

*Help
For Handling Criticism
When You Are
Parenting Differently*



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The Consciously Parenting Project Booklet Series

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The Consciously Parenting Project, LLC is a collaboration of professionals and families who are dedicated to providing information, resources and support for conscious decisionmaking in all areas of family life. We are committed to providing the most up-to-date research and information possible so that parents can truly make informed decisions. The Consciously Parenting Project, LLC is comprised of an on-line community, educational opportunities for parents including articles, tele-seminars and in-person workshops, TeleParenting Support Classes, Family-friendly Retreats and an extensive resource list on a wide variety of parenting topics.

The Consciously Parenting Project, LLC focuses on Love-Based Parenting to understand the child and dynamics in the family. It is a comprehensive, research-based paradigm that can be used with all families, from those looking to prevent behavior issues to those with severe behavior issues. Love-Based Parenting focuses on the relationships between parents, the relationship between parent and child, and all the relationships within the family system to make lasting changes, rather than simply focusing on the behaviors. Love-Based Parenting understands that behaviors are simply a communication and we seek to understand what the behavior is communicating in order to address the underlying issues contributing to the behavior instead.

We also seek to educate parents about a wide range of outside factors that can influence family-life, from media to the foods you choose to bring into your home. We seek to empower you to make the best decision for your family by providing the information and support you need to do so. This isn't a one-sized fits all technique, but rather a different way of looking at the world in an aware conscious way.

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Handling Criticism from Others

When you have made the decision to parent differently from others in your family or your community, many parents find themselves in situations that are uncomfortable for them. Well meaning relatives or neighbors may say things that you react to, even if only inside yourself. How do we handle these situations with love and respect? What can we learn from them about where we are on our own parenting journey? What can we learn about ourselves? How can we make this seemingly negative experience positive?

Let's look at ourselves first. What does it say about where we are on our own journey when the criticism of others bothers us? From my own experience and from talking with many, many parents, criticism or negative comments affect us the most when we are not 100% confident in our own decisions. If you weren't raised the way you are parenting, until you are more confident in the decisions you are making, others comments or even questions can bring up the doubts you are feeling deep down. Use that as an opportunity to discover where you aren't fully confident in your decisions.

Perhaps we are seeking validation on some level from these outside people. Maybe we really want our sister-in-law to accept what we're doing, or marvel at how thoughtfully we are making decisions for our child. But if we expect this validation to come from outside of ourselves, we will be disappointed. No one else can validate you. You have to validate yourself.

In order to be proactive in situations like this when we are still connecting with our own internal parenting rhythm, we need to become as confident as possible about our decisions. This

doesn't mean that everyone else is totally wrong. It means that your decisions resonate with you and you don't need someone else to agree with you in order to feel like you're a good parent. This means that you need to educate yourself as much as possible and surround yourself with others who are making similar decisions while you are still in the process of becoming confident as a parent. It helps to have others who are walking a similar path to turn to when questions do come up for you. It doesn't mean that you need them to validate you. It simply means that you have support. Having others who do support you makes it easier to handle those situations where there are conflicts or those who do not agree with what you are doing as a parent.

I believe that it is important to recognize that we are in the middle of a negative neurophysiologic feedback loop when someone says something that is upsetting to us. It means that communication from both people is adding to the negative energy and situation that is occurring. Sometimes, people interpret this as blaming the "victim." After all, "she's the one with the negative comment, not me!" But, if you have a role in this situation, however small it may seem, it means that you can make something different. You are NOT powerless and you can be proactive! Isn't that great?

In order to change what is happening from negative to positive, we need to understand a little about feedback loops. Feedback loops are communication between two or more people, and includes our communication on all levels- from our words, our tone of voice, to our body language. Each person in relationship with others communicates with far more than our words. Awareness of how we are feeling and what we are communicating verbally, as well as non-verbally, is essential

to turning these situations around. If you roll your eyes, even if only on the inside, it will have an impact on what is communicated.

