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POSITIVE PARENTS – CHILDREN RELATIONSHIPS

Excerpt from the book *The age of relationships in crisis*. Franco Angeli publisher, Milano, Italy, 2013.

1. The changing family structure

The deep socio-cultural changes of the last decades and the democratisation of the family have deeply changed not only the relationship within the couple but also between parents and children. In the patriarchal family the children, like the women, didn't have any rights and their "management" was entirely in the hands of the father: the principle of "patria potestas" applied, according to which fathers could do as they pleased with their children. The so-called *children's rights,* which we hear about so often today, are a recent conquest, still largely incomplete, the result of the process of change mentioned above.

Also on the affective plane things were very different from today: fathers and to a certain extent mothers too, often had an attitude of detachment or indifference towards their children. With the birth of the modern family, and even more the post-modern family, the children have increasingly become the privileged recipients of their parents' care and affection. The parents tend to establish loving relationships with the children very early, often right from the time of birth (or even during pregnancy) whereas in the past those who could afford it had their children breastfed (and even brought up) by wet nurses. The changes in fathers' behaviours are especially evident. They used to be interested in their children only from a certain age onwards, whereas today it is more and more common to see them present at the birth, hold their infants in their arms from the tenderest age and even change their nappies, caress them tenderly and play with them. All these activities in the past were delegated to the mothers and beyond certain limits and when the children were over a certain age, would have been considered inappropriate for both parents. Not that the parents were not fond of their children, but they did so differently, less affectively and more pragmatically, while at the present time intimacy and affectivity has become – in the parent-children relationship as in the couple's relationship – a fundamental value.

The enhanced role of intimacy and affectivity has brought big changes in parent-child relationships, making them more spontaneous and gratifying but also in some ways, less reliable; for example, while in the past there was a sort of implicit mutual aid agreement whereby the father and mother brought up the children and introduced

them into the labour market and they in their turn, kept and looked after their parents when they became old, nowadays adult children tend increasingly to maintain relations with their parents only if there are real ties of affection.

The change did not stop here: many families today consist of only the couple (not necessarily married), with no children; then there are, in ever increasing numbers, the families of separated and divorced people, consisting of only one of the two parents and – variably – the child or children. Finally there are the reconstructed families, composed of two separated or divorced parents and their respective children. So there is a big variety of types of families compared with the single type which had dominated the scene for thousands of years (among these new typologies, given the subject of this chapter, we shall obviously refer, from now on, only to families with children).

As well as the numerousness of the children, the reasons for parents to procreate have also profoundly changed: once – since there was no contraception – children were inevitable, whether they were wanted or not, whereas now, in most cases, they are born only if they are really wanted. Moreover the reason for wanting them has changed: in the past the sons were considered an asset for the family: more people to work in the fields or help in the workshop or even (in aristocratic families) to administrate the property or represent the family's name in military spheres. Today instead, in a growing number of cases, one has children for affective reasons and so as to experience the joy of parenthood. Many women only feel fulfilled if they are mothers and, although to a lesser extent, a growing number of men feel the need to become a father.

Although this change in parenting only became fully evident in the second half of the 20th century, it began more than a century earlier, as a consequence of various factors including the reduction in the number of children and the spread of Romanticism, the values and models of which have deeply influenced not only the sphere of sentimental relations but also the very conception of the family and of parenting roles. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens, in his book *The transformation of intimacy*, speaks openly of the "invention of maternity", in the sense that conception and the ideal of motherhood that we take for granted today, did not always exist but appeared in relatively recent times, following a social and cultural change of which Romanticism is an integral part.

