

This little book is about  
parents who are sometimes powerless.

Perhaps you are not among them. But there is sure to be something that strikes a chord in you.

Being a parent is not always easy, after all. All over the world, by the hundred million, parents try to do their best for their children daily. Nonetheless, the number of reported cases of child abuse is rising. This presumably reflects the fact that being a parent and human being is sometimes so difficult that one is somewhat at a loss how to act.

It may be that people discuss parent-child relationships too little. A book cannot, of course, provide all the answers. But it may perhaps afford some help and encouragement for parents who feel that is what they need.

That is exactly what this little book is about.

Swedish Committee against Child Abuse

# A Book for Parents

Five-year-olds  
know nothing,  
of course, of the  
anguish of having  
to ask for grace on  
an electricity bill.

A mother succumbing  
to severe stress

Martina Eriksson is a woman who, among many other things, is five-year-old Edgar's mother. Edgar might be described as the most important feature of Martina's life. There are, of course, other things that are important and take up her time – some because they are enjoyable, and others because they are essential. She is a single mother to Edgar, and works full-time. Her job falls into the essential category.

Martina Eriksson could no doubt become a world champion in juggling. Her whole life is a matter of coping with several tasks at a time, preferably with a beautiful smile on her face.

To an outsider, she seems to be succeeding fairly well. Smiling, Martina calls the electricity company and asks for a respite with the bill. Smiling, she asks the cashier at the supermarket to please swipe the credit card once again, in the hope that it will work on the third try. Smiling, she is the last of all the

parents to fetch her restless and tired, freckle-faced Edgar from the day nursery. And she smiles beautifully almost all the way home to the flat where she and Edgar live.

But in fact Martina Eriksson feels that she is failing in everything she does. For her, it is a defeat not to be able to pay an electricity bill on time, and every time she sees Edgar sitting alone with the building blocks in the playroom at the nursery, she gets that familiar icy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

The fact that Martina's existence has become a juggling act, full of problems, is not her fault. Nevertheless, on top of everything else, her self-confidence is shattered. She feels helpless and inadequate, and has to strive constantly to keep up a cheerful façade.

In any case, when she gets home with Edgar he is in his most demanding mood. He pulls at Martina and has a hundred important things to tell her. In due course he overturns a pail of soapy water all over the carpet. Then Martina's anger overflows as well, and in a moment of utter helplessness she wallops Edgar on the cheek.

Edgar Everett knows his mother better than most other people, but he cannot be expected to know anything about the shame she felt at the supermarket. All he knows about right now is a mother who first had a rigid, strange smile on her face and then, all of a sudden, started to dislike him terribly because he happened to stumble over a pail of water. For Edgar, it is as if Martina is further away from him than ever, and he blames himself for that.

He wonders how he will ever be able to make his mother happy again – as if mothers' well-being were their five-year-old children's responsibility.

Five-year-olds know nothing, of course, of the anguish of having to ask for grace on an electricity bill. But they know very well how it feels to be sad and want to be left in peace. These feelings are the same, after all, for everyone whether one is five or 32 years old.

Martina might have talked about those feelings. She might have told Edgar that it wasn't his fault, but that on this particular day

being Martina Eriksson was too trying for words. *She might have said this was why she couldn't give proper answers to all his tricky questions that evening, and that she felt miserable inside. She might have suggested they take it easy and look at photographs or something like that, since she couldn't face doing any cleaning.*

To Edgar, Martina could have admitted that she is not perfect. (A perfect mother with a strange smile is not what he wants, anyway. He prefers an ordinary mother.)

Children are more forgiving than most adults. Sometimes, perhaps, they are a bit too good at forgiving. In this case Edgar will no doubt forgive Martina, but it means she will have to give vent to her irritation in appropriate ways from now on. And that she treats Edgar with the respect he deserves from now on.

After all, he is the most important feature of her life.

And that  
kind of bruise  
fades away  
less easily,  
if ever.