A negative feedback loop cannot exist in the presence of a positive one. This means that if you can shift the way that you feel, the situation will cease to be an issue. That means you have tremendous power to make it different, but also tremendous responsibility, too. When we fall into simply blaming the other person, we are not acknowledging our role in creating this situation, nor are we able to access our personal power to make it different for our families and for ourselves. This is when we feel stuck and powerless. This is when we simply dread seeing that family member because we blame them for making us feel the way we do. In reality, it is part them and it is part us. We can't control the "them" part, but we certainly can use our loving influence with them when we have fully acknowledged and taken responsibility for the "us" part. Even if we feel it is only 2% us, and 98% them, we still have the ability to change our 2% and that is enough to make it different. Many times, it takes shifting our understanding of where the other person is coming from to really change our 2% (or 5% or 50%).

Let's take a closer look at the other person. When someone is negative about something, they are coming from a place of fear. Fear you say? It looks like anger to me! Well, underneath the anger, the behaviors you are seeing or experiencing are being driven by a fear. Most of the time, these outside people truly want what is in the best interests of you and your child. They are concerned or they wouldn't bother to say anything to you. They're afraid that if you do X, then Y will happen. Deep down (or sometimes not so deep down), they feel that if you don't punish that behavior, your child will grow up to be a serial

killer. Instead of saying what they are afraid of, often times you'll hear comments that don't make much sense and may even seem out of context. They may not even be aware of their own fears or how they are affecting their ability to connect with you and/or your child in a loving way.

Both parties can be experiencing a great deal of stress. Stress causes confused and distorted thinking. This is when either party may make statements that don't seem to make much sense. This stress can be internal stress or external stress. When one person is feeling internal stress, it sometimes causes them to identify the stress as something outside of themselves that they need to make different.

For example, many grandmothers have no idea what to do when the parent informs them that they won't need a special baby bed because they are planning to co-sleep, just like they do at home, when they come to visit. To those raised in the era of "babies absolutely must sleep in cribs," this brings up a great deal of stress and fear for the grandparent. They are feeling internal stress, yet they react to it by sometimes creating external stress for you! Their behaviors say that it is so overwhelming to them to even think about a baby not sleeping in a crib that they need to do whatever it takes to convince you, the parent, that it is dangerous. Sometimes this is overt (you arrive to find a crib assembled in a separate room just for your baby and grandma tries repeatedly to remove the sleeping baby from your arms to put him in the crib during his naptime) and sometimes it is covert (an expression on grandma's face or passive comments under the breath as she is passing through the room, or maybe just asking repeatedly if you want to lay the baby down.)

In order to shift your own perspective about grandma in this situation, it is helpful if you can first recognize that grandma (although it may seem to be only deep down inside) wants what is best for everyone. Connect with that and repeat to yourself that grandma really loves you and your baby. Or, if that is too much, that grandma is just really scared right now. When we see someone else as scared, we are less likely to become defensive than when we perceive her as angry or attacking.

All individuals come into their current situations being influenced, for better or for worse, by his or her past experiences. For those born in other generations, or even those listening to most of our current childcare “experts,” different information about what it takes for children to be healthy was (and sometimes still is) given. When you can remember that they do not have the same information as you do, and you can stop to listen, most of the time people will tell you what their fears are. Once you can hear what a person’s fears and concerns are, then you can usually find a way to present some information in a way that they may be able to hear. The catch is that you have to release the desire to make someone else agree with you. Anytime you are trying to force something, you are not coming from a loving place, but rather a place of fear. What is your fear?

Another critical part to making it different is choosing a time to have a discussion when everyone is calm. If grandma has just said something to you and you feel disrespected, it is not the time to have a conversation if you want to make it different. Stop and breathe. Rather than trying to justify what you’re doing or why you’re doing it, simply acknowledge grandma’s feelings about it. It doesn’t mean you are going to do anything different

or that you have to give up what you believe, it simply means that grandma feels the way she does for a reason and you are acknowledging that. Later, and especially if grandma felt you were able to hear her feelings, you may just be able to have a conversation and learn more about why this is such a difficult topic for everyone. But this can only happen when everyone is truly calm and regulated.

If someone is reactive about a particular situation, or if you find that you’re never really regulated enough to have a conversation with this particular person, this is an indication of unfinished business and this situation or person is activating or triggering something. The same is true whether we are talking about you or someone else.

When a family member gets really upset because of the way you are handling a particular situation, it is about them. If you get upset right back, then that is about you. You are now dancing the negative feedback loop dance. But if you can recognize “their” stuff for what it is- their unfinished business- you can separate yourself from needing to react to it. When you don’t react on any level (through your words or your body language) because you are accepting them for where they are in this moment, you have the ability to break the negative feedback loop!

