

Interview with Neil about the Who's in Charge? Group

(edited from video) - Eddie Gallagher, 2006

[Names and a some details have been changed].

Eddie: Tell us a little about yourself.

Neil: I had a good job a few years ago and then, I guess it would be seven years ago now, I had a stroke which meant that I lost my job and unfortunately it also meant that I lost my house and my wife and everything, because my wife left me virtually holding the baby, holding four kids anyway. She disappeared off the scene for a while and I had four kids to bring up.

I understand that you brought up eight children in all [includes a number of step-children], how many of them had problems?

Just the one.

How old was she when you had your stroke and separated from her mother?

She was then 10 years old, the second youngest. I had a younger son as well as an older daughter and then two older step children still at home.

So did you have problems with her before the separation and stroke?

She was always a difficult child. She was very advanced and we were very proud of her. She was walking at 10 months and we were very proud parents. She was always very advanced and very intelligent... but, at the same time, quite difficult.

Did she take the separation hard?

Oh yes, she took it hardest of all of them.

How did things develop from the separation up until you came to the Who's in Charge Group?

At first I had found it all a bit much and when my ex-wife moved back to this area, for a while we split the children, I had my son and she had my two daughters and the problems didn't really start in earnest until I got my daughter back. I took her back because my ex couldn't handle her. I really don't know what went on while she was living there, I tried to keep out of it, and that's when the problems really started. She became very, very difficult. She was all right at school but when she was at home she was difficult.

Difficult?

Well she was very aggressive, intolerant, she always wanted her own way and I guess I basically lost control. These things happen gradually and if they happened suddenly you'd be onto it, but no, it didn't happen gradually and I suppose I was physically weak and I felt very guilty. Guilty about the fact that she was taking it very hard, that she felt abandoned, I guess. I was probably not as strict on her as I should have been.

Do you think your guilt played a big part?

Oh, there's no question of that, and looking back on it now, she played on that. I used to feel **terribly** guilty. If I said "no" to something, all her friends had one so why couldn't she? You know, all her friends did this, all her friends went to parties and stayed out late but she wasn't allowed to and I guess I – due to my guilt, I suppose – I'd relent. And it got to a point where she was very, very aggressive. She was aggressive physically in the sense that if I had denied her something, she would not give up she'd keep on saying that she wanted this and if I decided I was going to do something else she'd bar my way and she'd block the door there was a lot of pushing and shoving... no hitting, she never actually hit me...

What would you have done if she'd hit you?

Collapsed, I suppose, but she never did so. As I got older, in the past few years, I wouldn't have taken it too well, but thankfully she never did.

It sounds like she used your physical weakness against you though?

Oh definitely, I mean she was bigger than me when she was 15. She was bigger than me and obviously stronger than me and not prepared to take no for an answer, with anything, whether it was money or food or going out, staying out, not going to school when she felt she didn't want to go. What ever it was, she wanted it and that was that!

What led to you coming to the Who's in charge group?

I got to the stage where I just needed some help. I had taken her to counselling.

How did that go?

Not well. Not very well because I think the people that she saw, and there was more than one on separate occasions, but the people she saw sort of signed off, they felt they got as far as they could go and I remember one of them saying "I think we've achieved a lot and everything is fine now". I remember talking to my daughter about it and she said "I fooled her, didn't I?" So she would play act. On one occasion we went to a counsellor and she

just sat there and refused to talk. Just arms folded, lips forced together, didn't say a word for three quarters of an hour.

Where you involved in the counselling or was it counselling for her?

I was usually involved in the first session and then it was just the counsellor and her. The counsellor would talk to me occasionally and say "well this is very difficult" or they'd say "we're making great progress", whatever it was at the time.

Whatever impression she wanted to give?

So it seemed.

Was it hard for you to come to the group?

Yes, yes it was! A counsellor suggested that why don't you go to a group, a fellow by the name of Eddie Gallagher is running a group for parents, and I thought that sounded a good idea because I really felt I'd lost it. And I was going no where; things were totally out of hand; and I thought "oh well, I might as well go along". I guess it took me a while to get enough courage to ring up and find out about it. It took me even more courage to go, in fact I missed the first session. It took even more courage when I got there because I walked into a room full of ladies; I was about the only guy there. But I soon settled down, I thought, well I've got nothing to lose, I'll give it a go, a bit sceptical but I thought –"give it a try".

So was it helpful?

Well yes, very! Looking back now, I equated it to training a dog, I remember watching a TV program with some English woman who said you don't train the dog, you train the dog owner and I thought "maybe it's me that's got to change, and I've got to change my attitude and what I'm doing and it might make a difference". So I think one of the first things I learned is that if I can do things differently maybe I could turn things around.

So you got some hope?