A father with no faith  
in his own importance

In the hall hangs a photograph that, for some reason, makes Ymer Tribali stand and stare from time to time. It is a picture of himself and Nora on a merry-go-round at Bakkens tivoli, the amusement park near Copenhagen. Nora, aged about six, has her head back and is laughing uninhibitedly, oblivious of the photographer. Ymer himself, in a plaid waistcoat and with a full beard, has one arm round Nora and is looking at the camera with an amused expression on his face.

A great deal in that picture – the beard, the chequered waistcoat – suddenly feels very remote. Above all, Ymer Tribali suddenly finds it strange to meet his own proud and happy, relaxed and fatherly gaze in the photograph. That is what he looked like just ten years ago. The proof is there, in the hall.

Nora went to a party on Saturday night, and did not return until Sunday. At first, when she came in through the door, he

wanted to hug her; but he held back. He had lain sleepless with worry, but she had also in fact broken a promise. Nora was, of course, unaware of the hug that might have been. She went straight to her room, and her whole bearing signalled 'Leave me alone.' She would probably not have allowed her father to hug her anyway.

Somewhere along the way, Nora seems to have lost her respect for Ymer. Nowadays, she shows clearly that she despises everything he stands for. She swears, hurling many vile words of abuse at him. She says she is ashamed of him – his clothes, his jokes, his inability to use a computer, his old Ford Fiesta. She just grins in his face when he gets angry. She calls him a 'f\*\*\*ing idiot' within earshot of other people.

All this makes Ymer feel like a disqualified father. Along with the rage and sense of powerlessness, the feeling of failure hits him at lightning speed. Sometimes he reacts by literally shaking Nora, in a vain attempt to regain control.

Later that Sunday, in a surge of anger at another provocation

typical of Nora, Ymer strikes his daughter hard on the face with the back of his hand – an accurate backhand that sends her back against the wall. She slowly sinks to the floor, with blood trickling from her nose. Now Nora shouts that she hates him. He hears things about himself that he has never heard before, and that she is going to report him for assault. Ymer yells back that he is the one who should damn well report her, so that she behaves herself, and then she turns and goes.

Ymer thinks Nora's sole aim in life is to enrage him, but in fact she presumably wants the opposite. She would not admit it herself but deep down, she is uncertain and vulnerable. She wishes her father would lower his voice, stay calm in an adult way and show that he cares about her. *He could show it by asking what has happened to make her like this, by saying he does not understand and wants her to explain it to him. She wants him to say he cares and that he is not going to leave her in this situation until she has told him what is going on.*

Instead, powerless, Ymer strikes his daughter in the face. In

the clearest possible way, he signals that he is utterly uninterested in what she really feels (though this is not, in fact, the case), that she is a hopeless kid and impossible to reason with (though he has not, in fact, tried), and that the only way to reach someone like her is to resort to sheer physical violence (though he does not, in fact, believe that is so).

His act has brought about more than a pronounced redness on Nora's left cheek. He has also crushed his teenage daughter's self-esteem, which was already shaky. And that kind of bruise fades away less easily, if ever.

No, the person who evidently already sported a full beard in the mid-1980s must, quite simply, have more experience of life than the one who has just had her 16th birthday. And the one with an adult's experience of life must be able to use it to reason his way out of conflicts with others, instead of offending or hitting them.

Be that as it may, there is something about the picture in the hall that makes Ymer stop and think sometimes. It depicts a

relationship with Nora that feels impossible to regain. What he seems to have forgotten is that there are many other ways of relating to others. People grow and change. When it is no longer fun to go on the merry-go-round, family members have to find new ways of being close to one another.

Although Nora is no longer six years old, she still needs a proud, secure father who does not stand for insults. She needs a father who can take being unpopular sometimes, and who can put his arm around her when she herself loses control of this or that. A father who is unabashed about his ugly clothes, his ignorance of cyberspace, his rusty Ford and his self-evident right to poke his nose into his child's life, assume responsibility for her and care about her.

If Ymer Tribali is to succeed in restoring Nora's confidence in him, he must of course take proper command of both his paternal role and himself. And it will not be easy. But life cannot, after all, be so much more difficult than it is now.

Would Thoma's  
father pull the hair of  
an adult acquaintance  
who did something  
wrong?

