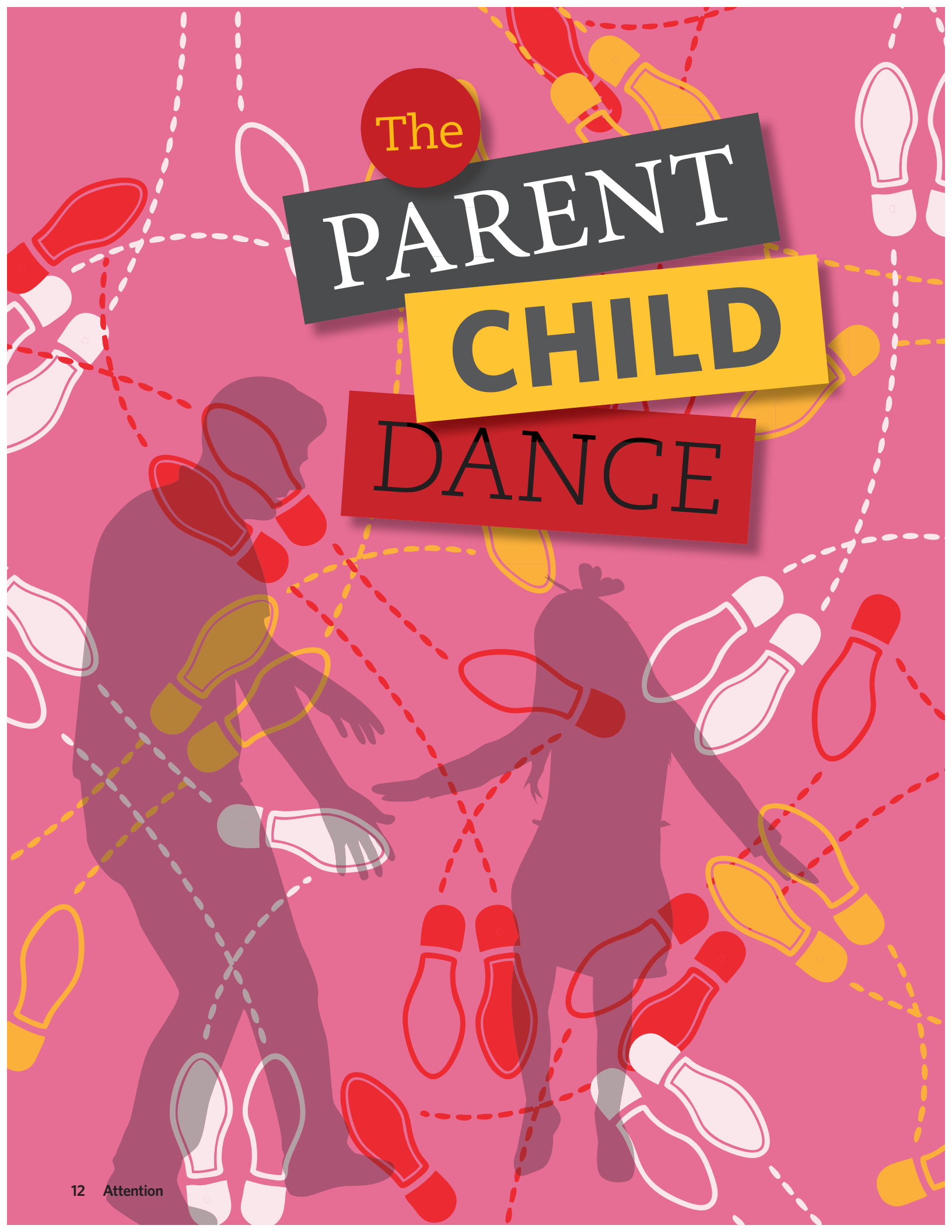


The

PARENT

CHILD

DANCE





by Ronald A. Kotkin, PhD, and Aubrey H. Fine, PhD



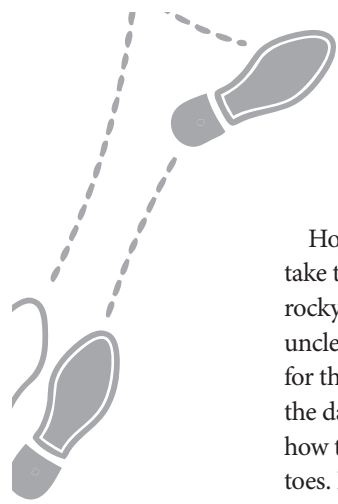
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HAVING CHILDREN AND RAISING A FAMILY

should be the greatest joy in one's life. However, to bolster something that is that significant requires tremendous responsibility and patience. Parenting is hard work, but the payoff is priceless. Most would say there are no regrets, but also realize that becoming a true family is hard work. As parents, our role must be to provide a strong foundation for our children, so that they can eventually grow up to become self-sufficient adults. However, just like everything in life, all children are different, some requiring more support than others. Parenting is like a fluid, coordinated dance between a parent and child. The metaphor of a dance is used here to represent the interaction between the child and parent. The more seamless the movements are between parent and child, the more graceful the interaction. When a parent takes the lead or decides to share it, over time with practice, the dance can be smooth and effortless.

