

SMART PARENTING: Raising Happy and Responsible Children in the 21st Century



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INTRODUCTION

“Mommy, how come these little ones get away with things many didn’t when they were that age?” is the usual complaint of the eldest children. They were referring – not to their first brother, who was just a few years younger -- but to the next “batch” of siblings – a boy or a girl who came about ten years later.

As parents, you do try not to play favorites and be consistent as possible. However, that eldest child, indeed, had reason to complain. “Well son, it’s because your parents have learned a few things as you were growing up. You must understand. Your parents never had any kids before you so they made a few mistakes with you” is probably the usual explanation.

“So I am the guinea pig! Why was I born first?” will probably be exclaimed, with a smile.

If you read Dr. Spock from cover to cover, you will probably be unconvinced about sparing the rod. Didn’t that generation produce the juvenile delinquents? You didn’t follow the “wait ‘til your father gets home” practice either. Very young children tend to forget what they are being punished for when you postpone it. Besides, it is assured that you do not want them to have an image of a father as “the executioner” just as you dislike the sermons of the old about mortal sin and hell-fire.

That doesn’t mean you should spank them for every little thing. If talking to them or sending them to their room doesn’t work, then the slippers will convince them that you mean business. For graver offenses, it’s the belt, no TV, no telephone, no parties (“grounded”), or no allowance – whichever is effective at

that point in time, upon consultation with your spouse, their other parent, of course.

You should avoid spanking as much as possible. You can even try classical music to calm the warring preschoolers. Result: they will fall asleep. They will probably say, “No wonder I hate classical music!” when they learn about your trick when they were small.

The main thing a child should understand is to know what he or she did wrong. No amount of punishment can correct behavior if the child is not aware of his or her mistake. And the best thing to achieve this is to take the child aside and talk to him or her calmly. If the child is ranting and raving like the Incredible Hulk, it is useless to talk to him or her. That’s when you send your child to his or her room.

“Come out when you’re not ‘Hulk’ anymore and we will talk”. More often than not, they fall asleep out of sheer exhaustion.

This is one of the mistakes you can have with your eldest child. When he or she has tantrums, you will probably shout back at him or her. “If you don’t stop, you will stand in the corner!” If you don’t want to spank him or her, one of you could bodily carry the child to the corner where he or she would wail and wail until somebody else would rescue him or her. “Come darling, come here.” There goes your discipline.

It was really more a punishment for you than for your child. You could summon your child as quickly as possible but long enough for him or her to know who is boss. When the kids get bigger, you can’t spank or make them stand in

the corner anymore. Also, they are getting to be too tall for you. They could be menacing. They are onto one another like a cat and a dog. And you would be the referee pushing two ferocious gladiators away.

But that is merely a phase. With patience, understanding, and firm guidance, the kids will outgrow it. The only problem with too many kids is that when one starts outgrowing a phase, another gets into it. But you've already had a few years' rest, so with this second batch, you know more or less what to expect.

According to knowledge gathered from those who have been parents for twenty years, the various phases that you have observed in your children so far are: first, tantrums at age two. These are really manifestations of frustrations at the many things they found they could not do – until they discover tantrums do not work; slow eating from two to three, an effect of weaning from the bottle and a certain wariness at discovering different tastes; quarrelsome from seven to twelve, as a way of asserting their individuality; sensitiveness/secretiveness from twelve to fifteen as they begin to discover their sense of privacy. Also there is a general distraction and carelessness in their studies when they begin to discover the opposite sex. It's smooth sailing from sixteen onwards.

Chapter One

CHILDREN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Don't be Surprised if Today's Kids See Life as One Big Commercial Break

Television today is still a “baby sitter” both for adults and preschoolers. When people are bored or simply want to rest, they watch TV. Some are not really interested to watch at all. They need the TV to put them to sleep. As soon as you turn it off, they wake up.

With the remote control, watching TV can be a dizzying experience. I get confused with what characters go with what plot. What with that mysterious hand switching channels during commercial breaks, you find yourself following several shows at the same time. Sometimes you have to shout, “stop!” and confiscate the remote control. “Please decide which program you want and stick to it”.