A father unwilling  
to take after his own Dad.

If anyone mentioned a building site to Thomas Bengtsson, he would think of one near the area of detached houses where he grew up.

New houses were to be built on what had previously been his favourite meadow, and he was forbidden to go there. Thomas's father was an architect; perhaps that was why he thought youngsters should not get in the way of houses in the making. Or perhaps it was because he realised that, with pits to fall in and excavators to be run over by, it might be dangerous.

Thomas went there anyway, of course. And his father, of course, found him out – hardly surprisingly, when one evening he brought home five orange site markers that he had pulled up here and there (in the hope that it would make the new houses triangular). Thomas Bengtsson's father did not say much. He just grabbed the hair on Thomas's temple and twisted it round several times.

Any mention of hair on the temple would remind Thomas of numerous occasions when his father pulled his hair so hard that his brain curled up, his face changed colour and his heart missed a beat. After the punishment, he used to be sent to his room. He remembers how he sometimes sat on the floor for hours, fixedly staring at a knot in the grain of the wooden ceiling, firm in the resolution never to pull his own children's hair if he ever became a father.

But now, in adulthood, Thomas thinks it was not such a bad punishment after all. Now he can understand why his father became so anxious and angry on those occasions, and felt obliged to make his point so forcefully. 'It didn't do me much harm,' Thomas thinks.

One might well ask Thomas what good he thinks it did. Every time his father hurt him because he had done something wrong, no doubt he stopped doing whatever it was on that particular occasion. But in the longer term it was evidently no help at all, since Thomas's father pulled his hair over and over again.

Would Thomas's father pull the hair of an adult acquaintance who did something wrong? Presumably not: it would be humiliating both to himself and to that person. By pulling Thomas's hair, his father thus showed that he did not regard his son as fully human. He saw him as a good-for-nothing – someone whom one could apparently treat however one wished. Instead of trying to sort out the problem like two human beings, by talking about it, Thomas's father turned his back on him and distanced himself from his son as a person.

Thomas can think what he likes now that he has reached adulthood. But the question is whether the treatment he received did not, whatever he thinks, harm him quite considerably. What message do parents convey to their children by pulling their hair? That they are not allowed to run round building sites? No, it teaches them that it is right to hurt a person who has done something wrong.

The other day, Thomas found his son Peter giving a friend a lift on his bike – what is more, without a helmet (though Peter

knows very well what they have said about that). Thomas smacked him on the behind with the palm of his hand, just to emphasise to Peter how dangerous it is to give someone a lift on a bike without a helmet. It was a fairly restrained smack, but Peter turned his eyes to the ground and, of his own accord, spent the rest of the evening in his room. One can assume that he sat there staring at some suitable knot in the grain, with the firm resolution never ever to smack his own children on the behind.

One wishes, of course, that Peter could liberate himself from the humiliation of being beaten by his father. On the other hand, one wishes that he could remember that very feeling long enough to depart from the pattern when his turn comes to be a father.

Thomas is presumably not an evil person. His mistake lies in not trying to change a form of behaviour he learnt himself when he was a little boy. If this is to end, someone in the Bengtsson family must be the one to stop hitting his or her own child. And Thomas should realise that this person could be him.

Changing learned behaviour is by no means easy. But there is no denying that it is immensely important, considering what can otherwise be transferred to the next generation... and the next... and the one after that. Above all, it is an opportunity to make the world a bit better.

This opportunity is given, in particular, to all parents who were themselves beaten when they were small.

**Johanna tends to sit  
in silence, in her  
hazardous platform  
sneakers, refusing  
to drink milk.**

A mother who  
didn't quite know how.

Johanna Dahlberg is 13 years old and has very definite principles. For example, she rejects milk, hair slides and sneakers with soles less than 12 centimetres thick. Johanna's mother long assumed that hair slides must be dreadfully old-fashioned – until she happened to see in the school yearbook that virtually every girl in the school used them. Except for Johanna Dahlberg.

