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## Coercion and Effect

Michael Polinski  
*College of DuPage*

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## Coercion and Effect

-Michael Polinski-

Janet Segall hunched over the steering wheel of the forest green minivan and rubbed her fingers into her forehead in a futile effort to ease the dull fuzzy pang that had bothered her without pause and mercy from (the) early in the morning. In the back seat, her children clamored for their release, but all Janet wanted right now was a few minutes of liberation for herself.

Janet stumbled out of the front seat and jerked open sliding side door. She slowly unbuckled Emily; and after fumbling with the latches and straps, she picked up Dillon. Emily skipped through the garage to the entrance, humming a silly song she had sung earlier at kindergarten and waving a handful of colorful papers. Trailing behind her, Janet carried Dillon and a baby bag, cautiously navigating her way through the maze of garbage cans, bikes, tools, toys and storage bins.

Inside, Emily threw off her backpack, hopped up on her chair at the kitchen table, and put her papers down in front of her. Her pigtails stopped bouncing and flopped down just over her ears.

"Mom, hurry up. I can't wait to show you what I did at school." Emily put her hands under her chin and looked up at her mother with eager eyes and a stretched out smile.

"Now, just slow down, Sweetie." Janet's voice cracked from fatigue. "Mommy's not moving too fast today." Janet reached the table, looked down at her daughter, and kissed her on the forehead. "You know your brother was up all night again."

"But I want to show you now."

"Have a little snack. After I get your brother down for his nap, we'll have plenty of time to look at your pictures."

"Emily's smile turned into an impatient frown and her eyes lost their sparkle. Janet ignored her disappointment and set a banana in front of her. With Dillon still in her arms, she walked toward the stairs, stopping in the doorway.

"Don't worry. I'll only be a couple of minutes."

"But Mom."

"I'll be right back, Sweetie."

Emily slumped over the kitchen table and extended her right arm over her head. She reached for the banana and twirled it on the table. Around and around spun the banana, failing to stop on the imaginary winning spot. She then pushed the banana aside and shuffled the

papers. Up, down, criss-cross, side-to-side slid the papers, never finding a good position.

Bored with being bored, Emily popped up in her chair. She surveyed her scattered pictures of her favorite that her teacher had made the students draw today. She glanced back and forth, trying to decide which one she liked best: the picture of the daily family dinner or afternoon with Mom. Of course, it was Mom, sitting on the couch with her, resting under her arm and listening to her read a book. Together, just the two of them. Emily looked up at the ceiling.

"Mom, hurry up." Emily pushed the pictures away, grabbed the banana, peeled it, and took a big bite.

Upstairs, Janet gently rocked Dillon to sleep to a cd of Mozart adagios, oblivious to Emily's plea. After about five minutes of rocking and caressing, Dillon finally dozed off in her arms. Janet carefully placed him in his crib and tiptoes out of the room. Janet reached the top of the stairs and gingerly descended them, trying to prevent any creaking. She stopped on the bottom step when she heard some rustling from Dillon's room

"Oh no," She whispered to herself. "Please no. Please sleep little boy."

"Mom, is that you?" Emily called from the kitchen. "Are you coming?"

Before Janet could respond to Emily, Dillon erupted in cries and called out for "Mama." Janet stood still and waited to see if this was a temporary out burst, perhaps caused by his rolling over to a more comfortable position. But his cries and calls persisted and intensified, so Janet walked back up the stairs. She paused outside his room, took a deep breath, counted to ten and asked the lord for straight. She forced on a smile and entered the room to comfort the troubled toddler all over again.

Emily fidgeted in her chair and looked toward the entrance of the kitchen. She twirled her pigtails. She took another bite of the banana and walked to the stairs.

"Mom? Mom, where are you? I thought I heard you." Emily called up the stairs an It's been more tan a few minutes. Mom?"

Emily ran up the stairs to her brother's room as her mother put Dillon into the crib.

"Whaaa!"

