fact, why they almost always tell young people what to do in “power over” relationships. The implication is that the adult has *thought* about providing counsel to the child, and *wants* to have a reasoned conversation where the child learns to make fair and safe and responsible decisions, but the adult just *can’t* do it. The truth is more that the cease and desist orders are knee-jerk reactions to real or perceived dangers or problems. Nothing is thought out ahead of time. It is just what adults do. We give orders.

The long-term drawbacks to consistent, order-based problem solving with young people are obvious. Our purpose here is only to demonstrate that our giving orders to young people are automatic responses, and are not driven by the justifications and excuses we typically use for our overall lack of reasoning with kids. We will use one clear example of a couple of parents and their two children to make this point.

I was staying over at a colleague’s house on a business trip. Jack, and his wife, Marissa, are very intelligent (both have advanced degrees as well as basic street smarts), have lots of money (yearly income close to 7 figures), have many good and close friends, have an overall great relationship with each other and their kids, seem at peace with themselves, have jobs which afford them all the time they need to be active in their kids’ lives, have

warm and loving relationships with their parents, are frequent contributors to their community, and weren't stressed about any particular life issues at the time of my visit. By any means of measurement, this couple would be considered by most people to be living successful lives. Stress of one kind or another cannot be blamed for their choices as parents that violate MBYB standards. These two parents simply use instant, automatic, power-based "problem solving" with their kids, the same as most adults.

For two days I heard my friend and his wife speak frequently and with great pride about their two children, Michael (18) and Erika (15). They related story after story of their accomplishments. Michael was mostly quiet and serious. Just starting college, he had captained his high school law club to the state championships. He was responsible in everything he did. Erika, a bubbly and sparkling personality with a gorgeous voice began singing on stage in major venues at the age of 7 (making upwards of \$1,000 a week), and has traveled all over the world. She's performed with full orchestras, and has stood with all-stars as she sang the National Anthem confidently before thousands in a major league baseball park. She was always a bit on the wilder side than her brother. I asked about trouble with either kid, and was told, "Not really, nothing major with either one, ever. They are both fantastic, and we feel blessed to have them in our lives."

That is the background. Everything positive. Still, when faced with helping their two very responsible and confident kids to make their own decisions, these parents felt the need to control rather than to reason.

#### **Non-reasoning incident with Michael:**

The family lived near a breathtakingly picturesque, narrow, winding road on a cliff overlooking the ocean. I drove on it in the daylight with my friend and could see the inherent driving dangers. At night, the navigation would require extreme and total concentration. Increasing the degree of difficulty, he told me, was the fact that this particular stretch of road was notorious on weekends for accidents involving young, partying, drunken drivers from a nearby college.

My friend, with the righteous conviction of someone who *knew* his action was correct, a "no brainer" for him, said to me as an aside while in a conversation about Michael, "You know, when he first got his drivers license, I wouldn't let him to drive on this road. I just told him he couldn't do it, that I wouldn't allow it. You'd have to be crazy as a parent to let him drive here."

I thought to myself, *why the order?* He's been telling me for days about his brilliant and responsible kid. Why the automatic order, as if Michael was suddenly stupid and couldn't handle a reasoned conversation? It blew me away that this proud parent, in a situation like this would not have a MBYB conversation from the MOTIVATE box:

"Michael, this is a really dangerous road. You know that. It's tough driving even for experienced drivers and especially at night. On weekends it's even worse

because there are a lot of drunk drivers out here. How would you feel about not driving on this road at all for at least 6 months? At least consider never driving at night, or maybe very rarely except for a special occasion? What would you think about that? And, because of all the drunks, I would say never drive here on the weekends between 10:00 PM – 2:00 PM. Does that make any sense to you? What's your reaction to what I'm saying?"

Then, the parent and the child can have a reasoned conversation about the situation and the choice. How can young people learn how to make choices if all we do is prohibit their behavior and tell them what to do? This particular kid, from everything the parents have said, is obviously not suicidal. In fact, he's also very responsible. Why would a kid like this need to be told what to do? Would Michael be the kind of person to take unnecessary risks with his life? Giving an order to a kid like this makes no sense. It *has* to be an unconscious, automatic response from a parent justifiably concerned about a young person's safety.

#### **Non-reasoning incident with Erika:**

I was having dinner with the two parents after watching their daughter perform at a local club in the downtown area of the city. Erika had gone to dinner with her friends. Halfway through the dinner, Marissa realized that she and Jack hadn't confirmed plans with Erika about when or where to meet for the drive home. Calls to her cell phone went unanswered.

The time was about 7:15 PM. My assessment, as I watched them become more and more concerned about how to connect with their daughter, was that we probably weren't going to be ready to leave for another hour. They kept trying her cell phone and a few of her friends' cell phones with no result. By 7:30 PM they were getting more and more upset with the situation and *with Erika for not making clearer plans with them*. By 8:00 PM the energy had gotten pretty bad. I asked them, "What would happen if they couldn't reach Erika and she didn't call before they wanted to go home?"

They said she could always take a taxi home and they could pay the driver when she got there. That made a lot of sense to me. I was surprised when, after a few more words about this trouble, Marissa added the punishment in an angry tone of voice: "But she is going to have to pay for it."

I wondered to myself, "Why the upset with their daughter? Why are they so driven to exact vengeance?" Erika is a good kid, was excited about her performance and hanging out with her friends, and hadn't thought of making arrangements with her parents for the drive home? It seemed like an oversight that anyone could make.

*Why the anger?* Why the “power over” force with a pretty decent kid just because things weren’t going right? Why not this kind of conversation if we were ready to leave and still hadn’t been able to connect with Erika:

“Well, this is too bad. It would have been so much easier if there were plans for going home. But she’s with friends and it’s the theater district of the city so she’s reasonably safe, and most likely one of her friends’ parents will be around for help. Let’s go home and if she ends up taking a taxi we’ll just pay for it when she gets there. She’ll probably call us, anyway, once her evening with her friends winds down and she realizes we didn’t make plans for getting home. No problem.”

Getting angry and wanting to punish Erika, somehow, for this oversight? Seemed like a pretty strong overreaction with this kind of kid. Given Erika’s history and her life experience, the parents’ reaction wasn’t logical. It *had* to be an unconscious, automatic response out of concerns for the young person’s safety.

In both cases, with Michael and with Erika, *none* of the variables typically given as reasons for the exertion of parental power and control were present. Not one. Control is just what parents do, regardless of the circumstances.

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