What about our own unfinished business? What about addressing our part so that we don’t need to react right back? This is perhaps the most difficult part, yet it is truly an opportunity for growth for us- to heal some of our own unfinished business.

Finding the Healing

When someone has a negative reaction to something that you're doing as a parent and you find yourself reacting, ask yourself how you are feeling when this happens. Some people find it helpful to just free-associate and talk to someone else about whatever comes into their mind as they think about the stressful incident. Others like to write in a stream of consciousness manner, allowing whatever words need to come out to come out. Some find drawing or painting, either with their dominant or non-dominant hand, to be very helpful. Others find great success by focusing into where in their body they feel the stress during incidents such as this and allow themselves to connect back to a time when they felt this same feeling in their past. Every experience we've ever had is stored within the cells of our bodies, so when we connect back with our bodies, we may be able to access the answers that are there. Regardless, making some sort of connection between what is happening in the present moment and prior events can be very helpful in the healing process.

Caution: If you have a known trauma history, it is generally advisable to find someone who can support you through the process to avoid becoming overwhelmed. If you start the process and find it isn't working or it is simply too much, you could probably use the support of a therapist who understands what you are trying to do. See Resources.

Be Proactive

If there is a person you know challenges you, spend time before visiting taking really good care of yourself. That's right- take care of yourself. Spend some quiet time by yourself or connect

with others who share your ideals. Create an action plan if the situation becomes too overwhelming. Decide ahead of time what you are okay with, and what you are not. Write it down. Write down why those are your limitations so that it is firmly in your mind and accessible when you are in the stressful situation. Repetition helps to get your thoughts into your subconscious mind where it is easier to call up when you are under stress. Remember that stress causes confused and distorted thinking and those are precisely the times when we need to have what we want to do or what is really okay with us at our fingertips.

Have an out. Pay close attention to your own stress levels. When you are feeling too much stress about the situation, excuse yourself for a little while. Go on a walk around the block or take a short drive. Connect with someone who can connect with you- call a friend you made arrangements with beforehand. Calm your system down. If you are unable to calm yourself down or find yourself very reactive, it is too much for you at this time. Honor that. Respect that. And follow your exit plan. If that means that you go stay at a hotel or that you return home early, it is important that you do that. If you worry about damaging the relationship, recognize that the negative feedback loops will cause more damage by staying than recognizing when you have all had enough and respecting where everyone is in that moment. It might mean that you need shorter experiences with this person, perhaps staying at another location if it is an out of town trip, and visiting at times that everyone is the most calm and regulated might be the answer to start creating some positive feedback loops to turn the relationship around for the positive.

Finding the Gift

What? Are you kidding? He's the most difficult person I've ever had to deal with! He's impossible! A gift?

The most difficult situations often hold within them the greatest gifts. What looks like a curse could actually be a blessing, depending upon how you choose to look at it. Situations and people who challenge you can hold the key to your growth. These situations encourage you to have tenacity, to stick with it when the going gets tough. These are also areas within yourself that are coming up for healing, if you allow it to be so. Truly, as I look back upon many situations in my own life that were incredibly difficult, those were the ones that have shaped me, empowered me to connect more deeply to myself, and to move through my own fears.

As you start to look at situations differently, understanding your role in making them different, you will start to see a new world open up to you. This new world is truly full of gifts and opportunities to embrace yourself fully, to look at the world and yourself through new eyes.

What gift is this seemingly difficult person or situation bringing into your life? It may take working through all your feelings before you can find this gift, but it is there. Once you have found the gift, take the time to tell this other person (preferably in person) what they have allowed you to learn and the gift that they are in your life. You may not be ready for that in the next hour, day, month, or even year, but work toward that goal of telling him that he is valuable and that he has changed your life in a positive way. Talk about a change in feedback loops! If you don't get that far, or it is impossible for some reason, wish them well through a prayer, write a letter, or otherwise release

the situation in whatever way you are ready to do. Only then can you truly move on.

But what does this look like?