> Patriarchal authority within the family was on the decline towards the end of the nineteenth century. Direct male authority over the family, which had been all-absorbing when the home was still the centre of the production system, was weakened by the separation between home and workplace. Certainly the husband continued to enjoy absolute power, but the growing importance of the affective relationship between parents and children often softened his use of power. Women's control over their children's education increased as families gradually became smaller and children began to be seen as vulnerable and in

need of a lengthy emotional weaning. In the words of Mary Ryan, the centre of the family hearth shifted « from patriarchal authority to maternal affection ». (…)

The idealisation of the mother was one of the underlying themes of the edifice of modern maternity, and it certainly benefited from some popular values of the paradigm of Romantic love. (...). Women were seen by men as different creatures, who cannot be known, inhabitants of a territory that is foreign to men. The idea that each of the sexes is a mystery for the other is ancient and has been represented in various ways in the different cultures. The decidedly original feature here is that maternity and femininity are seen together as characteristics of the personality and will have a decisive influence on the more common images of female sexuality. An article on marriage published in 1839 remarked, «the man has power over the person and conduct of his wife. She has power over his inclinations: he rules by means of the law; she with persuasion … The woman's empire is an empire of gentleness… her orders are caresses, her threats are tears». Romantic love was essentially a feminised love.[1]

Before the 19th century therefore not only fathers, but neither mothers showed particular affection towards their children, either because they were overburdened by the number of their offspring and by continuous pregnancies and breast-feeding, or because they were influenced by a dominant culture that was deaf to the values of affectivity and tenderness and tended to impart their children's education in a prevalently authoritarian key. An affective mother's role always requires an individual, single relationship with each child, at least in certain moments of the day, and a mother of eight or ten children, who worked what's more, even if she had wanted to, would not have been able to find the material time to dedicate herself to everyone. Then, with the gradual fall in the number of children and the growing influence of the Romantic culture, a first, important revolution took place, which can be summed up in the concept of "affective maternity". Finally, for some decades now, at least in the west, there has been a second evolution, which we could by analogy call "affective paternity". This latter evolution, though visible to all and well documented with research on the subject, is still emerging and is largely incomplete, both in the sense that there are geographical and/or cultural areas in the West where it hasn't yet caught on, in the sense that even where it is already widespread, we find that the majority of fathers have not fully identified with this parenting model and are capable of taking on only some of its aspects. This backwardness of the fathers compared with the mothers is easily understood, if we consider the delay of over one and a half centuries with which this evolutionary process began and also the fact that men suffer greater cultural (and perhaps neurobiological) difficulties in relating to the emotional-

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[1] Giddens A., 1992.

affective sphere. The fact that this two-speed change is "justified" doesn't exempt it from negative consequences, both in relations within couples and in relations with one's children. In family relationships that increasingly carry the mark of democracy, dialogue, respect for individuality and affectivity, fathers today, although in many ways much better than their ancestors, are often the stragglers, if not the ballast that holds back the evolutionary thrusts coming from the rest of the system. As many authors observe, it is almost always the women – in the couple and in the family – who point out the importance of the communicative, affective and emotional dimensions and who are actively committed to improving them, whether by reading articles and books on the subject or by attending courses and seminars and inviting their partners to do the same. Unfortunately, the data concerning attendance at these courses reveal that only a small minority of males accept the invitation, perpetuating and accentuating the gap between themselves and their partners. In this way, what could be a potentially positive and ameliorative factor in the couple's relationship in many cases, at least in the short term, risks turning into a boomerang, because the greater sensitivity and communicational-relational skill acquired by the woman makes her perceive all the more clearly and distressingly the gap between her and the man, adding a further element of conflict in their already weakened relationship.

In conclusion, here too, as in the couple and in the other relational spheres, the inter-personal revolution presents itself ambivalently, bringing advantages on the one hand and disadvantages on the other, and here too, as we shall see, the challenge is to reconcile creatively the many conflicts that the new freedom brings out into the open.

