
The Art and Science of Raising Healthy Children

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Parenting as a Process

Parenting, a practice as old as human life itself, is considered by many to be the singular most important form of human interaction. For decades, parenting theory and practice has been discussed, debated, written about, examined and reexamined. A universal practice, it is considered clearly instinctual by some and learned by others.

Founded on cultural values and familial norms, parenting behaviors are generally thought to be passed on from one generation to another like a prized family heirloom. Parenting practices are diverse in expression, reflecting a range from the most positive to the most negative extremes. Parenting can be wanted or unwanted, appropriate or inappropriate, healthy or dysfunctional, abusive or nurturing. Whatever its form, it is generally agreed that the impact of parenting is felt throughout one's lifetime – and for succeeding generations. No other form of human interaction can boast such power and longevity.

Parenting is considered to be an art, as well as a science. As an art, the picture is of a mom, dad and child sharing, touching, laughing and crying freely. As a science, the concept is one of natural and logical consequences, developmental stages, punishments, rewards and family rules. Parenting is to be enjoyed, yet it also serves as evidence of the will of the species to survive the most grueling of times. Parenting means feeding children, changing their diapers, getting them to bed, getting them up, giving them a bath, paying them an allowance, reading them stories, telling them what to do and what not to do, and worrying about them when they get old enough to begin to do things for themselves.

Parenting is a father hoping his little girl will do well in a spelling bee and the pride in seeing her graduate from college. It is the pain of a mom seeing her teenage son hurting from a cruel rejection of a peer, and the warmth she feels watching her grown son comfort his own little boy. Parenting is the personal inner torment a mother and a father feel knowing their son or daughter will be faced with making many tough choices on drugs, sex, relationships, and careers, and the personal inner peace they feel knowing their children take good care of themselves and make good choices. Parenting is attachment and separation dependence and independence, love and anger, contentment and frustration, pride and hurt, acceptance and rejection.

Technically, parenting is a process of interactions designed to nourish, protect, and guide a new life through the course of its development. The parenting process begins at the creation of the new individual and continues to be practiced throughout a lifetime in varying degrees of intensity. The process of parenting entails four main tasks:

1. To foster physical and mental health.
2. To provide emotional warmth and nurturance.
3. To provide opportunities for the development of individuality and intellect.
4. To facilitate social and emotional competence.

When these tasks are carried out in the context of a strong emotional tie with a caretaker who stimulates a positive view of other people and the world, children have the opportunity to develop their own individual potentials to the fullest extent. When the tie between the caregiver and child is not established or is strained, children and parents alike will face trying times.

The following are what I call the building blocks of parenting. These are the characteristics and skills necessary to carry out the process. When implemented, these building blocks

define parenting at its best. If any or all of these characteristics and skills are diminished or absent, the essence of parenting is jeopardized.

The Building Blocks of the Parenting Process

Bonding and Attachment

Parenting begins with the process of establishing an unconditional positive regard and acceptance of the child. At birth, the process of establishing the relationship between mother and child is called "bonding." Statements such as "He has my nose" or "Look, she has your eyes" are common ways parents express their initial view of their children as extensions of themselves, and welcome the children into their families. Williams Sears (1987), in his book entitled, Creative Parenting, refers to the process of bonding as "immersion" mothering and "involved" fathering. According to Sears, immersion mothers and involved fathers convey such deep love to their child that h/she feels "right," which naturally brings forth desirable behaviors and returns a message of love to the parents.

Researchers are studying the importance of early parent-infant bonding. Many suggest that bonding actually occurs in the majority of parents at the moment the woman discovers she is pregnant. Such early bonding enables parents to transfer their life-giving love for the "inside infant" to the caregiving love for the "outside infant" (Sears, 1987).

Whereas "bonding" between parent and infant occurs within the first 24 hours, "attachment" describes the extension of bonding, e.g., the close relationship between parent and child, which continues throughout life. Bowlby (1961) defines attachment as any form of behavior that results in a person attaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual, usually conceived as stronger or wiser. Like bonding, the biological function of attachment is the contribution it makes to survival of the infant, mainly protecting a child from loss or attack. Behaviors such as clinging, calling, crying, smiling, and following are designed to achieve or maintain closeness to the parent.

