

A child's lesson in listening

By Ruth Ostrow

THE other day I walked into my daughter's room and found toys, dolls, bits of paper and clothing strewn everywhere. "Clean up your mess," I said, echoing the mantra of parents all over the world, virtually every day of the week, in 5000 different languages, to children in houses, huts and igloos.

"Your room is a pigsty. Only pigs leave their droppings on the floor," I said, folding my arms as billions of mothers have done before me.

My daughter is seven years old. I expected the regular protests applicable to a child her age: "But I cleaned it yesterday" or "It's Kathy's fault", but was shocked by what came out of her mouth. "Mummy, do I get to have my say now?" she said quite firmly.

"What? There is nothing to say. Just clean it up now!"

"Mummy, I have an opinion and I want you to acknowledge me," she insisted. I nearly fell to the floor at her New-Age speak. "You also leave things on the floor. I've seen clothes everywhere and you leave coffee mugs on the floor of the lounge room when you're watching TV."

My mouth hung open. Guilty as charged. "Just clean up your room," I repeated and stormed off. Then it dawned on me. Her school has introduced a subject called personal development. Each morning the students in the early grades sit around in "sharing" circles and talk.

Her PD teacher once explained it to me: "We teach them to share their feelings and to resolve conflicts this way. Most importantly, we encourage them to listen actively to other children. We teach them that everyone deserves to be heard, even if they have a different point of view."

What my child was doing was exactly this -- expressing her point of view -- and on reflection she was right. So I went back into her room and explained to her that I knew I did have a problem keeping the floor clean. I knew it made Daddy very angry. And I was trying to stop her from making the same mistake.

"How about we both help each other to keep the house cleaner? I will tell you what you have forgotten to do and you can remind me." We kissed and I felt good about not reverting to the old "Do as I say, not as I do." In fact I was delighted to have been challenged on my own bad behaviour, and was very proud of my daughter's courage and common sense.

And I decided to write a column in homage to this new subject of personal development, which has been introduced to primary schools in NSW (and has an equivalent in other states called health and physical education, which incorporates it) and to say what an enormous benefit it has already had in our household where my daughter has become more self-confident and aware, and kinder, in many more ways than I can write about here.

According to a spokesperson from the NSW Department of Education and Training, PD, together with health and physical education, has been mandatory for secondary school students since 1991, with a required teaching time of 300 hours of study from Years 7 to 10.

It was made mandatory for primary students in 2000, with schools to determine the hours devoted. Most primary schools I contacted give their students about two hours a week of PD, which includes subjects such as health and safety, self-esteem, making the right choices, drug and sex education, body image, friendship, good communication, stranger danger, identifying feelings, taking responsibility for oneself, as well as physical education.

In one school, the principal reported that even this small amount of PD was enough to help one of his students assert his personal choice not to take drugs. My daughter is lucky enough to go to a school in NSW that teaches PD to the lower grades every day. The teacher tells me: "We are of the belief that it is really important to develop the soul of a child and to nurture strong self-esteem. Also to teach kids to recognise their own gifts and talents.

"It's crucial for kids to have a deep sense of worth as human beings, and to learn positive thinking and good habits of the mind, which will help them with their learning and development."

In a climate of distrust, when so many of us are recognising that we got messed up by worshipping authority figures who later crumbled before our eyes -- priests, teachers, politicians and flawed parents -- there is no greater life skill than learning one's own personal power and strength.

Good riddance to the archaic days when children were seen and not heard, and lived by adages such as "Respect your elders" and "Don't answer back". To me this is a very exciting educational development and I believe there should be more hours taught each week, the earlier the better, to produce these lovely, bright, evolved human beings who we -- as the older generation -- can learn from.

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