2. Problems of transition from the couple to the family

Modern culture still hands down the myth that the birth of a child is a joy and satisfaction for the family, but as mentioned in the previous chapter, this is hardly ever the case. Because of the changed social conditions and the different motivations and needs that couples have today, as well as joy, the arrival of a child involves a considerable burden of practical and affective efforts and sacrifices, for which the new parents are often totally unprepared. It is certainly a greater burden than our forebears faced, both because women work nowadays and the family is no longer the extended structure in which there was always a grandmother, aunt, sister or older daughter who could share the work of looking after the children, and also because parents wish to dedicate to their children a higher level of care and affection. Moreover, in the past there was little room for the couple's personal well-being and pleasure and therefore there were no individual expectations that interfered with childcare, whereas for post-modern couples such needs are fundamentally important, and if they are not met the relationship greatly suffers. In consideration of the above aspects it should not be a surprise that on becoming parents, both the man and the woman often feel disoriented, tired by the physical fatigue and embittered by the considerable decrease in affective support that each succeeds in obtaining from the

other.

So, while in the past the arrival of a child sealed the conjugal relationship – since procreation was one of the principal social aims of matrimony – today this event produces at least some disagreements within the couple and in many cases real crises. The birth of a child is an extraordinary event and it is natural that at the beginning the parents, and in particular the mother, dedicate every attention to the newborn baby. But often this natural phase becomes too exclusive, or it is prolonged over the necessary time, in this way makes the two partners become detached from each other. Initially the new parents may not be aware of this slow process or they may underestimate it, but as we saw earlier, in the couple everyone unconsciously seeks in their partner the attention that they did not receive in childhood from the parent of the opposite sex, therefore the presence of a child creates in each member of the couple's *inner child* a sort of jealousy, reinforced and confirmed by the fact that this presence actually denies him spaces, care and affection that are now dedicated to the child instead of to him or her. According to the psychotherapists (and husband and wife) Hal and Sidra Stone

> *Marriage can stay alive and flourish if the care dedicated to the relationship continues and if the children do not start to occupy all the space, to the point when no space remains for really lively and romantic partnering. The priority of the energetic bond must continue to be reserved for the partner even when there are children, if you do not want the couple's relationship to start deteriorating and the primary relationship to change from the relationship with your partner to a relationship with your children, to whom it should not belong.[2]*

In conclusion, it seems clear that the old cultural model according to which the married couple had to sacrifice their individuality to the needs of the family and of the children is no longer applicable today, at least in its traditional form, in that it clashes with the couple's individual needs and their aspirations for personal well-being, straining the affective intimacy which is the basis for contemporary couples. To prevent this, it is essential – also in the children's interest - for the couple to safeguard their priorities, dedicating sufficient space to affective intimacy, sexuality, dialogue, to clarifying their problems. Many couples complain about the lack of time or money (for example money to engage a babysitter or go out to dinner) and believe that they cannot afford special spaces to dedicate to themselves and to the couple, but on careful examination it is often discovered that this is not the problem. Daily living certainly imposes many commitments but very often, more than finding the time or the money it is a question of reviewing priorities, placing the couple's relationship in its correct position. Just as we can find the time for sports, hobbies, social life and other things we are interested in, we should learn to do the same in order to save the depth and vitality of our relationship. When we give due priority to this subject, new

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[2] Hal and Sidra Stone, 2000.

ideas come to help us find the necessary time. In the same way we can be creative about money: e.g. *co-parenting* groups composed of 2 to 5 families, each of which takes turns to look after the other couples' children for an evening, afternoon or a weekend, thus giving each couple precious (and economical) moments of privacy. The home is the place where parenting roles are most marked: to enable the couple to meet in the spirit of lovers rather than as parents, according to Hal and Sidra Stone, it is useful at least once a month, maximum a month and a half, for the couple to spend some time away from the usual places: a whole weekend or maybe only a few hours to go for a walk, to the cinema or make love in a different environment.

All of this may be more difficult to organise when your children are already used to being at the centre of your attention and no limits have been set to their presence and their demands. Parents sometimes feel guilty and do not know how to communicate their own needs to their children. The first step, suggest the Stones, is *to feel inside yourself that you have the right*. No one feels guilty when they leave their children to go to work: they feel it is right, healthy, a support also for their children. The suggestion is to absorb this inner certainty also when the time away from home without the children is for the good of the couple's relationship, which for the children's emotional and mental health is just as important as the money that their parents earn by working. Two parents who know how to be partners, lovers and friends are the greatest gift that they can give to their children.