Empathy

Perhaps no other single quality of parenting is as critical to the overall growth and well-being of the child as is parental empathy. Empathy is the ability to be aware of and honor the needs of another, and to act to help that individual meet his/her needs. In parenting, empathy is critical to an adult's understanding of a child, because it requires the "parent person" to consider the "child person" an equal – not in knowledge, intelligence, or experience, and certainly not in maturity, but with respect to the feelings and needs which motivate us all.

Bruno Bettelheim (1987), in his book A Good Enough Parent, suggests that an empathic response means an attempt to put ourselves in the other person's place, so that our feelings will suggest to us not only his emotions, but also, his motives. According to Bettelheim, when parents are trying to respond empathically, they must understand the child from the inside, not from the outside like an observer attempting to comprehend another's motives through his intellect. Since children are little people with the same needs as adults, only much needier, the parents' ability to empathize with the needs of the child is essential in promoting the necessary physical, emotional, intellectual, and social behaviors required for healthy growth and development.

Self-Awareness

Parents must consider their own needs as well as those of their children. When parents consider their relationships with their children, they often discover that they are clear about children's needs, wishes, and feelings, but vague about their own. Being able to be empathetic to the needs of others requires a familiarity with the whole range of one's own feelings and needs, not only with those of the moment, or those which are habitually attended to. Parents whose physical, emotional, social, and intellectual needs are not being met will have difficulty in meeting the needs of their children.

Touch

Touch is the most powerful of interactions between parent and child. The significance of touch as an essential element of parenting has been studied for years by researchers examining its impact on children's growth and development. Early research conducted by Halliday (1948) suggested that children in hospitals deprived of their accustomed maternal body contact developed profound depression with lack of appetite and wasting, leading to death. We know that touch is the primary mode of communication with a newborn baby. According to Sears (1987), touch is the language for both parent and child, and is often a mirror of the parent's inner feelings toward the child. Children can sense what parents are feeling by the way they are touched. Gentle, calm nurturing touch evokes in the child a sense of trust, kindness, and security. Painful or scary touch communicates anger and fear to the child.

Discipline

Setting limits for children in their process of learning right from wrong, safety from danger, good from bad, and wanted from unwanted is a vital building block in the parenting process. Discipline means the establishment of boundaries, the creation of rules and the path of guidance, and learning for children who want to please their parents beginning very early in life.

Discipline constitutes the development of consequences – both rewards and punishments – that children have input in establishing. The ultimate purpose of discipline is to help children develop self-control and positive character. Self-discipline cannot be imposed, beaten into, or forced on a child. It develops best by the child emulating someone whose example he or she admires. Establishing discipline by threats and corporal punishment is least likely to work simply because children consciously emulate only people they admire. Parents who hit, yell, belittle, and show hostility toward their children for the purpose of “disciplining” them fail to foster trust and admiration between them and their children. Punitive disciplinary practices lead to the development of children who fail to learn self-control and are likely to grow into unruly adolescents.

Unconditional Love, Honesty, and Respect

Parenting is the process of helping children feel an overall acceptance as people without regard to their behavior. Unconditional positive love from a parent communicates to children that despite their shortcomings, mistakes, misdeeds, or accidents, they are still valued human beings. Parenting is also about communicating feelings in an honest and accurate way and encouraging children to do the same. Honest parenting means your words match your tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, and the true intent of your communication. When parents do not match their behaviors with their words, children get mixed messages. Over time, the child develops confusion and distrust toward the parents and their actions.

Parenting is also about respect. Healthy, nurturing parents respect their children as human beings. Infants and small children are viewed, like adults, as separate people, with their individual needs and preferences. Children's feelings, intentions, thoughts,

and bodies are held in regard – not treated as objects to be manipulated. Effective parents talk to and interact with their children with the same courtesy and consideration they would demand for themselves.

Knowledge of Development

Lastly, the process of parenting entails knowing what to expect of children at their various stages of growth and development. Children are born into this world entirely dependent upon their parents to help them meet their needs. As children grow older, their abilities to meet their own needs develop little by little. The drive towards autonomy and independence actually begins quite early in infancy, but complete maturity and self-reliance comes slowly over many years. Knowing what to expect of children as they reach physical, emotional, and intellectual milestones is important for the development of their positive self-esteem and self-concept. Children initially learn who they are from the ways they are able to please their parents. If parents repeatedly make demands on children which they are unable to meet successfully, children's feelings (self-esteem) and their thoughts (self-concept) about themselves take a negative turn. If this continues over time, children often end up feeling themselves as inadequate and viewing themselves as failures.

References:

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