Johanna's parents would, of course, do anything for their stubborn 13-year-old with the hair in her eyes. Three times a week, they drive her to and from football practice, the riding-school and her friends. Her father refrains from drinking a glass of wine on Friday evening so that he can go and fetch her from discotheques located at a fairly awkward distance from home. Her mother decides not to treat herself to a weekend and seat at a musical that she has saved up for and, instead, buys the quilted down jacket that Johanna covets so much.

Johanna tends to sit in silence, in her hazardous platform sneakers, refusing to drink milk. Her parents cannot help thinking it is fairly thankless doing whatever they can to please Johanna. In general, it has become uncomfortably silent in the family recently. The surly manner adopted by Johanna is, so to speak, infectious. It is not unusual for the whole of Sunday lunch to pass in stony silence, *except for requests for the salt and perfunctory thanks for the meal.*

One evening, Johanna's teacher calls. She wonders how Johanna is, since she has not been at school for two days. When Johanna's mother asks her daughter where she has been, Johanna replies that *it is none of her business.* Then she slams the door to her room, and when her mother knocks to say it is dinner-time she hears that she is an old hag and Johanna hates her.

Johanna's mother would never hit her daughter, Instead, she locks her into her room for a few hours, to give her a chance to think over her conduct and her truancy. It is then decided that Johanna may not go to the disco for a month. During the month,

she will have to make her own way to her friends' homes, the stables and the football pitch. Johanna's parents want her to learn something from this incident, and at the dinner-table they therefore converse with each other only, trying to pretend that Johanna is not there.

Truancy is, after all, a serious misdemeanour. If there were a book of rules for how 13-year-olds and their parents should behave, it would undoubtedly say that children must not play truant. The parents of a 13-year-old daughter who does not bother to go to school for two days and then tells them to mind their own business would presumably have the rule-book's blessing to be very angry.

But it would also presumably say in the book that the parents must not go round like ice-cold martyrs, maintaining a deathly silence about their daughter's mistake. When Johanna's parents lock her in and freeze her out of their dinner-table fellowship they in no way show, paradoxically enough, how much they disapprove of the truancy. They show how much they disapprove

of Johanna. And one wonders whether, according to the rule-book, their misdemeanour would not be classified as a graver one than hers.

Whatever the case, they have not only exerted their power to make their daughter feel more guilty and entirely alone. They have also subconsciously taught her a poor way of resolving conflicts, which will remain at the back of Johanna's mind whether she wishes or not. And these effects must surely, according to the rule-books, be deemed a way of abusing children.

It would have been better to show some genuine anger and talk over the whole matter. Getting angry is not prohibited. At least not for those who have cause, and who can control their anger by expressing it in time, before it explodes. Some remonstrations and reproaches might even have refreshed the atmosphere in the Dobson family, given how infinitely silent it has become recently. The truancy would have finally given Johanna and her parents something interesting to talk about for several hours.

But being Johanna Dahlberg's parent is no easy matter. When

Johanna's mother walks past the down jacket that hangs in the hall, it strikes her that she is virtually effacing herself for her daughter's sake and that it still feels as if it is not enough. Sometimes, Johanna's mother wishes there could be a book about how 13-year-olds and their parents should behave. But there is, of course, no such publication. (How other people should arrange their family life is something no book can, after all, lay down the law about.)

Each and every one of us has to find our own way. And if we make a mess of the job occasionally we must, quite simply, look our teenage children, or our parents, in the eye and ask for forgiveness. We must explain why we acted as we did, and try not to repeat the same mistake.

Quite a lot seems  
to have happened  
to eight-year-olds  
since Peter was  
one himself.

A step-family that is finding  
it somewhat hard going.

Peter first saw Magdalena at an ice-hockey match. One of his female colleagues brought Magdalena and her son with her to a derby. As soon as the whistle blew when a player iced the puck, Peter felt he had to turn his head up to the right and look at Magdalena. She had a knitted hat on, and her left cheek was dimpled. Peter loves ice hockey; yet he just sat longing for half-time, when he could take a closer look at that laughter dimple and perhaps buy a cup cake for its owner.

A few weeks later, Peter and Magdalena met again. Since then, they have had breakfast together virtually every morning for six months. Virtually every morning for six months, they have also had breakfast with Oskar.