3. Children's education: a new vision

As well as procreating out of free choice and prevalently for affective reasons, today we feel more strongly the need to bring up our children in a protective and reassuring atmosphere, educating them in the best way possible. As J. Gottman (1997, pp. 28-29) observes "the children and adolescents who can count on their parents' love and support are more protected from the threats deriving from child violence, antisocial behaviour, drug addiction, premature sexual activity, adolescent suicide and other forms of social malaise. Research shows that children who feel they are respected and given consideration within their families do better at school, cultivate more friendships and lead a healthier and more successful life".

Just as in the past children were at their parents' service, today many parents feel they are at their children's service. However, the many demands and constraints of daily life do not always allow us to put our good intentions fully into practice. It may happen for example that we come home tired after a day at work and find a child who immediately demands a charge of energy that we don't have. And how do we feel if we don't go and play with him straightaway? Is it better to be drawn by our sense of guilt and play anyway, even if not very absorbingly, or to make a plausible excuse for not doing so, or even answer with an outright no? These two choices are the most frequent and obvious, but definitely not the best: it would be better in these cases to be truthful, express your tiredness and find another moment for play. It is important to

respect your children's needs but it is equally important to respect your own, and to reconcile both, you will need considerable skills of communication and negotiation.

Many realise that it is much more difficult now to carry out the "job" of parenting than it was in the past, but they do not know why there are these new difficulties, nor do they know how to tackle them. As C. Bellecca (2005) observes, being a parent is a difficult task, because adults and children are different and bringing up children requires continuous change on the part of the parents, in search of new ways to relate to them. Unfortunately our father's and forefathers' genitorial models are no longer appropriate and the pseudo-innovative models presented by the mass media often don't correspond to reality, because they propose an ideal model of the perfect parent who should *always* be able to understand all their children's needs, know how to give freedom but at the same time be vigilant and set limits, know how to be understanding and present but not interfering. As we shall see, giving our children a good education does not depend on acquiring perfect parenting behaviours, on the contrary, since perfection is not human, struggling to achieve it prevents us from having an attitude of benevolence and tolerance towards other people's imperfections. It is enough to make an effort and exert ourselves to understand our children for us to be good enough parents and this is within everyone's reach. The mistakes we make, sometimes due to the intensity of our involvement, can become an opportunity for discussion and a new starting point in our relationship with our children.

However, while shunning perfectionism, it is legitimate and positive that more and more parents ask themselves questions about how to bring up their children better and about the most appropriate way to communicate with and relate to their children. In this last regard, here are some useful suggestions:

- ✓ dedicate more time to dialogue, certain that our children are worth more than many other things, including our career;

- ✓ believe in their ability to solve problems on their own, refraining from taking their place or doing the opposite and stressing them with our intrusive, suffocating, possessive presence;

- ✓ do not fear their negative feelings, but consider them as transitory: hatred can turn into love, anger into serenity, discouragement into hope;

- ✓ "feel disposed" to help them in that precise moment, with the type of problem they are presenting to us. It is far better, if we are not in a position to do so, to stress the importance of the matter (or request, or proposal), but postpone dealing with it, not for too long though (and then remember about it!);

- ✓ know how to accept their state of mind, however different from the feelings and desires that we would have liked to find;

- ✓ repeat to ourselves that each of them is different from us, with a full right to their own identity, their own life, overcoming the temptation to be a "model" child, to be exhibited in public or a "photocopy" child, who we would

sometimes really like to have;

- ✓ not to be under the illusion that all is accomplished by listening once, even if actively, but follow a global strategy that includes constructive and fruitful planning;

- ✓ convince ourselves that children are not "behaviours to be changed", but first and foremost people to accept;

- ✓ reassess ourselves continually, concentrating on our ways of being and acting and checking the effects.

