Atrocious Advice from “Supernanny” (#)
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By Alfie Kohn

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A despot welcomes a riot. Disorder is ended without warning or explanation. When the girl screams, that only proves how manipulative she is. Later, Mom confesses, “I felt like I was almost mistreating her.” “Do not give in,” urges the nanny, and misgivings soon yield to “It’s working; it’s getting quieter” – meaning that her daughter has abandoned hope that Mom will snuggle with her.

On another episode, a boy is playing with a hose in the backyard when his mother suddenly announces, “You’re done.” The boy protests (“I’m cleaning!”) so she turns off the water. He becomes angry and kicks over a wagon. Supernanny is incredulous: “Just because she turned the water off!” There is no comment about the autocratic, disrespectful parenting that precipitated his outburst. But then, automatic, disrespectful parenting is her stock in trade.

Supernanny’s superficiality isn’t accidental; it’s ideological. What these shows are peddling is behaviorism. The point isn’t to raise a child; it’s to reinforce or extinguish discrete behaviors – which is sufficient if you believe, along with the late B.F. Skinner and his surviving minions, that there’s nothing to us other than those behaviors.

Behaviorism is as American as rewarding children with apple pie. We’re a busy people, with fortunes to make and lands to conquer. We don’t have time for theories or complications: Just give us techniques that work. If firing thousands of employees succeeds in making children obey, then there’s no need to ask, “But for how long does it work? And what cost?”

In the course of researching a book about parenting, I discovered some disconcerting research on the damaging effects of techniques like the “naughty corner” (better known as time-out), which are basically forms of love withdrawal. I also found quite a bit of evidence that parents who refrain from excessive control and rely instead on warmth and reason are more likely to have children who do what they’re asked – and who grow into responsible, compassionate, healthy people.

If you can bear to sit through them, the nanny programs provide a fairly reliable guide for how not to raise children. They also offer an invitation to think about the pervasiveness of our society’s preoccupation with raising the next generation of winners and citizens for the quick fix. “I guarantee you,” Supernanny earnestly, if tautologically, exhorts one pair of parents, “every time you’re consistent, [your child] gets the same message.”

Granted, but what message?