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Column: Tales from a less-than-perfect parent

Christina Pandapas/Sitting in
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MARBLEHEAD - My children are not rational human beings. And irrationality seems to be contagious, because very often, I find I've lost all ability to be rational when dealing with them. It amazes me that after 15 years as a PR professional managing high-pressure situations like helping CEOs handle Wall Street Journal interviews and vice presidents of publicly traded companies manage angry investors that an 8-year-old and a 5-year-old can reduce me to a raving lunatic by refusing to eat their turkey sandwiches.

Internationally renowned parenting counselor and best-selling author Nancy Samalin understands completely.

"It's the most difficult and challenging job around isn't it?" she commiserated after I shared my tales of less-than-perfect parenting.

"I was a teacher and a nice person and thought I'd be a wonderful, patient mother," Samalin added. "Then, I had two boys one year apart. And, well, I didn't know I even had a temper before I had kids."

Nancy Samalin's honesty about her own parenting missteps and her perceptive sense of humor about the challenges all moms and dads face has made her one of the most sought-after parent-education speakers in the country and abroad. She has appeared on CNN, the Today Show and 20/20; is a contributor to numerous parenting magazines, and has written four books, including her latest, "Loving Without Spoiling... And 100 Other Timeless Tips for Raising Terrific Kids." She will be in Marblehead on Oct. 15, giving a public presentation on "Positive Parenting: Setting Limits," as part of the TeamUp speaker series.

An entertaining presenter, Samalin focuses on helping parents develop positive two-way communication with their children. It may sound like something we've all heard before, but where Samalin excels is in her ability to convey simple, usable tips that parents can apply in any given situation on any given day. She does not cite statistics or research studies. She shares what she's learned from 25 years of counseling parents and her personal experiences as a mother struggling to overcome her own shortcomings.

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“I nagged, criticized, bribed and threatened,” says Samalin. “It was the toughest job I’d ever faced, and I felt the least qualified.”

Bribing and threatening are particular hot points for Samalin, who found help in a support group when her boys were 7 and 8. Since then, she has dedicated herself to helping other parents.

One of the most important issues she addresses is making “no” mean “no,” not “maybe.” It usually starts with a parent threatening consequences on which he or she has no intention of following through. Haven’t we all blurted out a threat like “If you do that one more time, we’re not going to the circus this weekend,” and then caved because there was no way we were going to waste \$200 worth of tickets? Samalin says that children will test a parent if they think you don’t really mean it.

It is an unconscious response for most children. They want what they want when they want it, and they are going to try their hardest to get it. That may involve a lot of whining, crying and name-calling, all hurled at Mom or Dad.

According to Samalin, the ability to replace those bribing and threatening tactics depends upon how we control our anger, which also leads to the key issue of how we express that anger without hurting or insulting our children.

“Anger is the most important and scary thing about parenting,” said Samalin. “We love our children. But children can be very irritating, and children can be very wearing. When you’re in a hurry, they’re not. When you need a nap, they’re wired. When you want a clean house, they want to make a mess. Being angry is inevitable, but we have to find a way to express it without hurting the ones we love.”

Rather than preach, Samalin likes to give concrete examples and tips. She says one key to controlling anger is to watch out for what she refers to as “power words.” When a parent starts off with “you” or “if,” chances are those words will be followed by an admonishment or a threat. Instead, she suggests, make a brief, impersonal statement, such as “The rule is....”

She uses the scenario of a child forgetting her lunch. It would probably go something like this: “You better remember that tomorrow because I took the time to make that sandwich and, blah, blah, blah,” at which point the child is going to tune out.

“You are excruciatingly boring to your kids,” Samalin quips. “They don’t listen to you when you go on and on.”

Next time, says Samalin, “Try just using one word: ‘lunch.’ As in, ‘Jennifer, lunch.’”

Sometimes, Samalin advises, you just have to let it go. The worst thing that could happen is that Jennifer forgets her lunch, and she is hungry that day.

After more than two decades counseling parents with children age toddler through teens, Samalin has heard it all from moms and dads at their wits' end. There are daily challenges no matter what a child's age, she says. Struggles over bedtime become battles over curfew, while arguments about television time and homework start early and seem to continue right through college graduation day. And then there are the incessant battles between siblings.

"The only way to avoid sibling rivalry is to have one child," says Samalin.

Overall, Samalin wants to help parents to let go of the guilt, realize that mistakes are inevitable, anger is inevitable, and to gain some tools for dealing with parent-child situations that arise everyday.

"If after coming to one of my presentations, a parent can have five minutes more a day enjoying their child, that's success," she says.

Positive communication works, and Samalin believes the proof is in how we deal with people out in the world and in our work environments.

"We say things to our children that we would never say to someone we just met," she notes.

It is true. No matter how irrational I can be, I have never told any CEO who didn't like my ideas that he had better, "Do what I say, or else you're not going to that Wall Street Journal interview, mister. And by the way, eat your sandwich!"

Want to go?

Nancy Samalin, M.S. will be speaking at Marblehead Veterans School Performing Arts Center, Monday, Oct. 15, 7-9 p.m. Admission is \$5.

A series of grade-specific follow-up parent workshops will be held in collaboration with the Marblehead Counseling Center on Oct. 22, 23 and 24 to provide additional learn age-specific, limit-setting strategies. These workshops are funded in part by a grant from the van Otterloo Family Foundation and will be facilitated by Bonnie MacDonald, Ph.D.

Go to www.TeamUpMarblehead.com to pre-register for TeamUp events and to learn more about the 2007-2008 TeamUp Speaker Series.