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How A Broken Promise Between My Two Daughters Led To Me Accepting That Violence Is OK — Sometimes

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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There's a time in the day from 5 to 6 p.m. when I'm making dinner, and that's when my kids retreat into the unknown corners of the house. They know I'm distracted and this is the time for trouble. They challenge each other, they wrestle each other, they get into all those drawers and boxes you've told them to never open. Sonia and Elizabeth, 7 and 5 respectively, are, like most kids their ages, opportunistic delinquents.

One day, my girls climbed the back of our Everest-like living room sofa and dared each other to jump off. I kept one eye on them from the kitchen until I saw Elizabeth hesitate.

Relevant Reading: I'm Not Teaching My Daughter to Be Polite

(<http://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/im-not-teaching-my-daughter-to-be-polite>)

“You OK?” I asked.

“Can you catch me?” she said.

“Of course,” I said.

Sonia was outraged. “You pinky swore!” she yelled at her sister. “You pinky swore that you would do it on your own!”

Elizabeth got scared and started to cry: “I don’t want to.”

She started to climb down, but Sonia got even madder. “You have to do it! You promised!” She tugged at Elizabeth’s shirt, and dragged her back to the sofa.

“Sonia, stop!” I said. “She changed her mind!”

“No, she can’t! Not when she does a pinky swear!” she said.

Sonia pulled at her sister again and Elizabeth hit her, sobbing. To break them up I sent Sonia to her room and pulled Elizabeth into my arms.

Later when she had calmed down, I explained to Sonia that when we agree to do something we can always change our mind later. As soon as it came out of my mouth, I realized that I was talking about consent, specifically the idea of “revocable consent,” a core principal of the #MeToo movement that was the subject of a Supreme Court ruling in 2011. Consent must be “active, voluntary, ongoing, contemporaneous with the activity in question and revocable at any time.”

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explained to Sonia that Elizabeth was scared and no longer comfortable playing the game. But Sonia was still fuming. At school they recently introduced the idea of integrity; the importance of meaning what you say, the importance of following through. The injustice of breaking a "pinky swear," in Sonia’s world, was unforgivable. I didn't know what to say so I half-heartedly banned her from doing pinky swears with her sister and tried to get back to making dinner. Downstairs I checked to see if Elizabeth was calm and reminded her that we don’t solve our problems by hitting. Later, when I told my wife, she disagreed. She said, “That’s a perfect time to hit — If someone is physically forcing you to do something you’re not comfortable with.”

She's right. We certainly don't want to raise our daughters to be violent, but we also don't want them to feel they need to acquiesce to demands that make them uncomfortable just to avoid conflict. My wife and I talk often about how we can instill healthy attitudes about relationships in our daughters as they grow up. They should demand their voices are heard and respected. We are generally aligned on our philosophy to parenting, but in this case my wife's point-of-view was one that, as a man, I hadn't considered.

Relevant Reading: How Not to Raise a Mean Girl

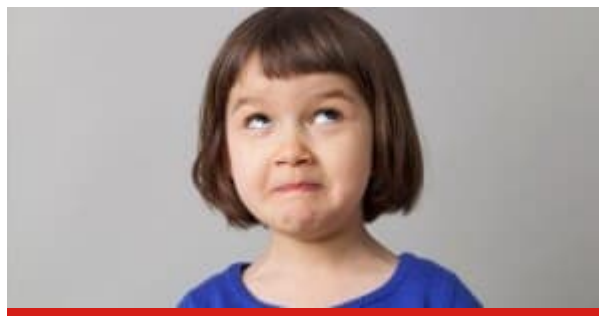
(<http://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/how-not-to-raise-a-mean-girl>)

Later, when she was in the bath, I explained to Elizabeth that she could, in fact, use violence to defend herself if someone is forcing her to do something she doesn't want to do. But she'd forgotten the sofa conflict. She nodded absently while playing with a Shopkins. I missed my chance.

We explained the same thing to Sonia but she couldn't see past the broken promise. We tried to play the empathy card, and tried to get her to imagine how she would feel if Elizabeth forced her to do something that scared her. "Then I wouldn't make a pinky swear," she said, a logical and self-evident axiom of her moral code.

In hindsight, my wife and I can unpack these competing principles: the integrity of the pinky swear versus the concept of "revocable consent." In the moment, though, I think I missed a good "teachable moment" about communication and consent. Next time, I'll be better prepared. Thankfully, there's always a next time for kids who delight in pushing each other's boundaries while their Dad is distracted by dinner.

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