Let's take several common situations and look at how we can turn it around to be more positive for our children and for ourselves. Even if the specific situation doesn't apply to you, read through the scenarios anyway. They all involve varied relationships and alternative ways of relating to others. These aren't intended to be scripts to follow, but rather examples of how we might approach these situations using this paradigm. As discussed earlier, these are idealized versions of what can happen after you have worked your way through some of your own feelings. It must be genuine and not simply words that are spoken in the right order.

Situation #1- The New Parents and the Co-Sleeping Baby

This scenario comes up often with parents who are working hard to meet their child's nighttime needs. Parenting doesn't stop just because the sun has set; therefore, many parents make the educated decision to bring a child into their room or into their bed to sleep at night because this is where everyone sleeps best.

In this scenario, Theresa had been going around and around with her sister-in-law who believed strongly that babies need to sleep in cribs. It had become quite heated on the last visit. Theresa had spent a lot of time journaling and talking with a friend who could really hear her concerns and feelings about this situation before she agreed to another visit with her sister-in-law. Vanessa has just brought up the baby crib again, which

is assembled for her visit in another room.

Theresa: I don't understand why you are making such a big deal out of where Sarah sleeps. She isn't your baby.

Vanessa: Babies die in adult beds. How could you do something that could endanger your baby?

Theresa: (Seeing her SIL's fear clearly now) You're really afraid that something is going to happen to Sarah, aren't you? (Pausing to let that really sink in, not allowing herself to take Vanessa's comments personally. Vanessa is really upset and it isn't about Theresa. Theresa sees this now and has no reason to get upset with Vanessa. She stays calm and keeps breathing.)

Vanessa: Heck yah, I'm afraid that something is going to happen to her. And you don't seem to even care! What's wrong with you?

Theresa: (Breathing, Theresa reminds herself that this isn't about her; it is about her sister-in-law's fear that something is going to happen to her baby.) I'm sorry that this is so scary for you, Vanessa. (Vanessa pauses for a moment, then remembers that her sister-in-law's best friend just lost a baby a few months ago.) Are you worried that something will happen to Sarah just like something happened to Mark a few months ago?

Vanessa: YES! (She shifts from anger into sobbing, Theresa moves closer to her.)

Theresa: I'm so sorry, Vanessa. I can't imagine how hard that must have been for you!

Later, when Vanessa has calmed down, Theresa might be able to validate her fears again and let Vanessa know that she hears her concerns and knows she cares about Sarah very much. She might even be able to share some statistics about co-sleeping, including the risk factors of co-sleeping, as well as the risks of sleeping in a crib. When she has this conversation, she can continue to validate her sister-in-law's fears, but that doesn't mean that she has to give in and do what she wants her to do. Theresa is the mother and has the final say about what is the best decision for her daughter, but she can still listen to and validate Vanessa's very real fears about the baby getting hurt. Perhaps Vanessa can get a bedrail for the adult bed or move the bed onto the floor if the bed is high. In this way, she is doing something that she can feel will help keep Sarah safe, while still respecting Theresa's wishes to be close to her baby at night.

Situation #2- The Co-sleeping Child

The Miller family has older children, 13 year-old daughter, Ellie, 8 year-old daughter, Lillie, and 4 year-old daughter, Melanie. The Millers believe in allowing their children to move out of the family bed as they are ready, knowing that each child is on her own time-table. Ellie has moved out of the family bed and now has her own room. Sometimes Lillie also sleeps in her own room, so she is also transitioning now into her own space. The 4 year-old, Melanie, is not the least bit interested in her own space at this point. Her parents know that she will also eventually move into her own space when she is ready. However, grandpa comes to visit and cannot believe that an 8 year-old and a 4 year-old are sleeping with their parents!

Grandpa: (Directed to the 4 and 8 year olds) Why are you still

sleeping in there with your parents? How old are you now? Worse than a couple of babies! Even babies should sleep in their own beds in their own rooms. (Turning toward the parents.) You've lost control of your home!

Mom: (Deciding to take control of this situation before it gets worse.) Grandpa, why don't you come into the kitchen so that we can talk? Alright kids, now would be a great time to go watch that movie you've been waiting to see. (Kids run to the TV; Grandpa, Mom and Dad move into the kitchen.)

Dad: Seems like it is really hard for you to think about our older girls still sharing a room with us.

Grandpa: I can't believe that you're allowing this to happen! They're never going to move out unless you make them. We made you sleep by yourself from the day you came home from the hospital and it was good for you. Built character!