Whereas many parents nowadays try to find appropriate ways to relate to their children and to educate them better, their forebears did not even consider the problem and simply applied to their children the same method that their parents had used with them – often an authoritative, strict, formal method, based on orders and punishments rather than on incentives and rewards. It was a method that had hardly changed over the centuries, just as there were no variations in the few, simple notions, values and rules that were transmitted using this method. This approach is no longer acceptable, at least not in the democratic Western countries, just as the moral notions and rules that were transmitted with it are obsolete: once parents and the elders knew the world much better than the young and could – albeit in a simplified and rigid way – hand down the knowledge to their children, but today things change so fast that the parent's world has very little resemblance to their children's and the so-called generational gap has become in many ways a real abyss. Not all parents are aware of this, but their children certainly are, and this not only makes communication between the two sides very difficult but in some ways makes it seem pointless. Another factor that complicates understanding between parents and children is the difference in their roles: parents feel responsible for their children and often in good faith would like to guide them towards the best in life, but this sometimes turns into an order or authoritarianism, and only produces conflicts, while in other cases it takes the form of excessive permissiveness, which leads to insecurity. The children on their part, as they grow up, desire (and deserve) more independence, but sometimes they exaggerate and are not altogether aware of the risks they may encounter.

The problem is that no one has taught the parents how to be good parents or how to establish a frank and constructive relationship with their children. Fathers and mothers are fundamentally self-taught and have as their only point of reference the rules and models that they in their turn received from their respective parents; therefore some limit themselves to repeating arithmetically the same behaviour, educational strategies and errors; others have a clear idea of their own parents' errors and limitations, but are unable to do any better than shift towards the opposite extreme. In both cases the outcome is far from positive.

So there is an oscillation between and educational practice based on power (the parent wins) and a more indulgent one (the child wins). Whether parents impose themselves authoritatively, or use a formula based on *laissez faire*, they preclude the possibility of

having a positive dialogue with their children and effectively helping them to grow and overcome emotional problems or dysfunctional behaviours.

An authoritarian kind of approach to education will at the most force children to behave as prescribed but will not influence them inwardly, apart from the fact that, especially in adolescence, a very normative "regime" could produce insubordinate and rebellious attitudes or encourage submissive, timorous and irritable behaviour that will tend to reduce the social skills of the future adult.

On the other hand, a very permissive attitude which leads the parent to yield to pressure from his children, does not educate them but on the contrary contributes to considerably delaying their growth process, promoting the formation of egocentric, egoistic, arrogant, insecure, domineering personalities, who are unable to take on responsibilities. If on the one hand this great permissiveness allows the children to live in full freedom, on the other it makes them feel they have been left to themselves – and we saw in Chapter 1 that without suitable instruments as a guide, freedom turns into insecurity and frustration; it is no coincidence that many children brought up in this way have the feeling that no one cares about them, not even their parents, and that freedom is in fact indifference.

Both of these methods, although opposite, are therefore morally harmful, and have negative effects on many levels, including on the quality of the relationship.

4. The dilemma between authoritarianism and permissiveness

A valid upbringing is not achieved with moral rules, with obligations and indoctrination nor with a mistaken permissiveness which leaves children on their own. The time is gone when parents could mould and control their children as they wished, but the time has not yet come (nor will it ever come) when children can do without their parents' guidance. This guidance should not be authoritarian but authoritative; not strict but loving. However, a parent must not and should not be transformed into a friend or contemporary, as many have tried to do, because in this way one is abandoning a role that the child is the first to ask for. Children need a structure, boundaries, rules and clear reference values that help them to find their way in the world, yet these factors should be proposed and not imposed, explained and not taken as dogmas, and as the child grows up they should become increasingly flexible and relative, never absolute.

In parallel with this guiding relationship – and not instead of it – there should also be a dialogue and an open and frank discussion, which enables both parents and children to express and negotiate their needs, emotions and ideas without *feeling they are being judged*. The point, today, is to constructively and democratically respect and reconcile the needs and abilities of both: the parents must learn to respect their children's growing needs for freedom, from their infancy, without waiting for teenage rebellion, giving them, as they grow up, more and more trust and teaching them to choose for themselves with freedom (freedom to choose their own path and also

freedom to err, at least up to a certain point). The children for their part are expected to learn to respect their parents' sense of responsibility, their fears and worries and also to appreciate their greater experience.

