

Marshmallow Parents

Written by Michelle Greenlee Harris, Columnist
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In the early 90's the world got a startling glimpse of the dysfunctional roots of one of its biggest stars – Michael Jackson. Many envied Michael's stardom, but after watching the mini-series *The Jacksons: An American Dream*, few envied his harsh and humble beginnings.

Part of what made the King of Pop's early days so hard was his domineering father. Michael told Oprah Winfrey that his father was so abusive to him during his childhood that as an adult he still became physically ill in his presence.

Recently Joe Jackson aka "daddy dearest", showed up on CNN giving parenting advice. Jackson criticized modern parents as being "too soft". The truth is many folks agreed with him.

I challenged my radio listeners to sound off on Papa Joe and his parenting views. Ninety nine percent of them echoed his statements. They agreed that many modern parents are too young, too distracted or too overworked to keep their children in line. "They're marshmallows" they collectively insisted.

Just like the sugary confection, I too can be gooey in the middle when it comes to discipline. I admit to sometimes being one of those overly indulgent, break my own rules type of moms. I have been known to rob my daughter of the joy of doing chores. She has also been cheated of the experience of bringing me her daddy's belt so I could whip her butt! Sure, I have been known to raise my voice and pop her leg but full fledged spankings were usually reserved for her dad.

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Ah good ole' spanking. There is one topic that every parent has an opinion on. I was surprised to learn that there are spanking instruction guides. You heard me – actual manuals on corporal punishment. I agree that there is a difference between spanking and beating, but I don't think people need 200 pages to figure that out. Most parents agree there is a line beyond which discipline turns into abuse, we just don't always agree on where that line is. Maybe we do need a few hundred pages of explanation.

Some people, like Joe Jackson, thought the line was miles away from what they did to their kids. In his CNN interview he insisted that his extreme disciplinary tactics were the reason why his children became stars. Apparently Joe graduated from the Ike Turner motivational training academy. Mister "eat the cake Annie Mae!" was the king of taking credit for a good outcome despite his despicable behavior.

The question Tina asked in her 1984 hit "What's Love Got To Do With It?" is what parents have to ask when deciding on any form of discipline. The motivation behind all chastisement should be love and the desire to teach.

I know children can take you to the brink – remember I have a teen ager. That's when you have to make some tough decisions. Even a softy like me can get a backbone when I know there is an important life lesson that must be imparted.

Fellow marshmallows listen to me – the softer we are on our kids, the harder life will be for them. So find a balance between tough love and a tender heart.