The parent-child relationship is sometimes like an “interpretive dance,” where the choreography is more than just synchronous movements, rich with individual meaning, personal symbolism, and sometimes spontaneous emotion. Dancing well together may not always imply or even require parallel movement. However, it does require an appreciation for individual athletic expression, tolerance for nuance and difference, as well as the simple joy of moving together. All of these factors are tied together strongly. They help us respect the unique contributions that each of us brings to the dance.

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However, when the child is unintentionally allowed to take the lead, the parent-child dance may appear more rocky and unstable. This often occurs when the parent is unclear and at odds with his/her role. The ensuing battle for the lead may cause disharmony in the relationship and the dance. Parenting is a lifelong commitment to learning how to lead the dance without stepping on your child's toes. It takes patience, thoughtfulness, skill, and commitment. Our book is designed to explain the concept of the parent-child dance and act as a catalyst for encouraging you to begin your journey in making positive changes in your child's life. We also provide a recipe for proactive parenting that will help all parents become more effective in relating to their children. A major emphasis within our writing focuses on explaining and discussing consistent and reliable behavioral solutions that can be put into place.

The underlying interaction

Using the dance metaphor to explain our relationship with our children is clearly a logical choice. It identifies the importance of understanding the underlying interaction between a parent and child and how that interaction ei-

ther enhances or impedes a child's behavior. We conceive a parent-child interaction akin to a dance because it involves how both parents and children learn to move and respond to one another. Some of us will be more elegant and graceful, while others will be perhaps a little more awkward and inept. Eventually, we will all develop our own style.

Parenting, like dancing, must be practiced so we can become more effective with our moves. We need to learn to become more comfortable with our moves and patient with change; these efforts will help boost our confidence. You cannot be expected to dance like Patrick Swayze or Beyonce right away. It takes years of practice to gain such proficiency. Allow yourself to fumble a few times and don't get discouraged; your patience and tenacity will pay off.

Ironically, some parents don't even realize their own behavior (or lack thereof) may be the culprit of negative outcomes. Lack of being consciously aware of good or bad behavior can have negative repercussions on the interaction. Children need to realize that their parents mean what they say and will act accordingly. They also need to recognize that their parents will make an effort and reward their good behavior and not just focus on what they are doing wrong. When one gives attention to the behaviors that need to change, children begin to

SAY WHAT YOU MEAN



MEAN WHAT YOU SAY

Here's an example of a strategy from our book.

The English language is very complex. Communicating accurately can be a real challenge. Often a child may appear non-compliant when the problem really stems from poor communication. Parents should make sure they say what they mean and mean what they say.

SCENARIO

Michael and Sharon shared with us their frustration with Billy. Billy frequently fails to follow their directions. They are beginning to think that he may need help from a speech and language therapist because he seems to have trouble understanding what they want him to do. They are also confused as to whether he is oppositional or he just doesn't understand

what they are asking him. Often, when they ask him to do something he looks confused. Let's hear from Michael, Sharon, and Billy.

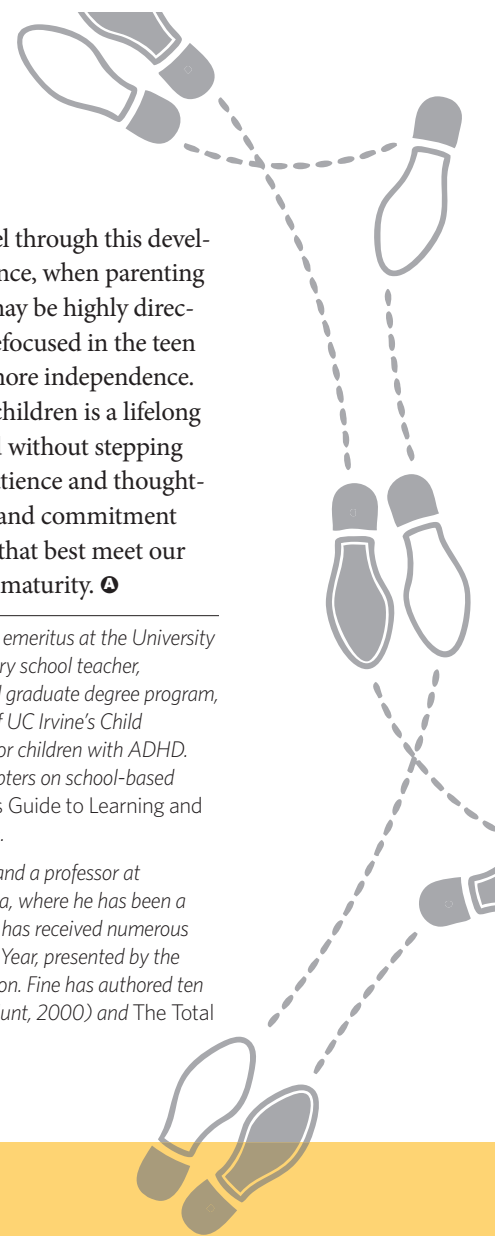
Parent Viewpoint: *We have been in a constant battle with Billy because he rarely complies with a direction the first time we ask. He looks at us as if we are speaking a foreign language. Even when he does try to follow our directions he only partially completes the task we ask him to do. We know Billy is smart but he may have a problem processing language.*