That was supposed to be final but what's this switching channel again? “Mom, there are commercial breaks!” would be the excuse. Today's TV imports still have family-oriented shows and the rest are soap operas, game shows and their local counterparts which include slapsticks or tearjerkers, noontime variety shows, movie personalities' song and dance, and movie Dom's gossip sessions.

These are the kinds of shows very young children are exposed to. Most of these are shown at times when kids are awake and those of school age are already home. Programming leaves much to be desired.

One of the positive developments in local TV is the emergence of talk shows discussing current issues as well as TV-magazine formats. For mothers, “Sesame Street” is heaven-sent. You can put the little tykes in front of the TV (at

least 4 “rulers” away – instructions to the little ones) and have a little break from mothering.

But violence even in cartoons is the order of the day. You see Bugs Bunny hammered on the head or blown to pieces by Sam his Enemy No. 1 or Road Runner running over the coyote. Tom and Jerry and now their sons slug it out; and of course, the Japanese robots and the superheroes in the endless fight between good and evil.

You don't have to think about the violent “drama” teleplays or movies and their trailers, especially the one where the lead actress pokes a gun on the actor's head who says, “Go ahead, and shoot it”. You'd probably close your eyes and shudder to think of the countless kids exposed to this kind of violence. And you parents are helpless. Ads just pop out of the boob tube every 15 minutes and you can't tell which one will go on. Not unless the stations publish a list of advertisers or sponsors. Boy! That's going to be a long list!

The crucial thing about TV is, it is a powerful medium. Repetitious subliminal messages are being exploited by advertisements that target kids. They are mesmerized by commercials. Cigarette and liquor ads suggest, “It is good to smoke and drink” without warning about its dangers. They often show images of sophisticated living.

Teachers reveal their frustration with college students who have limited concentration that usually lasts only for 15 minutes due to commercial gap syndrome. They suffer from what noted psychologists term “attention deficit disorder”.

Moreover, these teachers lament. Kids raised by TV hardly read, preconditioned as they are by TV-spoon feeding. (How many students actually read a book for their term paper? If they do, they choose a very short book but most just rent a DVD version.) There is nothing wrong with this audiovisual education like “The Planet Earth” but reading is entirely different from watching. Reading develops the imagination unlike TV, where the camera can focus on the smallest detail.

The fast pacing of images gives the illusion that “life is never continuous...it is fragmentalized; it is made up of commercial breaks. And if one doesn’t like what is seen and heard, one can change channels”. In reality, one can “change channels” in one’s mind and switch to fantasy.

Television’s powerful medium can be utilized in a positive way. Already public service ads by both the station and advertiser are being shown. It aims to educate the public on traffic and safety rules. Effective communication must be two-way. TV programs now feature citizens’ woes and call the attention of the concerned government agency or ask citizens’ cooperation in government programs. Not surprisingly, this produces faster results.

It is hoped that the government will subsidize alternative TV productions that will really give wholesome entertainment, education and develop local talent rather than the superstar “mentality” and its subsequent commercial rating that dominates the industry today.

In the high-tech world of communications via satellites, fax and computers, our children are bombarded with instant, varied and conflicting messages. It is

easy to be carried away with images of fun and make-believe like the MTVs that seem to be getting more and more hallucinatory and lead an aimless life. Or children of the TV generation might be indecisive due to the myriad choices they are confronted with.

This is real life. There is no instant replay or fast-forward. “Changing channels” needs a lot of thinking and weighing of consequences, advantages and disadvantages.

There is great pressure not to be traditional. Don’t apologize. You can still be progressive and choose traditional values. Indeed, your children need to have an anchor and a focus – good old-fashioned principles and priorities.

Like It or Not, Kids Grow with Violence

Like most of the parents, you are probably against guns. Real guns. At the mere sight of them, your knees turn to jelly. A gunless society is ideal but only law-abiding citizens can make it one. If guns are in the hands of goons, who will protect the gunless citizens? Nowadays, it’s hard to tell who are the law enforcers and the law-breakers.

You must be able to enforce “toys for peace” in your home. You should be conscious about this, as your boys and girls graduate from plastic toys that go “bang bang” to water guns. What are popular now are air soft guns using plastic pellets. They are quite expensive.

