Common Preferences and Non-coercion

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 16 July, 2003 - 18:28

One important concept in TCS is that of *common preferences*. Common preferences are policies that all parties after a successfully resolved disagreement prefer to their initial positions: everyone gets what they want. These are created through a combination of changing one's wishes to more moral ones, and creatively working out how best to proceed for everyone. TCS distinguishes between common preferences and all other possible ways of coping with prima facie disagreement, such as compromises (in which no one gets what he wants) or choosing winners and losers according to some mechanical formula like voting, taking turns, obedience to one's superior in a hierarchy and so on.

Another key concept is that of coercion. Coercion means (roughly speaking) doing things to people, or making them do things, against their will. Where common preferences are found, there is no coercion. A major difference between TCS and other educational philosophies is the idea that it is possible and desirable to raise children without intentionally coercing them.

Is non-coercion not, in itself, a mechanical rule? To think of it as such would be a misconception of TCS; moreover, such a rule could not be followed. By "it is possible" we are not implying that there is a mechanical method of achieving the lifestyle we advocate. We have something quite different in mind: like an engineer who says that starships are possible, we mean that whatever difficulties and obstacles there may be are not inherent in the situation of being an adult looking after a child, but are caused purely by not yet knowing how to solve the relevant problems. But this, in itself, is liberating because it denies the melancholy certainties of "for you own good" and "may as well get used to it" that have been self-fulfilling prophesies throughout history. What we mean is that aspiring to a non-coercive lifestyle is *not* like trying to build a spaceship that could exceed the speed of light: that would be an example of something that might be be desirable, but is *im*possible.

By "desirable", we mean something more than that being coerced hurts and that it is not nice to be in a position of hurting people. For that leaves open the possibility of a tradeoff between that and some other even more undesirable thing. Like a political theorist who says that the transition from absolute monarchy to liberal democracy is desirable, we mean that such tradeoffs can be eliminated – again, not by a mechanical formula nor merely by wanting to, but by creatively solving the specific problems that arise.

Another possible misinterpretation of TCS is the idea that coercion is always wrong – that if one child is attacking another with a cricket bat, it is wrong to intervene. On the contrary, it is vital to protect the victim, and that might well involve stopping the attacking child against his or her will, i.e., coercively. That there would have been a way to avoid this in the first place is, at such a moment, irrelevant for all practical purposes. But in the bigger picture, it is reassuring: if the good things in life could be obtained by mechanically following a rule, then only a wicked and unworthy parent would ever fail to find a common preference with their beloved child. But TCS is not a rule. When we say that it is possible and desirable to raise children without intentionally coercing them, we don't mean that if everything goes wrong sometimes, you must be an evil shit unworthy of life, what we mean is: *hey, there's hope – things need not be like this for ever!*

Comments

could u give some examples of...

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 17 July, 2003 - 08:40

could u give some examples of "common preferences"? how can we *always* get what we want?

compromise is an art

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 17 July, 2003 - 09:39

You're saying compromise is bad? What's up with that?!

"A compromise is the art of dividing a cake in such a way that everybody believes he got the biggest piece." Done well, everybody feels they got what they want. Saying it's nobody getting what they want means you're thinking of a compromise that's not working. In our family we teach the art of compromise that works and we like it.

Some notes on how it "works"

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 17 July, 2003 - 09:44

"Mum, I want beans for tea." "Darling, we're out of beans and I don't want to go shopping again. How about pasta?" "Yeah, pasta's cool." (Child puts pan of pasta on the hob.)

There will be hundreds of examples of common-preferences being found in the life of almost any human being every day, probably. Common-preferences aren't unique to TCS. What's unique to TCS is the belief that people don't have to fight with their own kids.

TCS philosophy is that it's *possible* to get what you want all the time. This happens, roughly, through a combination of treating one's children in a respectful, civilised way, having good ideas about what one *should* want and improving them all the time, and sharing those ideas with one's children in a positive way they are actively receptive to.