Today fortunately there are many very useful books, easy for everyone to understand, and also various websites that deal with the subject.[3] It is also possible (and desirable) to attend *courses for parents* where you can learn more about child psychology, children's growth stages, methods of education and ways of building a relationship with them and a positive and rewarding dialogue for both. In some towns, encounter groups have also been set up where parents can meet, independently or with experts present, to share their experiences and their worries. Finally, for all those cases in which the parent-child relationships have already deteriorated, it is possible to turn to an expert for help – a relational counselor or, in the most difficult cases, a psychologist – who helps solve the conflict and enables a more harmonious relationship to be re-established between people who fundamentally love one another but are unable to communicate efficiently and therefore understand one other.

5. New educational methods to build parent-child relationships democratically

The need to outline educational methods that are effective and at the same time democratic has emerged, as we have seen, only very recently; therefore until now few scholars and educators have undertaken this task, and fewer still have in some way succeeded. Among these we should certainly indicate Thomas Gordon, an American psychologist from the humanistic school, a pupil of Carl Rogers, who between the nineteen sixties and 'seventies drew up a constructive method of handling conflicts that allows the family to become a creative space of democracy based on deep respect for the human being and for his capacity for self-fulfilment. This method has been successfully applied and tested in thousands of special courses named P.E.T. (*Parent Effectiveness Training*), which have been attended up to now by more than a million parents of many nationalities. Being an effective parent means, from the perspective of the humanistic psychology of which Gordon is a spokesman, acquiring a series of relational techniques and methods able to stimulate the development of the children's' autonomy and self-determination.[4]

Gordon starts with a critical examination of the typical ways used by parents to respond to their children, and he identifies 12 of them, that he calls *roadblocks*:

1) orderind, directing or commanding;
2) warning, admonishing, threatening;
3) exorting, moralising, teaching
4) advising, giving suggestions or solutions;

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[3] Among the many books on parenting we suggest those by Ellis A. (1966); T. Gordon (2000); M. Kabat-Zinn and J. Kabat-Zin (1999); C. Bellecca, (2009), all mentioned in bibliography.
[4] See T. Gordon, 2000.

5) lecturing, giving logical arguments;
6) judging criticising, disagreeing, blaming;
7) praising, agreeing;
8) name-calling, ridiculing, shaming;
9) interpreting, analysing, diagnosing;
10) reassuring, sympathizing, consoling, supporting;
11) probing, questioning, interrogating;
12) withdrawing, distracting, humoring, diverting.

All of these ways are for the most part ineffective and in many cases even counterproductive; for example they may communicate to the child that his feelings or needs are not considered important; or they may arouse in him feelings of blame or inadequacy, a decrease in self-esteem; they may arouse feelings of anger, or even lead him to be defensive, to stop communicating and making any form of collaboration useless, and to withdraw into absolute introversion or to be servile and adulating, totally depending on his parent's instructions.

As a result – continues Gordon – it is necessary to radically change our approach and apply a more effective way of communicating, using the knowledge and instruments that the psycho-social sciences, psychotherapy and counseling make available for us today. The starting point for a constructive relationship to be established between parents and children should be the parent's abandoning a directive and evaluative position in favour of a contact and a bond characterised by human warmth, interest, agreement, clearly and precisely defined degree of emotional attachment. A non-directive communication therefore, along the lines of the communication that a psychotherapist or counselor establishes with his own client and who, offering understanding, respect and warmth, leads his child-client into a sort of educational alliance, a fundamental condition for a significant "growth" of the relationship.

The empathetic understanding of the other, that is, the capacity to identify with the other person and see the world from his point of view (while remaining aware of one's own identity), thus becomes the keystone of good communication, based on the capacity to listen to the other person, meaning both passive and active listening, rather than on authority or oratory.