Dad: You did what was right for you and your family. This is my family and this is the way we've decided to parent our children at night.

Grandpa: So, Melanie and Lillie are spoiled rotten. And you're just a couple of spineless parents who don't know what you've gotten yourself into allowing that to happen!

Dad: (Working hard to see through the negative words flying towards him, he is able to see that this really isn't about him. He isn't upset; his father is upset. This is his father's issue.) I know you really care about the girls, dad.

Grandpa: They're never going to be able to survive in this world if you protect them so much. Do you brush their teeth for them,

too?

Mom: Actually, the dentist told us to brush their teeth for them at least once a day until they are 8!

Grandpa: Bunch of ridiculous parenting advice, if you ask me. Raising kids who will be dependent upon you forever, That's what you've done!

Mom: It must be hard to watch us make what seem like mistakes.

Grandpa: These mistakes are preventable!

Mom: I'm sorry it is so hard for you right now.

Grandpa: You don't know what hard is! War, now That's hard.

Dad: I know you've had a hard life and I know you want what is best for our girls. We do, too, dad.

Grandpa: Well, at least Ellie has come to her senses, in spite of you all, and is now in her own room.

Dad: Yes, she made that decision on her own when she was ready.

The conversation goes on and eventually they are able to let Grandpa know that it is okay if he disagrees with what they are doing as parents, but they ask him to come talk to them directly, rather than bringing it up in front of the children next time. Because Grandpa is calmer, he is able to hear the request. If he is unable to remember this, Mom and Dad will simply remove him from the situation as they did this time to minimize the stress on the children.

Situation #3: The Child Misbehaving in Public

Johnny has been having a rough morning and has clearly stated that he doesn't want to go to the birthday party at the pool today. Mom has gone out of her way to be home to take him to the party after working all morning and figures that he will have a good time once he is there and in the water. However, things just don't go as planned and Johnny becomes increasingly dysregulated. Sandy, another parent attending the pool party, watches this exchange.

Mom: Johnny, you need to get out of the water and get your sunscreen on!

Johnny: No. I'm not coming. (Seeing mom is holding his baby sister and not wearing a swimsuit, he practically dares mom to come in and get him.)

Mom: Johnny, I don't want you to get burned. It is 95 degrees outside today and it is 1PM. I'm sorry that I forgot to put your sunscreen on before you got into the water and I know that it is hard to get out once you're in, but would you please come out for me?

Johnny: Nope. (Swims toward the middle of the pool.)

Sandy: I'll get him for you. Want me to get in and get him for you? He shouldn't talk to you like that. He needs to just listen when you tell him to do something.

Mom: (to Sandy) He's having a rough day and this isn't really like him. I'll handle it. Thank you, though. (Back to Johnny, realizing that they aren't connected if Johnny isn't listening to

mom.) Johnny, I'm sorry if I didn't listen to you earlier when you said you didn't want to go to the pool. I can see now that it was too much for you today and that you really just needed to stay home and connect with me.

Sandy: (With an incredibly confused look on her face) He is disrespectful and you apologize to him? I would have spanked him so hard if he was my kid!

Mom: (Turning back to Sandy, breathing, as she can't think of anything nice to say at the moment, nor can she see the fear) We are parenting Johnny differently because what seems to work with other kids doesn't work for him. I would appreciate it if you could give us a little space, please. (Asking for what she needs in a clear, direct way.) (Turning back to Johnny) Why don't you come out and spend a little time with me right now?

Sandy: You're letting him get away with that behavior?! I can't believe it! What kind of a parent are you?

Mom: (Seeing a glimpse of Sandy's fear) It must be scary to think that I am not disciplining my child.

Sandy: Yes. The world is full of criminals and this is how it starts. You have to let them know how it is and put your foot down. Show him who is boss!

Mom: I appreciate that you want to make the world a better place, but treating children the way you want them to treat the world is exactly how to keep them out of prison. Right now, my son needs my attention, but I'd be happy to give you a booklet about why I am parenting the way I am if you'd be interested. We can talk about this later, but this situation with my son needs my attention now.

