

## **"Dr. Coleman. Your Methods Just Enables Their Bad Behavior!"**

One of the most common complaints or criticism I hear of my work is that I'm either too hard on parents, or that my methods will just reinforce the bad behavior of their children; that in encouraging parents to make amends, be empathic, and not respond defensively, I'm doing nothing to force the child to see the parent's perspective or to grow up. In addition, I'm reinforcing the distortions in the child's orientation to the parent.

There are times when that criticism is exactly right: Sometimes a parent's continuing to reach out, to be empathic, or to not push back does lead the adult child (or your DIL or SIL) to conclude that they have a bigger claim against you than they really do. They might respect you less if they're abusive and you continue to try to reach out to them without any push against the abuse. This is especially true with adult children (or their spouses) who have personality disorders, addictions, or other forms of mental illness. It may also be better, as I've written before, to simply harden your heart more and stop trying.

So, to be clear, I don't assume that a child's version of a parent is correct. But I also don't assume that the parent's version of the child is correct. Therefore, you're betting off assuming that you have some blind spots as you begin this work. Making amends, showing empathy and taking responsibility for some period of time is an act of humility, not humiliation. It's a position of strength, not weakness. It's the ability to say, "Well, maybe you're right. Maybe I missed something really important about you either in how I raised you or how I communicate with you. Let's look at that together and figure it out."

You may never find out what your child's real complaints are about you if you don't start with where they are and accept that there be some validity to them. In addition, your humility communicates a willingness to communicate with your child as an equal, which is a requirement in today's parent-adult child relations.

Now, that may mean that your child will want to grade you with an F for your parenting while you or any other parent might grade you with an A. You still get to believe that you did a good job. You're not obligated to feel bad about your parenting. On the other hand, it's not useful to tell your child what a great parent you were when they're telling you the opposite. It will just escalate the situation.

Finally, allowing some time for your child to blame you may clarify for them what their real issues are. This is especially true for a child with some form of mental illness, as we discussed several weeks ago. Sometimes blaming a parent is a first step toward figuring out who they are. It doesn't mean that they'll always do it or that it's their ultimate truth. It also doesn't mean that you're signing on for that forever. But, your child may need to be in some kind of dialogue with you where you show that you can take a long, hard look at yourself, if for no other reason, than to model that such a thing is a useful thing to do in life, That's not being an enabler. That's being a good parent.