TCS philosophy doesn't say that this is easy, that anybody currently succeeds at doing it all the time, or indeed that one needs to be perfect in order to succeed at doing it all the time. Most of us have 100% common-preference based (non-fighting) relationships with a few friends without being perfect, but not with out kids. It's just a knowledge-gap.

TCS thinks we can have them with our kids too. Somehow. And we can start working out how in practice from where we are now.

Or, looking at it another way round, TCS is about refusing to *systematise* the coercion of children. It says, if kids get hurt, that's bad. It doesn't try to justify, rationalise or further the use of force on children. Every other parenting school states that coercing your children is *inevitable*, due to the nature of having children. TCS philosophy, on the other hand, would argue that even if every single parent in the world today, including all TCS advocates, regularly does things that cause their children hurt, that would not mean things should or must stay that way.

Alice

http://libertarian_parent_in_the_countryside.blogspot.com/ (http://libertarian_parent_in_the_countryside.blogspot.com/)

to post comments

"Compromise" is ambiguous

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 17 July, 2003 - 09:52

Where "compromise" means someone gave up some part of their preference against their will, unwillingly, TCS philosophy would argue that we can do better than that!

Where it means, everyone genuinely agreed and felt good about it, that's what was being referred to above as a common-preference, probably reached by someone adjusting their desires in a good way (morally).

"A compromise is the art of dividing a cake in such a way that everybody believes he got the biggest piece" sounds like common-preference finding- as long as the big slices of cake are real not pretend, and genuinely satisfying when bitten into, of course.

Alice

to post comments

Example or two

Submitted by decoy on 17 July, 2003 - 10:29

I'm bit of a newbie in TCS, but I'll try to draft one "easy" and one "hard" example.

First suppose a young child decides se really likes a teen show on TV, but you think the show might be a bit too mature for hir. Besides, it's on pretty late. What do you do?

The first thing is that you can't just tell the child se can't watch. That'd be coercion. Instead you need to think about what the two of you want, why, how those wants could be meshed so that everybody's better off, and then genuinely negotiate with the child.

If the problem *really* is about noise late at night, you might tape the show. If you fear the child might not understand what se sees, you might consider watching the show with hir, explaining, supporting, and if it ever comes to that, comforting. Children tend to pick the most peculiar shows, so you'd probably enjoy yourself. And

the company, of course. Or maybe you might want to watch some similar show you like better, and the child still likes.

If you fear the show might hurt your child, you should first make sure that your idea is sound, and if so, probably help the child understand your concern. Children aren't stupid or uncaring, so if you have a real reason for doubt, the child will usually understand and think twice about watching. If so, you should definitely help hir find some other show to watch, or other things to do, which are as interesting and satisfying as the show we're talking about.

But most of the time you'll probably find that there was no cause for concern in the first place -- TV doesn't make children violent or promiscuous. Dismissive parenting, a lack of solid knowledge and discounting rational thought *do*, though: they make for uncritical viewers, susceptibility to media influence and lack of impulse control.

No matter what the outcome, in the end, you don't worry, the neighbours get to sleep and the child does something se likes. The deal's something-for-nothing.

Then suppose a teenager wants a car but the money just doesn't seem to be there. Should we just bluntly state that a car is not forthcoming, or perhaps sacrifice your own well-being to get the car? Both are options, but neither is the right one. Again we need to think a little bit and negotiate.

Why is the car needed? If it's to get to school, there might be other ways to accomplish that. Perhaps the bus, perhaps a friend's car (maybe a new car shared with a neighbour?),

perhaps a motorcycle (BTW, girls can love cycles too). If it's because of privacy, self-image or independence, you should ask why the youngster doesn't have those right now. Plenty of solutions lie that way. If it's because the youngster needs a hobby, there are plenty of hobbies out there, and a number of places where one can get one's hands on cars. Even assemble one's own -- I've known a couple of people who've done that and grown up to be successful engineers.