Oskar is Magdalena's son, aged eight, and Magdalena has lived alone with him since he was three.

Quite a lot seems to have happened to eight-year-olds since

Peter was one himself. They talk in a sophisticated way, surf the Net and know a whole lot about how babies are made. Perhaps that is why Peter is at a loss for words when he is alone with Oskar. Or perhaps it is because Peter doesn't quite know what Magdalena wants him to be. An extra Dad for Oskar, or a friend to him? The answer is fairly crucial to the stance he should adopt. So Peter usually opts to be silent. That way, he at least avoids feeling like a foolish outsider – he just feels like an outsider.

Fairly soon after Peter moved in, Magdalena started noticing that Oskar was changing. Before, he wanted to sit on her lap on the sofa in the evening; now, he has suddenly begun wanting to be alone in his room. Before, he was placid and quite easy to get on with but now, suddenly, he has suddenly begun being difficult all the time. He refuses to put on his gumboots for a class trip to a marsh. He refuses to go to bed, although it is ten o'clock in the evening. He refuses to wash his hair, or eat breakfast. And if he doesn't get his way he lies down on the floor and shouts enough to make the windowpanes in Magdalena's house rattle.

Magdalena tries to resolve these conflicts diplomatically, without involving Peter. She notices how he dislikes the whole situation: he always goes to another room when things are at their worst. (He never, in fact, asked to be the father of a prickly eight-year-old.) Magdalena thinks that if she manages to keep the peace as far as possible, Peter's and Oskar's relationship may perhaps take root in time – if she can just succeed in protecting Peter from Oskar's rages and Oskar from Peter's uncertainty. So most of Oskar's outbursts end with his getting his own way, after various ifs and buts.

But one evening when Oskar refuses to brush his teeth and yells enough to shake the windowpanes, and Peter moves to another room, Magdalena suddenly gets the urge to hit her eight-year-old son on the cheek. For some reason, she refrains. The impulse came like a lightning reflex, out of total powerlessness, but she finds the strength that from time to time comes to parents from inside, and manages to stop herself from obeying it.

Magdalena does not hit Oskar. Instead, she rocks her son on her lap and slowly realises how close she came to hurting him. At the same time, she realises that she cannot manage to go round protecting the other two members of the family from each other any more. She cannot cope with making herself solely responsible for their sense of well-being. The role is untenable in the long run. Peter will have to assume the role of an adult man, although he is not Oskar's father, and Oskar must be allowed to be an ordinary eight-year-old who sometimes loses his temper when he doesn't get his own way.

Now, for example, Oskar yells more loudly than ever. But it is not so much to do with tooth-brushing and, rather, because he is worried about what is going to happen in his family. (When he is contrary, perhaps it is because he wants to test the resilience of this new family grouping. He feels insecure because he does not know whether Peter is someone who will disappear, or whether he is going to stick around.)

Having an extra dad is, in fact, quite fun – that is presumably

a view most eight-year-olds would subscribe to. You can go to ice-hockey matches with them. You can read books or ask supplementary questions about how babies are made. Sometimes, admittedly, the extra dad will tell you to put your gumboots on and sometimes he may get a bit angry. But this kind of thing is hard to avoid between children and adults who live together. You have to do a fair amount of adapting. Peter is, and will remain, Peter; and Oskar is Oskar. Peter is an adult and Oskar a child, and no one can change that. But it is the adult who must venture to deal with, and talk about, the conflicts this may entail.

Magdalena is a woman who possesses, apart from the knitted hat, the enviable ability to retain control when the surge of powerlessness comes. Right now, exhausted, she is sitting on the bathroom floor and watching while Peter tries to brush the teeth of her parrying, noisily weeping son.

And funnily enough, this is the closest her left cheek has come to a laughter dimple for several days.

Johan's father never hit him. Nor did he ever call him any abusive names. But he made Johan feel inadequate,

so that a bruised human being has nonetheless emerged on the other side.

