

# Parents can be embarrassing? Who knew?

Recently, a 36-year-old single mother of three from London, Ont., Roxanne Toussaint, decided that she had had enough of her children's inconsiderate behaviour. She hammered a placard into her front lawn that said "Mom on Strike" and pitched a tent beside it where she intended to stay until the matter reached a negotiated settlement.

Evidently Ms. Toussaint's offspring, a 14-year-old boy and his two sisters, ages 10 and 6, have difficulty sharing (of two pizzas for dinner, all they left for her was a "thin little measly piece") and refuse to help out around the



**i've got issues**

*randy chedour*

house with chores. As a result the kitchen sink is filled with dirty dishes, their rooms are a mess and bicycle parts and tools litter the backyard. In an effort to bring these non-compliant children onside with her requests for assistance, Mom has opted to exercise her constitutional right to protest and is unwilling to back down until the miscreants agree to sign a document laying out detailed plans to re-distribute chores more equitably and to resolve family arguments amicably.

Some would argue that Ms. Toussaint has only done what all parents may have, at one time or another, threatened to do and that, because she is still buying groceries and has a phone with her at all times, she is in no way being "abusive". Others may disagree.

What is indisputable, however, is that Ms. Toussaint aims to change her children's behaviour through public embarrassment. Had she not been interested in attracting local and national media attention, she could just as easily have erected her protest sign and tent in the backyard. That wouldn't do, however, since her stated goal was, first and foremost, to embarrass her children. She went so far as to admit to this when she told the Toronto Star, "I don't know any kids who are not embarrassed by their parents."

Well, she got that right. Most parents are able to achieve that noteworthy goal without even trying. Having been one of the primary sources of embarrassment for my own children over the years, I can state unequivocally that it is not hard to do. You don't have to work at it because, at some point in every child's upbringing, they will reach a point where virtually everything their parents do, or say, will result in their public humiliation. It could be the way you answer the phone when their friends call, the clothes you wear, the

music you like, the job you have, the irritating habit you have of prefacing most of your conversations with, "When I was your age..." or that unfortunate and regrettable karaoke and breakdancing exhibition at last summer's family reunion.

The point is that embarrassing your children is easy. No training is required and you'll never run out of material. But, and here is where Ms. Toussaint should be particularly cautious, when applied intentionally, is it an effective way to modify behaviour?

According to her, "Sometimes it takes a bit of tough love but really I think first they deserve a bit of embarrassment." If that's what they "deserve", then they have been amply rewarded. Media attention has turned their lives into a circus.

After nearly a week, Ms. Toussaint let it be known that the family had come to an agreement and the strike was over. One wonders if Mom grew weary of sleeping in a tent or if the kids chose capitulation as a means of getting the satellite truck out of their driveway. Either way one week seems hardly an adequate amount of time for either side to have "seen the light". If the children's post-strike behaviours do change and the Toussaint household becomes at once harmonious, industrious and peaceful, then perhaps it will all have been worthwhile. My guess is that any behavioural change will be short-lived and that Mom soon will be dusting off her picket sign once again.

Ms. Toussaint's children are probably not going to be traumatized for life over their mother's publicity stunt. They are also not likely to become better and more co-operative family members as a long-term result. We embarrass our children enough without any willful attempt. Do we have to do it both intentionally and publicly?

I think that all adults – parents, teachers and others in positions of trust and authority should use public embarrassment minimally and judiciously. Some young people may be able to laugh it off, but we should be aware that others might find the cumulative effect of repeated embarrassments to be devastating. One need look no further than recent news to find examples of kids who may have been embarrassed, intimidated or bullied once too often – and some, in extreme cases, have lashed out with tragic and lethal consequences. Is public embarrassment as a means of altering behaviour really worth the risk?

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