If such alternatives won't cut it, perhaps you could pool funds with your youth and work something out: young people can earn money too, so they shouldn't expect parents to pay for their every whim. (It's easy for young people to understand this as well, unless you've earlier shied away from talking about money and work.) Maybe you could trade down the family car and buy two -- it's far better to have two cars in a family than one, even if they're not that fancy. And no, even taking that second mortgage on the house isn't entirely out of the question if the payoff to the family is great enough. It often is.

And so on, and so forth. The point is that even with hard questions like money, the parent shouldn't be a dictator, and there are always hoardes of nice solutions. Most of them will lead to better outcomes to both parties. TCS doesn't tell what the right solutions are for *your* family, but it does give you good hints on how to find them quickly, nonviolently and innovatively.

(You might ask just how it is better for a parent to trade down the family car. It is because we're not comparing to the parent always getting hir way. We're comparing to a previous situation where the family car hadn't yet been bought. Speaking from the standpoint of the whole family it can be better to have two cars than to have just a single flashy one.)

to post comments

Common Preference Examples

Submitted by Elliot Temple on 17 July, 2003 - 16:04

Alice: very nice

anywayz, easy example:

Elliot: Wanna come over thursday? curi: No, busy. Can I come monday? Elliot: Erm, that's not a good day. How about wednesday? curi: ok, wednesday

they had conflicting first desires (elliot wanted thursday, curi wanted monday) and both changed what they wanted to wednesday. common preference found.

example 2:

Elliot: I WANT MEXICAN FOOD curi: NO, I WANT PIZZA, BITCH Elliot: I AM NOT IN THE MOOD FOR PIZZA, ASSHOLE curi: FUCK YOU, I *SAID* I DON'T WANT GAY-ASS MEXICAN FOOD Elliot: BUT MEXICAN FOOD IS SO GOOD, YOU NUT curi: LA LA LA LA LA LA LA Elliot and curi: *think* Elliot: Hey, there's a steak in the fridge. Big one. curi: *drooling* Really? Elliot: Yeah curi: w00t Elliot and curi: *cook and eat steak*

OK, in this example they had conflicting initial desires about what to eat, but both changed their desire to steak as soon as they thought of it. Notice they yell and cuss, but a common preference was still found. If yelling and cussing work for you, there's nothing inherently wrong with them; common preferences are not some particular method and TCS does not rule out any methods for mechanical reasons (ie, no methods that involve saying 'fuck' or no methods that involve more than 42 UNIT_OF_LOUDNESS). (Actually it's hard to imagine yelling being good IRL in our society, but it's often perfectly fine in text. And cussing can be fun both in text and IRL.)

Example 3:

curi: [wearing a diaper and sucking a passifier] I don't want to wear my seatbelt. Elliot: [wearing a hat that says 'dad'] Now son*, seatbelts are important for safety. curi: I know. Elliot: Well, then, why don't you want to wear it? curi: I'm not sure, I just don't like it. Elliot: Is it uncomfortable. curi: Yeah. Elliot: Anything else? curi: It's boring! It's all black and ugly. Elliot: OK, I have an idea. Elliot: *gets fluffy pink fabric with glitter and glues it over all the seatbelts* curi: cooool, now I'll look like a stud with my seatbelt on!

*I do not endorse calling your son 'son' instead of his name, it's just used in the skit to clarify who is who.

OK, this answer sounds kinda silly, I know. That's because finding common preferences for hard problems (many people find the seatbelt thing hard for them) depends very greatly on the specific details of the involved parties' lives. This solution only works because of curi's odd taste (curi says he was acting but don't listen). I can't tell you in what facet of a tricky situation a CP will come to you; I can say there are possible ones contained in *all* the facets.

-- Elliot Temple **http://curi.blogspot.com/ (http://curi.blogspot.com/)**

to post comments

Synergie
Submitted by Puella63 on 18 July, 2003 - 14:03

I have recently read Steven Covey's SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE. Habit no. 6, Synergise sounds a lot like CP. He mentions a 3r alternative to solve conflicts as being a preferable solution for all involved.

to post comments

How can it be better for the parent to trade down the family car
Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 19 July, 2003 - 00:19

"Decoy" asked how it can be better *for the parent* to trade down the family car.