Mom returns her attention to getting Johnny out of the pool and reconnecting with him for a little while. Later, she is able to address the behavior and talk about how important it is for him to listen, especially at the pool. She lets Johnny know that they won't be able to go when he is having trouble listening because she needs to help keep him safe.

Eventually, mom has another conversation with Sandy, not because she feels she must explain herself to make herself a good parent, but because Sandy has read the booklet she gave her and is interested in learning more. Sandy just hadn't seen anything like the way Mom was responding to Johnny and didn't know what to think. While Sandy didn't change the way she parents, she now has more respect for the way Mom is parenting.

Situation #4: Inappropriate Behavior in Older Child

Yasmine, 11, has a younger friend, Jesse, 7, who she plays with from time to time. Jesse comes over with her mom, Debra, who is a friend of Yasmine's mom, Jennie. Debra doesn't know much about how Jennie is now parenting her daughter, who is sometimes prone to aggression. They have spent some time with the kids playing in the yard before they headed down to the neighborhood pool. Yasmine was almost to the top of her window of stress tolerance after they played in the yard, and Jennie had to stop to take some extra time to really connect with Yasmine to get her to calm down on the way to the pool. Once at the pool, Jesse started pushing Yasmine into the water in a playful way, but Yasmine wasn't able to handle the stress of it. She held it together, working hard not to do something mean back to the smaller child. Jennie could see that this was the end of the pool time and started to pack up to go. Before

they could get out of the pool, Yasmine had enough and called Jesse a bad name. Knowing that Yasmine sometimes did much worse things, and actually feeling somewhat proud that Yasmine used a word instead of the rescue pole over Jesse's head, she decided to cut their losses and leave the pool before something else happened. On the walk back home, Debra confronts Jennie, who is still working to keep Yasmine regulated long enough to make it home.

Debra: That really hurt Jesse's feelings when Yasmine did that! I can't believe that behavior coming from someone who is so much older and who Jesse looks up to! She's going to think that that sort of thing is okay. And it is most definitely not okay!

Jennie: I'm so sorry that Yasmine called Jesse a name. It was totally inappropriate.

Debra: Aren't you going to punish her or at least say something to her? Jesse deserves an apology. (Jesse is walking right beside her mom, listening.)

Jennie: (Turning to Jesse in a very calm, genuine tone) I'm so sorry that the word Yasmine used to tell you that she'd had enough wasn't very nice. I'm sorry that it hurt your feelings. It wasn't okay that she did that. (Back to mom) When Yasmine calms down, then I'll talk to her about other ways to handle her frustrations, especially around smaller children. She kept asking Jesse to stop, which I've been encouraging her to do. We, as parents, needed to be more involved in their interactions this afternoon and keep it from going this far.

Debra: But kids need to learn to handle their own situations. We can't always be jumping in to save them, can we? How will

they ever learn?

Jennie: They learn by watching us model for them appropriate behaviors. They learn by having someone step in and take responsibility for them when they are overwhelmed. I am really sorry that it went this far and that you're so upset. You have every right to be upset. I think our play date was just a little too long for Yasmine to handle. Next time, let's make it a bit shorter and end before someone gets dysregulated. I value your friendship and I want us to be able to get together with our kids. And I'm sorry that it ended this way this time. We can keep talking about it if you need to.

Debra: Yes, I'd like that. How about I call you later?

Jennie: That sounds good. How about after the kids are in bed tonight?

Debra: Sounds good to me. I want to understand more about what you're doing. I don't have an 11-year-old, so I don't really understand what that's like.

It takes time

When you change the way that you are parenting your children, others are going to notice that you are doing something different. Surrounding yourself with others who are parenting in a similar way really helps to increase your confidence in your parenting decisions, and provides a venue for support when those difficult decisions arise or you are confronted by someone who seems to offer only criticism about what you're doing. We are changing the way that society interprets the behaviors of its children and this takes time. When we are

struggling with this, it may help to remember the words of Arthur Schopenhauer:

“All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.”

Arthur Schopenhauer

German philosopher (1788 - 1860)

Resources:

Phone Coaching is available through The Consciously Parenting Project at: http://consciouslyparenting.com/phone_coaching.html

Or by calling: (888)631-4441. If you reach voicemail, someone will call you back as soon as possible.

Or e-mail: info@consciouslyparenting.com

Public forums: <http://www.consciouslyparenting.com/forums>

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