

A few weeks ago I wrote a column about obedience. Actually it was about losing the ability to think when obedience is demanded even when there is cause to find another way.

I thought about this a few times since then and I realized that I presented a problem but I didn't provide an alternative.

There are other ways to introduce the social demands of life and society besides creating an elaborate set of rules which necessitates enforcement of the rules.

As many of us have experienced, adolescents don't generally take to rules all that well. We make a rule, they break the rule or find a way around it, and we look for ways to make them comply. A favourite tool for compliance is the good old positive reinforcement followed by negative reinforcement when things don't go according to plan. When behaviourism (positive and negative reinforcement) doesn't get the job done, the default position is total freedom. "My kids are impossible. I give up!"

Total freedom can also come in the guise of "offering choices." Parents care about their children and they value their individuality so they want to make sure that the child has her say in all matters that affect her. In this way, how can she object if she is part of the decision-making process?

Has anyone ever read *The Lord of the Flies*? Total freedom is not in the best interest of the child. Without direction and structure, bad choices are not uncommon. Not to mention bad attitude.

There is a sector of the adult population that thinks that self-government is the answer. This has been tried in schools, community organizations, and youth centres without the desired result. The kids are given control over the process and it is up to them to sink or swim. It sounds like a good idea. It is respectful and supportive. It is also a bit like going down the garden path.

The problem is that children and youth don't have all the tools they need to steer the ship in the right direction. They need leadership while they learn the ropes.

The other thing is that total responsibility is too much for them. Imagine taking flying lessons and you get into the plane for the first time and the instructor says "you're in charge." That would be a bit terrifying to say the least. The same applies to children and youth. They aren't ready to be in charge. They need guidance, they need boundaries, and they need mentorship. And yes, they need some responsibility so that they can learn to be accountable for their choices while they continue to learn from you, the parents.

So what can mitigate the perils of total obedience? I think parents need to set firm boundaries, know their child's abilities and tolerance for handling responsibility, and most of all they need to model accountability and good citizenship while demonstrating compassion and caring for others. Kids internalize what they see and hear. Be a good example.