Lots of ways. They won't have to be giving the teenager lifts. And they can be going to one place in their car while the teenager does some family shopping in her own car. Maybe the teenager can even come to rescue them when their car breaks down, or when the two parents are in a car somewhere and one of them is called away urgently and the other one wants to come home. When one car is in the shop, the family still has a car. Like "Puella63" said, when people are getting what they want and are happy, synergie happens.

to post comments

Right on
Submitted by decoy on 20 July, 2003 - 21:29

Elliot: excellent examples.

I too find that even strong emotion isn't bad for rational decision making, and think that the childish, utterly outlandish, even fiendish notions of how to conduct our lives sometimes prove fruitful. Children are a resource, *especially* when they don't like their seatbelts.

Life ain't a simple thing. In particular with children, who always manage to surprise you. That's also why I think we do not only have duties towards children, or just "care for them". I think we can actually *learn* from them -- children are too inexperienced to care about our faulty ideas, far too self-conscious to cope with inflated egos, and certainly quite capable of rational judgment. So they can also help us get rid of the cruft we're clinging onto. "Entrenched theories", as we call them.

I think that while we care for children, nurture them and give them space and opportunities to develop themselves, we should also take heed of what they *really* say, and *learn*. I mean, who's ever gonna shake us like children do?

to post comments

Common Preference is a flawed idea
Submitted by Henry Sturman on 22 August, 2003 - 11:19

I certainly like what TCS stands for. Quite literally, actually. I think Taking Children Seriously is a great name, and it really sums up nicely how I think we should treat children: simply take them seriously, just as we take adults

seriously. I agree with TCS's most important themes, which I consider to be: don't coerce your kids (well, I think there are rare exceptions where it's good to coerce kids or adults),

be creative at solving problems (generally work from the assumption that there is a solution),

be skeptical about traditional education, use argument and advice rather than force, look for common decisions which make all involved happy. I attended a lecture once by Sarah Fitz-Claridge about TCS, and she has really good and, I believe, true things to say about how to deal with children. So I much appreciate her insights and analysis of the mistakes so many people make in dealing with children. Mostly boiling down to not taking them seriously and using coercion instead of reason.

But ironically, while I broadly agree with most of the TCS conclusions, it strikes me that the way it is typically philosophically defended is logically flawed on several issues. Some other time perhaps I will argue that TCS'ers are somewhat mistaken about the link between TCS and fallibilism. Here I wish to argue that the TCS notion of common preferences is thoroughly confused. This is evidenced by my analysis of two articles on this site showing that the following three different and incompatible definitions of "common preference" are used interchangeably:

1.A common policy that improves the position of everyone. 2.A common policy that everyone involved prefers to all alternatives considered. 3.A common policy that everyone is satisfied with.

Definitions 1 and 2 follow from the first sentence of the article above:

"Common preferences are policies that all parties after a successfully resolved disagreement prefer to their initial positions: everyone gets what they want."

It is clear that the first part of the sentence implies definition 1. The second part ("everyone gets what they want") seems to suggest definition 2, but this is less clear. However, the following sentences clearly does suggests definition 2:

"To put it simply, you keep making bold conjectures and subjecting them to criticism until you have a solution that everyone involved wholeheartedly prefers to any other candidate solutions any of you can think of at the time. (We call that a common preference, the preference you have in common.)".

This is from the article **Introduction to Taking Children Seriously (TCS)**. Another except from that article:

" 'Does it have to be a question of being right? Am I actually wrong for wanting to go to a Chinese restaurant, or is that just my taste?' countered Wendy. It is not the fact that you like Chinese food that is the problem, it is that you are not taking into account the fact that the smell of Chinese food makes me feel physically sick. Let me put it another way: if neither of us changes our mind and we don't resolve the disagreement, is it not the case that at least one of us is going to get hurt?"

