

The Night I Stopped Being a Referee

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Linda Watson

One of the roles I have played for years for my two boys is a referee. My boys are 2 & 1/2 years apart and they often fought. A fight brought one of them running to me and I became the referee. I thought if only I could become a better referee and come up with just the right punishment, lecture or scripture verse to make them be good Christian brothers, the fighting would cease or at least get better. But it was getting worse as they got older. Joel was 10 and Ethan 8 at the time and I, who swore I would never scream at my kids, was reacting to the conflict as a screaming maniac.

One typical evening, I told the boys they had five minutes to get ready for bed and whoever was not ready with teeth brushed and pajamas on was getting a spanking. (One of my better referee tactics was to set a time limit so short they didn't have time to fight.) In a few seconds the screaming and fighting began. Ethan, the younger, came running and said, "Mom! Joel hit me in the stomach!" I tried to respond by asking, "What did you do..." but Joel said, "Mom, he threw my pajamas across the room. Besides you always let him get by with more than me." (There was a grain of truth in that accusation and I was stunned.)

My own anger escalated because I had failed as a referee. However, I rather calmly said, "You have five minutes to get ready for bed. If you are not ready then you will be spanked. You have to make your own decisions about how you are going to treat each other. I am no longer going to referee your fights".

They left the room and in a few minutes I heard the usual chaos. "Mom, Joel hit me." Then, "Mom, Ethan hit me first." I called back, "I want to remind you that you have exactly three minutes to get ready for bed. If you are not ready you will be spanked. I am not coming in there to referee so you can do whatever you want to each other." About three minutes later both came into my room. Ethan was very quiet but Joel fell down before me crying and begged me to be a referee again. "Mom, don't do this please. Just go back to the way you were before."

(I said to myself, "Maybe I have hit on something good here. Is this what we have discussed in Gary Sweeten's Family Class about how changes cause shock waves throughout the entire system? Is Joel trying to suck me back into my old patterns?")

When I stopped being a referee I was unaware I was making a big change in my pattern and the entire family system. I just needed to do something. I did it out of desperation. I was unaware of the role I was playing and how I was getting caught into the triangle between the boys. I replied, "This is very interesting. Just a few minutes ago you were

complaining how unfair I was. I gave you five minutes to do anything you want to Ethan without getting into trouble and now you want me to go back to a referee.”

Joel began to cry loudly and say, “Please Mom; please! Don’t do this! Please just be the way you were. What if we hurt one another or kill one another?” I said, “I guess if you made that choice you would have to live with it wouldn’t you.” I was amazed at how calm I was. I did not yell or scream. I was not enmeshed with him! He was crying but I did not comprehend why he was so upset so I said, “Joel, I am going to change. I will not be a referee any more. We will talk more when your father is home.”

Bill arrived a few minutes later but we didn’t have enough time or calmness with Joel’s weeping to get everything straightened out so Bill said, “Hold it. Let’s go to bed now and talk tomorrow.”

It had been a good start but I was still anxious. The next day the boys and I talked in the car but it was too brief for real insights but things were calmer. The real test came at supper. With Joel’s baseball game we had a tight schedule, just right for a big fight. I served spaghetti for dinner and Joel said, “Now that Mom will not referee we can do anything we like.” He proceeded to fire a fork of spaghetti at Ethan who smiled and loaded his fork. I said, “I think you have this all wrong. I need to redefine referee. Any food that lands on the table, floor or walls you will have to clean up.” Ethan promptly picked up one of Joel’s carrot sticks and dunked it into his milk and Joel retaliated.

I said calmly, “Excuse me but the rule still applies that you must eat all your veggies.” Joel turned and started to say something belligerent when I said, “Another thing has not changed. You may not be disrespectful to me.” Then we ate in silence. I was amazed at my new peace. They were not having fun but I was. The calm did not last long. Joel finished first and swatted Ethan as he rose from the table. Ethan took his shoe off and reared back to fling it when I said, (With some anxiety) “Whatever the shoe hits you are responsible for.” Joel retorted, “Yes, and if I get hurt you will have to pay the doctor bills.” That made me think, “What if he gets hurt? Will I be responsible for the bills?”

Before I could go much farther with the ‘What ifs’ Ethan broke in and said, “Mom, you are a Mom, right?” I said, “Yes. Ethan, I am a Mom.” Ethan continued, “Moms are supposed to be referees.” I smiled and said, “Ethan, I am not going to be a referee any more but I am still going to be your mother.”

We had to leave immediately to get to the game on time so I ran to get the car keys. I was really enjoying myself in this new role. But the good feelings did not last long before I heard Ethan screaming. “Oh, no” I thought. “Ethan is probably injured. How can I explain my non-refereeing stance to the ER when my children were trying to kill one another? And, who is responsible for the Doctors’ bills? “

At the bottom of the stairs Ethan was lying on the kitchen floor weeping profusely with loud groans. “I can’t walk, I am hurt bad. Joel kicked me in the leg with his baseball cleats!” My old referee habit immediately sprang into action and I yelled, “Joel! Come

here immediately!” Then I saw him peeking around the door with a look that said, “Come on Mom. You can do it. You can be the referee again!” That look brought me to my senses and I inspected Ethan’s leg to find no marks at all. I calmly informed them that as soon as Ethan could walk we would go to the game.

Joel complained loudly “I just knew we would be late for the game.” I refused to take the blame bait. Instead I said, “Joel, one of the consequences of choosing to hit your brother is being late to the game.” Ethan recovered quickly so we left with no delay. I tried to fill Bill in on things while watching the game but I was unable to communicate the new developments clearly. I left for an evening commitment somewhat apprehensive that the boys would get out of hand. When I got home and asked Bill how things went he said, “It was fine. In fact, I also told the boys I am not going to be a referee either. To which Ethan replied: “I may run away from home.””

We went into their room to pray for the boys and I said, “Ethan, daddy says that you really don’t like us not being referees any more and you might run away. I want you to know that if you choose to run away I will really miss you.” Joel chose that moment to begin to cry and beg us to return to our old ways. “Please, please don’t do this,” he said. “I want be punished so I can be a good adult, We may kill each other if you don’t go back to what you were doing.”

With so much bombarding us we did not know where to start but we said that we have so many other choices and ways to manage conflict other than killing or hurting each other. There are other alternatives to channeling anger. We also wanted to address Joel’s idea that punishment would make him a good adult so we had a lot to do. That night we made a promise to ourselves that we would be parents instead of referees or police officials.

There are times when I tend to slip back into my referee mode but I am definitely having more fun as a parent when I play the game of life with my children rather than being on the sidelines with a whistle. So often I was ready to frantically blow the whistle in the midst of a fight but now I have changed. I discovered that being a referee is not much fun but I love being a MOM! **Linda Watson 1989 revised 2007**

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Joel lives in Dayton and Ethan in Denver and they are best friends. Please let people know that if I had not been in your class I would have thought I had made a horrible mistake when the boys did such a good job of trying to get me to take back my old role. I can’t emphasize enough how important it was for me to understand the dynamics that were going on when I made the second order change and the class affirmation that I had in fact done the right and healthy thing!! (Update from Linda, March 12, 07)