Oh yes! I remember you saying that, you know everyone's different and not everyone will be able to use all the techniques or whatever. It's very hard when you're listening to people in the group and at the time you think "this sounds good, I might do that" – and then you get home and it doesn't work. And the one thing I think that I really held onto was the session where you were talking about power. The kids do what they do because they've got the power, because they don't care, and I don't have the power because I do care; and that left me in a position of weakness and my daughter in a position of strength, and that was the problem.

Was that a surprise to you that idea?

Well yes, it was! You never think that caring about somebody is going to have an adverse affect, and surely the opposite should apply.

Seems very unfair doesn't it?

Yes it does! Look, I've been on guilt trips, I've felt guilty about not being able to control my daughter; you know, it's all my fault, look what's happened, my marriage is falling apart that's probably my fault too, had to sell our house, that's my fault, I'm having problems with the kids, that's my fault, I felt shockingly guilty! So the last thing I wanted to do was to stop caring about her, and my initial reaction was you know, it didn't make sense. But then it did. So that was probably the first thing I tried.

What did you do about it?

Well, I was in the habit, I guess, of giving in to whatever the demands were, and giving in to the, "all my friends have this so why can't I?" and "You aren't being fair to me" she had this thing about not being fair. Which made me feel guilty, and made me think that I didn't care enough. And she said once "you don't care" and I thought "yes I do" and I said of course I care, you know I love you very much. So what I did then was to consciously try to get across to her that I didn't care about some things, which wasn't easy. I mean if you do care about something it's hard to show to them that you don't. But I tried to do that, I started giving her choices when she'd ask me to do something. I'd say "there are alternatives, you've got some choices, it's up to you to choose. You can choose what you want to do, but don't expect me to do what you want just because you think it's unfair". So I started to try and convey the fact that I didn't care about a lot of the things that she bought up – where hitherto I used to give in.

So you were pretending at first?

Well yeah, it's not easy. It wasn't easy at all! At first it didn't always work, I mean I didn't always follow through. It's not easy bringing up a teenage girl anyway, for a father, but to try and get across the position of not caring about something when you really do is hard. But it did start to work. She started making fewer demands, and gradually, gradually I got on top of things.

So it sounds like that was the turning point but you still had a long way to go?

It was, it was, it was a turning point because I had a change of attitude, you know. Even things like meal times: if she was out she'd come home late so it was very difficult cooking for my son. As part of showing that I didn't care, I used to cook all the meals together and my son and I would have ours and leave hers. She'd expect the meal to be hot when she came in late, but it

wasn't, so she'd have to fix it, not me. I said, "if you want to eat with us and have a hot meal then be here when it's cooked – 7 o'clock".

Did you feel guilty when you first did that?

Oh yeah, I was close to tears on a number of occasions particularly late at night. When you're on your own everything builds up when you go to bed and you just think about things. For a while there I had problems sleeping but then it dawned on me that it was actually working, and it didn't seem to affect her feelings towards me, you know, it didn't stop her loving me or anything like that.

[Despite the abusive behaviour there was always some affection between Neil and his daughter. Abuse is not about lack of love but about lack of respect. – Eddie]

It wasn't about love?

No, so when I realised that by taking the stand I'd taken wasn't affecting our relationship, other than her treating me better, I then felt better about it and I stopped feeling guilty. So it was really good, it was good that I went to that program.

You mentioned techniques, but it sounds like your attitude was more important?

Well, yes, it is! Technique was only important because, for some people, and I'm no different I guess, sometimes it helps to be given a couple of words or phrases where you can start, for example: instead of saying when you're asked to do something, instead of saying "oh no, I can't do that", which would result in an argument, I'd say "I won't do that". That's different – I won't do it, not that I can't. And I still do that now. My daughter has left home [to live with a boyfriend] but when I have contact with my daughter it's a much better relationship and she still, does still occasionally asks me to do things, and I said "no, no I won't".

So before you were making excuses, for why you couldn't do things?

Oh, absolutely

And you started just saying, I don't want to?

Yes, well not necessarily "I don't want to", oh I suppose that's how it comes across, but just saying that "I won't do that" and you know you can't come up with arguments – if you're not going to do it, you're not going to do it. Whereas if I said "I can't" she'd come in through the side door and use a different approach to try to get me to reverse the "I can't" bit. So once I started saying "I won't," – yeah, it gets back to attitude.

Thanks very much indeed.

That's OK, I hope I've been some help to other parents.

A few brief comments:

It is very obvious that Neil is a caring, intelligent and sensitive man and in no way deserved to be abused. Most of the parents I've dealt with (now over 300) with abusive children were caring, normal parents.

This interview makes clear the huge part that parent's (usually undeserved) guilt often plays in preventing them from being assertive with their children. Unfortunately some workers and services add to the burden of guilt rather than reduce it.

A number of parents who have made good progress in the groups I run have used the phrase "taking a step back". This means different things to different people (not doing so much for their children; not being so emotionally involved; not taking attacks so personally; not being so child-focussed) and Neil nicely illustrates one version of this. As Neil mentioned, what works for one parent may not work for another.

Eddie Gallagher