Apparently the aim here is to find something that everyone can agree to without anybody feeling hurt. This implies definition 3. Now let's go through these definitions.

It's often easy to find a common policy in accordance with 1. Suppose we are all very hungry. I prefer to go to a Chinese restaurant, while my friend doesn't like Chinese food. But since she is very hungry, having a Chinese dinner still does improve her situation, since she'd rather eat something she doesn't like than stay hungry. So we eat Chinese. According to the definition this is a common preference. But of course this is a totally useless definition, because defined this way a common preference isn't a good result at all. Although both our positions have improved, going to a Greek restaurant, say, would have been a much better choice if my friend really loves Greek food and I like it only slightly less than Chinese food.

Definition 2 is obviously ludicrous in the context of how TCS'ers use the term. It's not ludicrous in the sense that such a common preference is impossible. Sometimes it does happen that, say, all in a group prefer to go to the same restaurant. That's a true common preference. But what makes this definition ludicrous is the fact that it is inconsistent with the TCS idea that one can find a common preference in general. This is obviously untrue, a case of wishful thinking. If I prefer Chinese food and my friend prefers Greek food we have different preferences not a common one. The fact that we may be mistaken about our own preferences is irrelevant, for it remains that there is no logical reason to assume people generally have the same preference.

Definition 3 is the most realistic definition. And in practice that indeed seems to be the TCS attitude. Try to find a policy that everyone is happy with, taking into account everybody's preferences. Though I slightly prefer Chinese food to Greek food, I will be quite happy if we go to the Greek restaurant, because I still like Greek food, and I want my dinner partner to be happy as well. So, the idea is good: if there is disagreement try to be rational, creative, loving, etc. and come up with a solution that everyone can live with. Normal people call this a compromise. TCS'ers call this a common preference. But that term is, of course, quite wrong. Agreeing to a solution other than your own preference, to make others happy, is not a preference, much less a common preference. This may sound horrible, but TCS'ers live in the same world as normal people, and therefore they too regularly make group decisions via compromise, voting or whatever. Their third way exists only in Alice in Wonderland. Unless you redefine the word preference to mean a preference for maximum utility for the group, in which case all would have the same preference if they can agree on all individual utilities for all alternatives. But that is not what the word preference normally means. But, again, the attitude is good. In their illogical search for a common preference I imagine TCS'ers will tend to find the best and wisest compromises, making everybody happy. And that's good.

A last comment. One thing I'm missing in TCS is the idea that everybody doesn't have to do the same thing. If you're in a group you don't always have to find a "common preference" (compromise). If the majority very much wants to do one thing and one person has a very different preference, that individual can simply choose not to join and let the rest of the group do what it wants. Or the group can split into two groups, or whatever. This may be much better in many cases than looking for a single "common preference" for the whole group.

to post comments

semantics

Henry:

1. Common preferences don't always have to be the same thing. "Do different things" is a common preference.

2. The word "compromise" is actually ambiguous. Compromising yourself is a bad thing to do. "Common-preference" is more specific: it means (roughly) something everyone is happy with, as opposed to something one or more people may feel shit about but obliged to do because they think it's morally right.

Alice Bachini

to post comments

Common Preferences flawed idea?

Submitted by id on 24 August, 2003 - 09:10

There is a serious flaw in your arguments against common preferences. You seem to take the preferences of people to be unmutable.

Let us take the restaurant example and consider it with a little bit more detail. I want to go to chinese and my friend wants to go to greek - let's say he doesn't like chinese, or that the smell makes me sick.

Now if we do things by the utilitarian calculations, as you did, my initial preference would be to go to the chinese, since it would yield me the best utility. But this is before I hear that my friend doesn't like it. Hearing this of course changes my valuations for different things, since I like him and do not want to cause him discomfort, or sickness. Thus the value of going to a chinese restaurant with him is now a lot less than it was just seconds before - this is how obtaining new information may change our preferences. (Speaking from moral standpoint it is also right that we thus change our preferences)

So what happens next? Me and my friend, we try to throw out nice ideas about what we like, and want to do - in order to find out the best thing that exists. This of course is possible, since the best possible action that exists, exists.