Passive listening is what we usually define simply as "listening", but that we do not always put into practice with enough care; moreover, it is important to make sure that the other person clearly perceives this attention, for example looking him in the eyes while he talks and assuming an attentive and engrossed expression; then, every so often, responding to what he is saying with a smile, a glance, or "minimal encouragements" such as murmurings (e.g. "mh-mmh") and various gestures (e.g. nodding). Initially this way of listening may seem mechanical and even rather false, but if you apply it in a sincere spirit it will soon become natural and will make the interlocutor (in our case, our child) much more at ease in expressing his or her feelings, opinions and emotions.

Active listening is instead a more thorough and structured way of listening and

includes various strategies which help to improve our understanding of what the other person wishes to communicate: for example asking him further questions or presenting him with a summary using your own words of what you have understood, then asking for confirmation that you have understood correctly (e.g.: "let's see if I have correctly understood: you are saying that.... And this makes you feel... Is that right?"). Listening is considered successful when not only has the content of the message been understood but also and above all the emotional and sentimental dimension has been grasped.

Active listening promotes greater intimacy between parents and children and makes the latter more receptive to their parents' ideas and opinions. For the children it also facilitates the autonomous process of problem-solving, encouraging them to think with their own minds, to make an independent diagnosis of the problem and to find their own solutions. This approach to communication is particularly useful when the conversation starts with a situation of an open divergence in views. Rather than becoming entrenched in our own position and trying stubbornly to impose our point of view and our solution on our children (and then ending up with a "do as you please"), Gordon suggests we should use active listening for the purpose of creating a shared space in which to cultivate new, creative solutions through discussion and cooperation between *peers*.

A deeply entrenched prejudice in our culture leads us to believe that in any disagreement there must be a winner and a loser, and even within the family this logic tends to prevail. If the parent is the one who wins more often, this means that the prevailing educational model is an authoritarian one, which Gordon calls *method I;* if it is the child who generally wins, the author speaks of *Method II*, or indulgent educational approach. To get out of the *impasse* we must choose the classical third way, i.e. what is defined as *Method III*: a method in which conflicts are solved without winners or losers according to the *zero-sum game* formula described in Chapter1.

Method III consists of finding solutions by means of a bilateral agreement to which both contenders have actively contributed, according to a principle of equal participation. Applying some simple listening and mediation techniques typical of counseling, the parent must start a positive communication with the child and bring himself and the child to negotiate a solution that fulfils the needs of both. Starting from the precondition that the child has his own wisdom and responsibility for success in solving the problem, he is invited to formulate other possible solutions and commit himself – to his best ability – to believing in what he has committed himself to. The child, feeling that he is effectively collaborating in formulating the solution, will feel more responsible for finding creative and effective solutions to the problems. Legitimated by his parent's trust, he will then feel committed to keep his promise. The operational practice of the method of solving problems and of approaching change is structured in 6 phases, that Gordon illustrates with a wealth of examples in the book indicated previously and that we simply mention here:

1) identify and define the terms of the conflict;
2) bring out all the possible solutions;
3) appraise together the solutions found, highlighting their pros and cons;
4) choose together the best solution;
5) plan together how to put the solution into practice;
6) assess the results.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to stress that the use of the techniques and skills described above should not imply a manipulative purpose. With the adjective "effective", Gordon does not intend to tickle the fancy of a parent who expects to secretly persuade his child to do what he wants him to do, but rather to invite him to use a sincere and positive way of communicating and relating that helps the child to gain independence and responsibility. It is therefore essential that the parent should not take on the role of his child's psychoanalyst, but should go down to his level and be willing to open a dialogue with his child on an equal footing, to question his real sensations and emotions and if need be, to call his own attitudes into question. The level of discussion therefore moves from parental "know how" to "being" a parent, from skill in communicating to having a real parental attitude.

The aim of this method is to educate children to manage with their own personal resources the problems they will encounter in their daily life, taking responsibility for their choices and their conduct, avoiding the two extremes of being passively enslaved to their parents or capriciously bullying them.

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