Someone who has learnt  
that he is not good enough

Johan's father always said that you can do anything, as long as you make up your mind to do it. He liked to take himself as an example: the working-class boy who became a senior consultant physician thanks entirely to willpower, being hell-bent on success and winning scholarships. *'My elder son can go as far as he wants, as long as he puts his shoulder to the wheel,'* Johan's father sometimes boasted to guests. When Johan heard this expression for the first time, he wondered what it meant. He asked his little brother, who was somewhat in the dark about it as well.

When Johan was in his first year at school, all the children were tested for admission to the municipal music school. The ones who did best in the test were allowed to start learning to play the violin. Those whose performance was second-best were allowed to play the trumpet or clarinet. Then, in descending order, came the piano, guitar, drums and recorder. After a long, impatient wait

in the corridor, Johan received the painful news that he was welcome to start playing the recorder. To this day, he remembers how he cried in the car on the way home from the municipal music school, although he had never exactly dreamt of playing the violin. And he remembers his father saying to him that *he could have done better if he had only put his shoulder to the wheel.*

'You can do anything, as long as you make up your mind to do it.'

When Johan was ten, he was allowed to accompany his father on an elk hunt. This had long been a much-discussed topic in the family, and in the latter part of September Johan's father had concluded many evenings by telling Johan and his little brother hunting stories.

Johan remembers four things from the hunt itself. How the dachshund quivered with excitement. How keeping quiet took a lot of effort. How he threw up when someone took the entrails out of a big-eyed roe deer. And, most clearly, he remembers how his father looked coldly at him and said *he supposed they might just as well take him home.*

'You can do anything, as long as you make up your mind to do it.'

When Johan was about 13, the roof of the family's holiday cottage had to be replaced. Johan's father, Jan the carpenter and Johan's paternal grandfather were up on the roof. Johan and his younger brother had been given tasks to carry out closer to the ground. The brother carried the roof slates up the ladder to where his father received them, while Johan's job was to cut open the plastic packages of slates and make sure his brother had the right number to carry. After some time, late in the afternoon, the hierarchy began to disintegrate. Johan's brother had a rest and Johan took the slates up the ladder and gave them straight to his father. All went well. Next time, he carried the slates up the ladder and all the way up on the roof. Jan the carpenter, at the top, stretched out a sinewy hand towards Johan. But Johan could not reach him, so he took a step upwards and happened to drag one of the slates along the ones that had already been laid – not on purpose, of course. But he still remembers the moment when they stood there on the boards, three metres above the ground,

eye to eye, and his father looked at him with contempt and said with forced calmness *'Kindly get off the roof.'*

'You can do anything, as long as you make up your mind to do it.'

If you asked Johan's father about Johan's childhood, no doubt he would say that he tried to encourage his son in every way and that he always boasted about him among his friends. If you asked Johan, *no doubt he would say that his father never – on one single occasion – showed that he thought Johan was good enough.* And, although Johan is now a grown man, he is still afraid of failing. Or rather, succeeding has become extremely important to him, for this very reason.

Johan's father never hit him. Nor did he ever call him any abusive names. But he made Johan feel inadequate, so that a bruised human being has nonetheless emerged on the other side. One may well suspect that Johan's father was himself subjected to hurtful treatment when he was a child and that, without reflecting about it, he is repeated his own parents' icy rejection.

You cannot, in fact, do absolutely anything you want to do as long as you make up your mind. You cannot stand seeing a roe

deer's entrails if you hate the sight of blood. And you cannot inspire your son with courage and a go-ahead spirit unless, at the same time, you accord him the right to sing out of tune, vomit or scratch a roof tile. Otherwise, you give the impression that you only like him if he is achieving something – and that is surely not what you really mean.

When Johan was about 15 he laid his recorder on the shelf. By that time he was thoroughly schooled in every finger position on the piccolo, soprano flute and alto flute. He had been a soloist at the end-of-term school assembly and Christmas show, and belonged to all kinds of ensembles. But his recorder-playing had continued year in and year out not because Johan himself thought it was rewarding and fun, but because he wanted to show his father that he could put his shoulder to the wheel. It was a rather sad reason – and it did not work, either. It merely gave Johan's father more opportunities to hurt his son by refraining from giving praise.