So in our case, it might truly be that we go to that Greek restaurant. If we do, this does yield me greater satisfaction than going to chinese with him or going to chinese without him, i.e. it is a common preference of type 2. On the other hand, we may find out that our preferences for certain kinds of food are more important than being together at the moment and so I will go to chinese, he to greek and we'll meet again after eating. Thus as Alice already pointed out, common preference may be that we don't do things together.

to post comments

Short response

Submitted by Henry Sturman on 24 August, 2003 - 10:01

Yes, as I mentioned at the end of my previous comment, you can always redefine the term "common preference" so as to make it correct. Indeed, if you define preference to include having a preference for others being happy, plus assume that everybody's preference is for maximum utility, plus assume people can agree on each other's utilities, then you have something workable. This does leave open the question of why we should all be utilitarians. But it does nicely reason away the problem of sacrifice (alla Ayn Rand),

simply by claiming that if you are happy to sacrifice because you want someone else to be happy then it isn't really sacrifice. And yes, one can even square the circle by defining people doing **different** things as a **common** preference on the grounds that everybody is satisfied with the result.

I have a preference for being clear and saying what you mean.

to post comments

definition of CP

Submitted by Alice Bachini on 24 August, 2003 - 12:16

Henry,

How do you think "common preference" ought to be defined? Do you think we should use the word "compromise" instead, despite the way this term is often used, to mean something whereby people coerce themselves into self-sacrificing?

to post comments

Not talking about redefining common preferences

Submitted by id on 24 August, 2003 - 12:29

The talk of common preferences is said when speaking of people who know each other and **care** for each other. Now if one cares for another, we can express that in utilitarian terms in following way. If the other person is happy, then my utility goes up, and if he is unhappy mine will also be lower.

I'm not saying we should all be utilitarians, I just explained the matter in utilitarian terms, since you wanted to express the common preference problem in utilitarian terms and concluded that it is faulty, which it is not.

As for simplicity, the idea of common preference is very simple. Everyone gets something they prefer over anything else that is possible. What follows of it, and how it exactly plays out cannot be though out without taking into account that people care for each other **especially when we are talking about relationships inside a family**. Caring and loving is integral part of close relationships and thus any theory that doesn't take that into account is bound to fail.

Preferences are not immutable, but they change and can be changed when the situations we are in, change.

to post comments

Re: definition of CP

Submitted by Henry Sturman on 25 August, 2003 - 10:57

I think definitions should be chosen so words mean what they normally mean. So I would define a common preference as the earlier defition 2:

2.A common policy that everyone involved prefers to all alternatives considered.

And I would want to define a preference as one's personal preference, not yet taking into account other's preferences. Otherwise we are left with no word for the original preferences. For the whole idea of choosing something others are happy with as well, is based on the idea that the others have an original preference which precedes the posterior preference taking other's preferences into account.

This is simply the correct definition because this is how a normal English speaking person would understand the phrase when first heard.

I think the use of the term in this sense is quite OK. It's only that with this definition the typical use of the phrase by TCS is incorrect, as it is not generally true that a common preference can be found, as is claimed. Only if it happens to be the case, say, that we all like the same restaurant most, is there a common preference.

Where TCS'ers mean something else than what they are saying, I propose they simply say what they mean to say. If they mean a utilitarian result, they should say a utilitarian result. If they mean a result that everybody is happy with, they should say a result that everybody is happy with. The latter is sort of a eufemism for a good compromise, that everybody finds fair and acceptable. Etc.

I also think the word compromise is OK. I don't think coercion is built into that. In some sense sacrifice is built into it, but only in the nontrivial sense that TCS'ers also accept it, namely as giving up your own initial preference because you want the other person to be happy as well. But there might be some danger in the term, as it does sometimes imply that compromise, in the sense that people give up something, is inherently good. While often it can't be avoided that people give up their initial preference, there is not always enough emphasis in at least avoiding that as much as possible. That's why I do like the TCS attitude of trying to be creative in finding solutions that everybody is pleased with to the greatest extent.