Child Viewpoint: *I can't seem to do anything right. I try to do what my parents ask me to do. They get mad at me all the time. My mom says things like, "Let's go clean up our room." I go to my room and wait for her. Twenty minutes later she comes into the room, looks at the condi-*

tion of the room and chews me out for not cleaning my room. How fair is that? She said, "Let's clean your room." Well, I waited and she took twenty minutes to join me. I guess "let's" means "you." Dad would say, "Wouldn't you like to start your homework now?" Of course I would answer honestly and say "No." He then chews me out for being rude. "How dare I refuse to do my homework?" My parents sometimes say things like, "Why don't you go take care of your room?" I go look at my room and figure I took care of my room. They go into my room several hours later and list all the things I forgot to do in "taking care of my room." I guess they thought I was a mind reader. They tell me ten things to do without taking a breath. I always remember the first and the last thing they said and have no idea what the middle things were.

SOLUTION

In everyday communications, we often think that we are exceedingly clear in what we are saying. The English language is complex and



realize that they can get what they desire in a cooperative manner. Rearing children with consistency helps them understand predictability and act accordingly.

Over time and with practice

It is important to appreciate that the more seamless the movements between parent and child, the more graceful the interactions will be. When you are more comfortable in taking the lead or personally decide to share, over time and with practice, the dance can become smooth and effortless. We believe that one of the miscalculations some parents make is when they unintentionally allow the child to take the lead in the parent-child dance. An example of a miscalculation of behavior is when a child misbehaves to get a desired outcome and the parent reluctantly gives in. This may promote the behavior rather than extinguish it. This misstep may cause rocky and unstable interactions. The battle that ensues for the lead may cause disharmony in the relationship and the dance.

The dance between a child and a parent may need to be adjusted over the years. An effective parent attends and adjusts to these needs as his/her child moves through adolescence, pre-adulthood, and even into adulthood. The dance may begin as a waltz, but inevitably will take on dif-

ferent forms as parent and child travel through this developmental journey together. For instance, when parenting a preschool-aged child, the process may be highly directive. This style of parenting may be refocused in the teen years as the adolescent searches for more independence.

As stated earlier, bringing up our children is a lifelong commitment to learning how to lead without stepping on our children's toes. It takes our patience and thoughtfulness. It also takes our willingness and commitment to learn various parenting strategies that best meet our child's developmental age and social maturity. 🎯

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	INEFFECTIVE ("Let's") COMMANDS	QUESTION COMMANDS	LONG CHAIN OF COMMANDS	VAGUE COMMANDS
Direction	Let's clean your room.	Wouldn't you like to do your homework?	Clean your room, wash your hands, and get ready for dinner, feed the dog, help your mother set the table, and don't forget to put away your skateboard.	Take care of your room...
Child's interpretation	We are going to clean the room together.	I have a choice of whether I want to do my homework. No, I don't think I want to do homework.	Clean your room...	Go into my room and check it out.
What we meant	Clean your room.	Do your homework.	Too many things to remember even for the parent who said them.	Put the clothes on the floor in their appropriate drawer. Make your bed and put your toys in the toy bin.

can be confusing. If the person receiving our communication is unclear as to what we mean, this is an invitation for conflict. Children are often extremely literal and think that we mean exactly what we say. If we are not careful, we can set them up to appear non-compliant. One effective way of prompting children to listen is to start with the phrase "You have a direction to..."

This prompts us to state what we clearly want them to do. In the table at left are a few ineffective directions, how children perceive them, and what we actually mean.

Giving clear directions increases your child's ability to comply with you.

Parents often get angry because they think that their children are purposely not doing what they were told to do. A simple way to test whether they are ignoring us is to ask them to repeat the directions. If they can't repeat the directions then they weren't listening, didn't understand, or our intended meaning was not clearly expressed by us.