That was undeniably a refined way of hurting a child. Twenty years on, the pain is still there.

## Sixteen pieces of advice to anyone who finds it difficult being a parent sometimes

1. IF YOU ARE WORRIED ABOUT NOT BEING A GOOD PARENT SOMETIMES, remember that it is never too late to improve. Children collect experiences all the time but, simultaneously, have an incomparable ability to perceive their parents' desire to change.

2. IF YOU EVER GET THE IDEA THAT YOU MAY HAVE TREATED YOUR CHILD WRONGLY, say sorry. As a small child, one is often asked to say sorry to people on various occasions. As an adult one does so more seldom, although it is a good way to show respect for others. It is particularly rare for adults to knock on their children's doors to say sorry for their bad behaviour. Saying sorry to your child does not mean 'losing face'; instead, it helps you to grow as a human being.

3. IF YOU FEEL EXTREMELY OVERSTRAINED AND SAD ABOUT THINGS IN YOUR OWN

LIFE, explain it to your child. No one can go round setting a good example to humankind all the time. Small children, too, can understand what feeling despondent is like, and there is no need to make anything dramatic of it or go into details. Remember to add '*...and it's not your fault*' at the end. These words are paramount: it is not your fault. For an adult it may be self-evident, but for your child it is a relief to hear them. Otherwise, it is tremendously easy for a child to assume responsibility.

4. IF YOU FEEL POWERLESS OVER YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIOUR WHEN OTHER ADULTS are present, remember that this is something that affects every parent. The more powerless you show yourself to be and the more you behave differently from usual when your child starts yelling, for example, the more uncertain the child feels. How would you have tackled the

situation at home? Try to do the same, without paying so much attention to what other people might think. Their children surely yell sometimes as well.

5. IF TALKING TO YOUR CHILD REALLY DOES NOT WORK, try again. Lower your tone of voice, stay calm in an adult way and say what you think. This gives weight to what you say, even if you cannot expect an immediate response. If you get carried away with anger, the situation just gets worse.

6. IF YOU FEEL THAT YOU ARE SO PROVOKED BY YOUR CHILD THAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO LOSE CONTROL, remember that a child usually knows exactly what provocation is required for a particular parent to become enraged. Retaining self-control is then not easy, but this is what a parent has to do. In this situation, it is advisable for parents to disregard the exact words used by their children and try, instead, to see their children for what they are: individuals who are immensely important to the parents and

are themselves having a fairly hard time of it. And who in fact need their parents' care and concern, although they signal the opposite.

7. IF CHILDREN JUST GO ON YELLING AND CRYING, and seem inconsolable, the trouble is probably tiredness that they have difficulty in coping with. Perhaps what they need for the moment is a quiet time on their own. Try to remember what you yearned for yourself at the age of six, when you were inconsolable. What quietened you down and made you feel secure – a story, peace and quiet, being left in peace or having an adult around? Your own instinct about the right thing to do is presumably better than anyone else's.

8. IF YOUR TEENAGER SEEMS TO HAVE LOST ALL RESPECT FOR YOU, remind yourself that this is just your subjective feeling. Teenagers, like all children, need us adults and our experience of life, but must also be allowed to demonstrate their independence. That is how

things have always been. But there are, of course, limits to how you should allow yourself to be treated.

9. IF YOUR CHILD DOES SOMETHING THAT MAKES YOU FURIOUS, remember that anger is nothing prohibited or strange, but that rage should not be allowed to last and must never culminate in ostracism or cold cynicism and cruel comments. This kind of behaviour makes children doubt their self-worth, and such feelings are very difficult to get over.

10. IF YOUR CHILD TRIES TO STRETCH THE LIMITS OF WHAT YOU ALLOW, and puts pressure on you to give way, remember that caring also means saying no. Children cannot be expected to rely on an adult who is incapable of standing firm: they need clear limits. Where to draw the line is something you yourself decide; then, as an adult, it is your job to ensure it is respected.

11. IF YOU THINK YOUR CHILD HAS DONE SOMETHING WRONG, make sure that your

reproach focuses clearly on the error itself, not on the child's whole way of being. It must be clear that you have respect for your child and that this is precisely why you are disappointed in what (s)he has done.