So, if TCS wants to avoid the word compromise, that's quite OK. Just think up another word, but please do choose a word which is good and correct. And don't use a word which simply denies the problem instead of solving it. Which is exactly what "common preference" does, since it denies the problem that people don't always want the same thing.

By the way, the word coercion is used in a not well defined way by TCS. For example, I have some doubts about how appropriate it is to speak of self-coercion.

Henry Sturman (http://henrysturman.com)

to post comments

how can we *always* get what we want?
Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 12 December, 2003 - 15:14

By keeping an open and positive state of mind....erm and how does one do that, I hear you ask!

:) (http://www.rideflame.co.uk/)

to post comments

common preferences
Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 26 June, 2004 - 21:11

I really like the idea of commonon preferences but to say it is just as easy as stating your preferences and having your kid reasonably dialogue is a little trite...it is and can be emotionally exhausting to have this type of discussion

with a 3 year old; less so with an 8 year old but it gives the illusion that non coercion is simple and in reality in can be extremely diffficult. I'm not saying it's not worthwhile but lets be honest about the work it can take...

to post comments

Re: Common Preferences

Submitted by Alex (not verified) on 6 April, 2006 - 18:21

I agree, these examples of "discussions" with children that will supposedly convince them to change their minds and make a good decision are either trivial or fanciful: -some are trivial in that the child's preference is not very different from the parent's, or that the child doesn't have a very strong preference in the first place. -others are fanciful in assuming that the child will so easily be convinced of the correct decision, when in fact children (and adults for that matter) are occasionally very stubborn, and won't always readily change their minds, regardless of how rational, patient, and clear the parent's explanation is.

Of course it is good to explain why you think a kid should or shouldn't do something, but to claim that you will always be able convince them with such an explanation is wishful thinking. Think about when you were a kid: did your parents ever tell you that you should do something that you didn't want to do, and try to explain why they wanted you to do it? Did you ever stubbornly reject these arguments, no matter how much they tried to help you see the reason? Did you ever realize later in life that they were right, and that maybe you just weren't willing to listen? Maybe you even do that as an adult from time to time, you would not be alone.

I think Mark Twain captured the idea perfectly in saying this: "When I was 14, my father knew nothing. When I turned 21, I was amazed at what he had learned in just 7 short years."

This situation happens all the time, and not just in childhood. When it does happen, sometimes you just have to explain your position, and then tell the kid to trust you. Parents, after all, may not be any more intelligent than their children, but they certainly have much more experience with the world. That is why kids have to just trust them sometimes, because the parents have been there and done that, and know what works and what doesn't.

to post comments

Common Preferences and Non-coercion

*Submitted by **aids related (not verified) (http://techactual.org/)** on 23 November, 2006 - 15:00*

If you define preference to include having a preference for others being happy, plus assume that everybody's preference is for maximum utility, plus assume people can agree on each other's utilities, then you have something workable.

to post comments

I like the word common preferences!

Submitted by mammal_mama on 7 January, 2007 - 19:29

I don't think common preferences should be replaced with another word. When I'm getting together for a meal with people I love and enjoy being with, it's preferable to me to find an eating option we can ALL enjoy together, rather than me getting my absolute FAVORITE food if no one else likes it.

I guess if all you really care about is the food, and the people don't matter, you WILL be happier just going off on your own -- and your companions may find that preferable to eating food they hate or having you be totally miserable.

If you like them enough to want to spend time together after the meal, they'll probably prefer sharing time that you ALL can enjoy.

Of course, if the affection's all one-sided and you don't even want to see them later, your going with what you want is going to be hurtful -- yet would they really WANT you to fake an emotion you don't feel?

I'D rather know the truth myself. But I agree with id that you need relationships of mutual caring for TCS and CP to work.