"Darn it. I told you to wait. Why couldn't you just wait?" Janet cradled the little boy against her chest. "Now get downstairs and wait." Janet stroked the back of the Dillon's head and rocked him gen-

tle back and forth once more. Janet looked straight at Emily.

"Get downstairs now."

Emily stood in the doorway, staring at the ground, twirling her pig-tails, swaying from left to right in the doorway. "But I—"

"But nothing. Go down now."

"But—"

"Now!" Janet yelled in an angry whisper, her face creasing with violent ridges.

Emily ran from the room and down the stairs, sniffing and whimpering the whole way. She stopped at the bottom to wipe her dripping eyes and runny nose on her sleeves. She trudged into the empty kitchen and grabbed her banana. She shoved a big chunk in her mouth, gagged on it for a few seconds, and then spat most of it into the garbage can.

Emily then pushed a chair next to the counter, climbed up on it, and took down a glass. She placed the glass on the kitchen table and took the nearly full gallon of milk out of the refrigerator, struggling to carry it to the chair. She grabbed the glass with her left hand, lowered it a few inches below the seat of the chair, and tilted the milk to pour it into the glass.

But Emily tilted the gallon too much and the force of the rushing milk knocked the glass out of her hand. Emily panicked and dropped the gallon, too, sending it crashing to the floor and splattering milk on her and throughout the kitchen. When Emily picked up the gallon, it had less than a quarter left.

Emily grabbed a roll of paper towels and quickly spread the entire roll over the spill. She picked up the drenched, dripping towels and stuffed them in the garbage can. She threw two kitchen hand towels on the floor and ran to the bathroom to get the decorative guest towels with the soft ruffled edges. She then scattered these towels across the floor.

Emily knelt down and tried to wipe up the spill, but the towels quickly became drenched and spread the mess out farther and farther like finger paint on slick paper. Emily heard her mother's footsteps on the stairs and looked toward the hall entrance to the kitchen.

"Mom, I need your help."

"Shhh. You don't want to wake your brother again," Janet whispered loudly from the bottom of the stairs. "I think he's finally down for good."

"But Mom. I need your help." Emily straightened up on her knees, surrounded by dirty, wet towels.

"I'll be right there." Janet walked to the front door and brought

in the mail. She flipped through the stack of letters and bills on her way toward the kitchen, dropping them on the kitchen desk when she entered the room.

"Emily, what the heck happened here?" Janet looked at her milk-stained daughter and kitchen.

Emily ran to her mother, clasped her arms around her mother's waist, and began to mumble and cry. Janet shook her hips and shook her daughter off her, sending Emily sliding to the floor. "Get off of me, Emily. You're a mess."

Emily picked herself off the ground and lunged at her mother again, crying and babbling and grasping and flailing.

"Off, I said. Off." Janet pushed Emily off again and walked away toward the pile of towels on the floor. "Young lady, I want to know what happened. And now!"

Janet picked up the towels and threw them into the sink, sending milk splattering all over the counter and cabinets. Turning to face Emily again, she slipped on the slick surface and fell to the filthy floor. "Damn it. Damn it."

Emily flinched and tensed at the sight of her mother's fall but when she saw her mother wasn't hurt, she giggled at the way the milk stains splotched on her black sweat suit like a cow's hide.

"Emily, you think this is funny?"

Emily stopped giggling and stood stiffly in place, watching her mother's face tighten and twitch in an unfamiliar way.

"You couldn't wait. I said a few minutes. A few stinking minutes. That's all! But you couldn't wait!"

"But Mom...I only...I'm." Emily mixed her explanation with her apology, ending up getting neither out, and just shut up and pleaded with her face for a kind word or a warm hug or a soft kiss to make everything ok.

"Save it young lady." Janet pushed herself up to her knees.

Emily haltingly stepped toward her mother. "Mom, I only--"

"Just get away, Emily, please. Just get out of here." Janet stood up and walked to the sink. "I really don't want to see your face right now." She turned the cold water on full blast.

