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# How People Change

By **DAVID BROOKS**

Nick Crews was, by his own admission, a middling father. He enjoyed cuddling with his three kids, but he was frequently away on naval deployments and didn't stay in touch with them once they went off to boarding school.

Over the years, Crews has watched his children (the oldest is now 40) make a series of terrible decisions. "I bought into the fashionable philosophy of not interfering; letting the children find themselves," he told Cristina Odone of The Telegraph of London.

Finally, in February, Crews decided he'd had enough. He sent his offspring an e-mail message, which is now known in Britain as the Crews Missile.

"Dear All Three," **he wrote**. "With last evening's crop of whinges and tidings of more rotten news for which you seem to treat your mother like a cess-pit, I feel it is time to come off my perch.

"It is obvious that none of you has the faintest notion of the bitter disappointment each of you has in your own way dished out to us. We are seeing the miserable death throes of the fourth of your collective marriages at the same time we see the advent of a fifth."

Crews continued: "I wonder if you realise how we feel — we have nothing to say which reflects any credit on you or us. Fulfilling careers based on your educations would have helped — but as yet none of you is what I would confidently term properly self-supporting."

Then he turned to his grandchildren. "So we witness the introduction to this life of six beautiful children — soon to be seven — none of whose parents have had the maturity and sound judgment to make a reasonable fist at making essential threshold decisions. ...

"The predictable result has been a decade of deep unhappiness over the fates of our grandchildren. If it wasn't for them, Mum and I would not be too concerned, as each of you consciously, and with eyes wide open, crashes from one cock-up to the next. It makes us weak that so many of these events are copulation-driven, and then helplessly to see these lovely little people being woefully let down by you, their parents."

Crews then finished his e-mail. “I want to hear no more from any of you until, if you feel inclined, you have a success or an achievement or a REALISTIC plan for the support and happiness of your children to tell me about.”

He signed the e-mail, “I am bitterly, bitterly disappointed. Dad.”

That e-mail, released by one of his daughters hoping to get publicity for a book she is translating, has made Crews a hugely popular folk hero in Britain. Many parents are apparently delighted that someone finally had the gumption to give at least one set of overprivileged slackers a well-deserved kick in the pants.

The problem, of course, is that no matter how emotionally satisfying these tirades may be, they don’t really work. You can tell people that they are fat and that they shouldn’t eat more French fries, but that doesn’t mean they will stop. You can make all sorts of New Year’s resolutions, earnestly deciding to behave better, but that doesn’t mean you will.

People don’t behave badly because they lack information about their shortcomings. They behave badly because they’ve fallen into patterns of destructive behavior from which they’re unable to escape.

Human behavior flows from hidden springs and calls for constant and crafty prodding more than blunt hectoring. The way to get someone out of a negative cascade is not with a ferocious e-mail trying to attack their bad behavior. It’s to go on offense and try to maximize some alternative good behavior. There’s a trove of research suggesting that it’s best to tackle negative behaviors obliquely, by redirecting attention toward different, positive ones.

It’s foolish to imperiously withdraw and say, come back to me when you have a plan. It’s better to pick one area of life at a time (most people don’t have the willpower to change their whole lives all at once) and help a person lay down a pre-emptive set of concrete rules and rewards. Pick out a small goal and lay out measurable steps toward it.

It’s foolhardy to try to persuade people to see the profound errors of their ways in the hope that mental change will lead to behavioral change. Instead, try to change superficial behavior first and hope that, if they act differently, they’ll eventually think differently. Lure people toward success with the promise of admiration instead of trying to punish failure with criticism. Positive rewards are more powerful.

I happen to cover a field — politics — in which people are perpetually bellowing at each other to be

better. They're always issuing the political version of the Crews Missile.

It's a lousy leadership model. Don't try to bludgeon bad behavior. Change the underlying context. Change the behavior triggers. Displace bad behavior with different good behavior. Be oblique. Redirect.

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