Applying this to small children: let's say a toddler takes a bottle of water and starts squirting it all over the house. If she and her parents have a relationship of mutual caring, what she REALLY wants is to enjoy squirting the water, not ruin the carpet and irritate the big people.

Though she may not have the words to express all this, she VERY LIKELY would prefer squirting the water without causing anyone else unhappiness.

If her parents really care about her happiness, they'd prefer, say, having her squirt in the bathtub, or throwing a towel on the kitchen floor and giving her bowls to squirt into, or heading outdoors to squirt if it's warm: they'd prefer ANY of these alternatives over forcibly taking her squirt bottle and making her unhappy.

Of course, a parent who cares JUST about the carpet, and sees no importance in her child being happy, would probably prefer just stopping the squirting -- similar to the diner who cares only about the food not the fellowship. Again, the relationship of mutual caring is essential: without it, common preferences are impossible and irrelevant.

Susan

to post comments

How pleasantly hypothetical.

How pleasantly hypothetical. And I'm sure it never never NEVER goes anything like:

"Mummy, I want beans for tea." "Darling, we're out of beans and I don't want to go shopping again. How about pasta?" "I want beans." "But we don't have any beans. How about eggs?" "I want BEANS." "I am too tired to go shopping now. I could make some potatoes." "I want BEEEEEEEEEEEANS." "Chicken noodle soup!" "Beans. Beans. Beans." "Tomato soup and a toasted-cheese sandwich?" "BEANS, I want BEANS!" And so on ... no, it NEVER goes that way, does it?

to post comments

re: How Pleasantly Hypothetical

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 24 January, 2010 - 13:37

i think the whole entire point of TCS is giving your children the same respect you would give them if they were adults - even when they dont act like adults. To expect them to act like adults would be irrational and thus still disrespectful. So suppose the beans conversation goes the second way, you, as parent, could step back and say "Look in the pantry and pick something out. Anything in the whole pantry. I'll make sure to get some beans the next time I'm at the store."

This way, you've shown your child respect by allowing him to choose his snack (anything in the pantry should be acceptable; it would be disrespectful to keep donuts or other "sometimes" foods right in front of the face of a child and then tell them he can't have them) but you've also taken seriously his craving for beans. If child still refuses to find a "common preference" as its referred to here, then likely the tantrum is due to some other cause - "HALT" is the child Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired? in which case the solution, or common preference, is not giving your child beans, but rather fulfilling their need in some other way.

No, its not easy, its not simple, but its called parenting. Its hard work and requires dedication if its to be done right, but everything in life worth having is worth working for!

to post comments

If yelling and cussing work for you

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 2 April, 2010 - 03:20

Yelling and cursing are not magical behaviors that blossom from nowhere and go nowhere. Both have their origins in pain, violence and anger. You may add lack of self-control, and egotism. Where is your child learning that that such behavior is acceptable? Obviously from you - she/he may have a hard time later maintaining healthy social ties if such destructive behavior makes up her repertoire of social options.

Yelling could never work for me because it is antisocial, disturbing and violent. I am repulsed by your bold assumption that yelling is an acceptable form of behavior, especially from a young person. Cursing is a form of language manipulation which can denotes anger, spite, violent, scorn, derision or many other forms of sociopathic states. I did not allow my children to curse. Both have developed lovely, charming personalities. Once less strike against them in this life. Who can stand to associate with an ogre?

These two elements which you blithely accept are brutal deformations of language. Language is a common tool that is poisoned by vulgarity much as one poisons a well by urinating in it. VaniNY

to post comments

Actually, my older child

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 22 June, 2011 - 23:17

Actually, my older child would have thrown himself to the floor in front of the pantry, weeping and wailing that there were no beans in it. He would have done this from the time he was 3 until he was probably 5 years old.

Not all kids respond well to this kind of negotiating/talking/choosing, especially at that age. These methods would probably work quite well now that he's older and can hold different options in mind and balance them out, but getting him to that point took lots of work.

to post comments

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