Emily crept up behind her mother and tugged on her sweatshirt. "Please Mom, turn around."

Janet stared out the window biting her lip, rubbing her forehead, feeling her internal temperature rising uncomfortably and uncontrollably higher, past boiling, far past boiling.

"Mom, I need a--"

"Damn it, Emily, leave me alone!"

Emily ran out of the kitchen into the dining room and tripped on the leg of a dining room chair. She fell into the decorative antique table with porcelain figurines of precious angels on top of it and sent them crashing to the floor and shattering to pieces. A broken wing landed in Emily's hair. Janet rushed into the room and rushed toward her daughter.

"Are you ok?"

"No you leave me alone!" Emily screamed through her tears. "Just get away from me."

"What?" Janet grabbed Emily by the outer part of her arms and yanked her to her feet. "What did you say?"

"I don't want you anymore. Let me go." Emily squirmed and twisted, trying to free herself. "Leave me alone."

And when Janet refused to let go, Emily spat in her face. Instantly, almost instinctively, without thinking, and for the first time, Janet lifted her right hand above her head and lowered it swiftly and surely to its target on Emily's cheek, snapping Emily's head back. Emily recoiled and withered from the blow. She then stiffened in angry disbelief at this unwanted but forceful revelation and glared at her mother with a hurt deeper than anguish.

"I hate you. You're not my mom anymore."

Emily jumped to her feet, ran out of the dining room and up to her bedroom where she closed the door and buried her head in her pillow.

Janet watched her daughter flee from her and sobbed like a mother who had just lost a child.

After Janet finished mourning her loss, she swept up the broken pieces of angels and cleaned the milk-stained kitchen. Before going upstairs, she noticed Emily's papers on the kitchen table and looked at the scenes of happy family life her daughter had wanted to share with her. Janet hung her head as she hung them on the refrigerator. She then slowly walked up the stairs to Emily's room and gently knocked on the door.

"Emily, it's Mommy. May I come in?" Janet waited for a reply. "I want to talk to you. I'm sorry Sweetie. Won't you let Mommy come in?"

As she waited alone outside in the hall, Janet didn't notice the ache in her head anymore, though its grip was just as tight-something else hurt more.

## II.

Two weeks passed and everything seemed back to normal. Janet and Emily had talked about what had happened and how they should handle things when they're tired, hurt, or upset. They even salvaged the rest of that horrible afternoon and enjoyed the subsequent afternoons, the way they did before, seemingly creating more happy scenes for Emily to paint pleasant pictures of.

Tonight, Janet was cleaning up in the kitchen after dinner and her husband was sitting in his recliner with Dillon on his lap in the adjoining family room reading a book about farm animals to him. Emily sat on the floor in front of the fireplace playing with her dolls. Every time Janet walked to the kitchen table, she looked up and smiled at her family, even if they weren't looking at her. In a few minutes, she would join them for their family time.

"Leave me alone." Emily made the mommy doll yell at the baby doll.

"But Mom," the baby doll whined.

"But nothing. Get away." The mommy doll pushed the baby doll away. "You're bugging me."

The mommy doll walked away and the baby doll followed her crying. The baby doll grabbed onto the mommy doll's dress and tried to hug her.

"But I only want to play with you."

"Enough. I'm busy." The mommy doll wiggled out of the baby doll's grip. "Go sit at the table by yourself and eat a banana."

The baby doll ran out of the room screaming louder.

Emily's father looked up from the book.

"Shut up. Shut up. You brat," the mommy doll yelled and followed after.

The baby doll crashed into the tea set.

"Now look what you've done. You stupid girl." The mommy doll rushed over to the fallen, whimpering, frightened baby doll.

Emily's father continued to watch her. Janet looked up from the kitchen table.

"You broke it. You bad girl."

"But I--"

The mommy doll slapped the baby doll in the face.

"Get out of here before I hit you some more. You bad girl."

"I hate you. You're nothing but a big meanie." The baby doll ran out of the room and hid under a blanket.