

Disciplinary Dilemmas and Other Cautionary Tales

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I have been reliably informed that nothing brings out the fault lines in a marriage like the challenges of reaching agreement on how to raise the offspring of the aforementioned union. Not only does one have to struggle with the apparently limitless task of imbuing your children with "the right values" (i.e. *your* values!), but you also find out, sometimes to mutual detriment, about previously undiscovered differences of opinion between you and your spouse. The real challenge is to resolve those without your little angels realising and using the policy of "divided, they fall" against you…

Sometimes these difficulties may emerge when your child is still a baby. As it did for my friends - Kristin and her husband - Jan, who frequently find themselves with very different opinions about how their four-month-old baby Andrea will be when she grows up (!). A moment of harmony between these two very strong-willed individuals occurred when they were recently able to download advance episodes of their favourite television series "Criminal Minds," which they could not wait to see. Apparently, the episodes contained some images so graphic that Kristin spent most of the time with her eyes closed. "But what about the soundtrack?" I asked her, "Didn't all the screaming disturb Andrea?" "No, no," Kristin reassured me, "I made sure that the volume was lowered. And anyway, I had turned Andrea's chair away from the television screen."

For anyone who thinks that this may be an unnecessary precaution, I should add that Andrea is the most alert baby I have ever met, and combines a small, but well coordinated physique with an intense interest in moving images, particularly on television. Just as I was allowing myself to be relieved that Kristin had taken the necessary action in this regard, her husband (who is rather more laid back) happily announced, "Oh no, Andrea had turned her head after you moved the chair, so she was watching everything!" And if they hadn't already been quite remiss enough in their parental duties, I should perhaps add that the episodes they were watching had been downloaded from a pirate website…

Moral dimensions are an intrinsic part of child-rearing (as Kristin and Jan can now testify!), and many parents choose to rely on divine guidance. But the role of God, and the mysterious ways in which He moves can create any number of awkward questions for parents. My friend Katy has been diligent in attempting to provide her children with a reasonably religious upbringing, and has dealt with the resultant questions with considerable grace and patience.

Alongside various moral and ethical values, she has also been working on a more temporal level to address concerns such as the need for her five-year-old twin sons to take regular baths. In this regard, germs have provided an important incentive to cooperate at bath time, and the boys are well aware of the role of these tiny creatures in bringing about tummy upsets and fevers. Nevertheless, Katy found herself flummoxed when five-year-old Chris recently asked her if there were germs in heaven, "because if there aren't any germs, Mummy, then does that mean that nobody takes baths in heaven?"

It must be admitted that parental duties can sometimes be very onerous indeed, as my friend Mai-Britt discovered when she went for a holiday in the family cabin in the mountains with her three-year-old daughter Stine. They had been shopping for provisions at a general store that was a twenty-minute walk away from the spot where they were staying. Inexplicably, but inevitably, Stine suddenly decided to throw a very public tantrum