12. IF YOUR CHILD APPEARS TO BE TAKING SIDES WITH THE OTHER, ABSENT PARENT, remember that this does not mean that the other parent is more important than you. When a child idealises a father or mother who is no longer part of the family, it is an outlet for missing that parent. You should not let it hurt you. It has, in fact, nothing at all to do with you, the parent who is on the spot.

13. IF YOUR CHILD DOES NOT SEEM TO LIKE BEING WITH HIS OR HER NEW STEP-FATHER/-MOTHER, remember that children need to feel secure in what is happening to their family. What the child probably feels is not any genuine dislike of the new step-parent but anxiety and a desire to test your new relationship. Will this new person stick around, or

will (s)he disappear sooner or later? This is something the adults must agree about, so that they can present a clear front to the child.

**14. IF SACRIFICING YOUR OWN INTERESTS SOMETIMES FEELS THANKLESS,** remember that your child does not expect you to efface yourself to suit him or her. Children do not benefit from having parents who are tired and resigned. Think a bit about what is best for you sometimes as well.

**15. IF YOU FEEL POWERLESS IN YOUR PARENTAL ROLE,** the important thing to start by understanding where the sense of powerlessness comes from. Only then can you do something about it. It is almost always easier to get a perspective on your situation if you share your thoughts with another adult – a friend, parent, lifemate or colleague. If you want to telephone an outsider, there are several organisations that provide helplines for parents. The telephone numbers are given in the adjacent box.

**BRIS, (Children's Rights in Society).**  
Helpline for adults: 077-150 50 50.  
A call costs 1 krona a minute, and professional help is given. Open on weekdays from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

**RÄDDA BARNEN, (SWEDISH SAVE THE CHILDREN),** anonymous parents' helpline: 020-786 786. Free of charge. Open on Monday from 12 noon to 9.30 p.m., Tuesday to Friday from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. and weekends from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.

**RÖDA KORSET, Swedish Red Cross,** emergency helpline: 020-220 006. Free of charge. Open every night from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.

**SFPH (Swedish Association for Mental Health/Ester Bohlman Foundation).** Parents' helpline: 020-854 000. Free of charge. Open from Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

**EMERGENCY COUNSELLOR:**  
08-702 14 80 or 112  
(emergency services).  
Always open.

**16. IF YOU SUSPECT THAT A CHILD YOU KNOW IS BEING MALTREATED OR ABUSED,** it is always better to talk to someone about your suspicions than to do nothing at all. Contact the social services in your area: there, trained staff can advise you how to act. You need not say what child you are talking about, or state your own name. Your call will not automatically result in a report being filed. You can also contact a child and youth psychiatric clinic or school health service to obtain advice and support.

### What is child abuse?

What do adults achieve if they hit, ostracise, lock up or ignore children, abuse them verbally or otherwise hurt or offend them?

They show the children that they are of little worth. They turn away, instead of getting close. They fail to affirm the children as human beings. They rock the foundations of the children's self-esteem. They inflate their own importance at the children's expense. They teach the children that love cannot be taken for granted – that it has to be deserved (even at the price of self-effacement). They signal that they do not care.

Children are burdened by these feelings for years – perhaps right up to and including adulthood. Many children who are abused find that the worst thing of all: the horrible, lonely, everlasting sense of their parents' total lack of commitment.

They also learn behaviour of their own. This is what happens when children decide for themselves what is right and wrong:

parents teach this through their own conduct. Talking to a child about how to behave towards others is usually quite pointless unless you practise what you preach. Children base their own learning on what their parents do, and unconsciously fashion their own moral code on this basis.

This does not mean that all those who have been beaten in childhood will automatically beat their own children. But it does, in fact, mean that they will have to break a learned pattern if they are to refrain. Obviously, it would be simpler if the pattern had not been there from the start.

Another implication is that we parents bring up not only our own children, but also to some extent all our descendants in subsequent generations.

This gives us as parents even greater responsibility. And, as we can just as well see it, this also gives us an even greater capacity for benefiting the generations to come.

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