This is probably one step ahead of video or role-playing games, where one uses the computer or imagination. In war games, they can act it out. You

probably don't notice it but when your kids start playing war games, their relationship skills improve. They become a team with a hobby to share. It's good, clean fun. Nobody gets hurt. They wear protective goggles or face masks, long sleeves and long pants. (It seems there are some adults who join, not to play, but to hurt.)

The children's justifications should never change your stand about toy guns. They know they can never ask you to buy such guns for them. (So they'd probably try asking their other parent.) Besides, your reaction is always economic: "How much? That's a month's groceries! No way!"

But when violence is deliberate, such as in hazing, then that's a different story. This is no longer a game. The pain is real. It is not like those "blood pellets" you can wipe away when the game is over. You can actually have blood on your hands.

Hazing does not teach brotherhood. It teaches revenge. So this batch was made to take a gulp of milk, spit it out, and pass the same glass down the line. From a half-filled glass, by the time it gets to the last guy, it's nearly full. Next year, this same batch will do the same, or worse, to their neophytes. And so the violence escalates.

Is this a rite of passage every boy must undergo to be a man, or a girl to be a woman? A father, especially one who got by without joining any fraternity, is proof enough that fraternities are not necessary. If by brotherhood, it means cheating by test paper leaks and connections, then you shouldn't want that for your children.

They say the culture of violence is bred by violence in comics, movies and television. That enough exposure to violence can dull one's sense and one can become insensitive to gore and blood. Power can be such a heady experience. Guns or even a car can give one a feeling of power. You've seen houseboys transformed into veritable kings of the road, once they get behind the steering wheel. Can you imagine those out of school youth recruited to be security guards and issued guns?

What can we do about this culture of violence? Parents ask the schools to be stricter with those involved in frat violence. For students, the best thing is to boycott fraternities. Those who join are mostly insecure students from the province who really need some form of brotherhood, as they are new in the city or university. They do not know that one can pass the course and find jobs based on one's merits.

Fratmen are popular with girls. Well, girls, frat membership does not make a man – especially when the measure is whether one can stand a beating and be able to beat up others in turn. Fraternities will eventually die if there will be no new recruits.

Aside from limiting your children's exposure to violence in mass media, you have to teach them how to handle power. With power come greater responsibilities. Being a true leader means humility and service, not giving orders to slaves. Moreover, fellowship can be achieved without undergoing or inflicting pain.

You can't completely protect your children from violence since it exists in their environment. The most you could do is to arm your children with values so that, in time, when they encounter violence, they will know what to do and hopefully make the right decision.

Chapter Two

EFFECTIVE PARENTING

Encouragement is the Seed of Success

What kind of parent are you – an encourager or an intimidator? The encourager stresses working towards a certain goal. The intimidator stresses winning. For this kind of parent, “It’s the results that count... not the effort, not the intentions.”

And what results! Useless deaths. You have heard about graduating college students resorting to suicide for not graduating with honors in a family of medalists or in another case, for failing to graduate at all. Those who choose to live become obsessive about reaching the top, even at the expense of others. Some are immobilized – afraid to try unless success is guaranteed.

Naturally, the one encouraged first is happy about the praises heaped on him or her. But when you give him or her the opposite, the reactions would be: disbelief, anger...and later, self-doubt. Somehow, all those discouraging comments get to you.

That exercise made us step back and examine the atmosphere you create at home. Is it encouraging or downgrading? Are you an encourager or an intimidator? Note that your targets are parent-volunteers, so they were aware that this was some sort of exercise, yet it affected their self-esteem. Imagine how a string of negative messages or put-downs can affect an insecure child?

Encouragement is not the same as pampering though. Pampering means regularly doing something the teenagers can do for themselves such as fixing

their room, preparing lunch, or even waking up. Overindulgence makes a child irresponsible. Overprotection makes kids dependent on others.

Praising is not encouragement. Praise is a reward given for an achievement. It fosters competition and fear of failure. Encouragement is given for effort and improvement. It fosters cooperation and self-esteem. It inspires confidence and acceptance.

Of course, you should give praise when it is due. But encouragement does not thrive on praises alone. A child can tell empty praises from real ones. Besides, there is danger that a child hungry for praise will merely conform to please and won't feel okay unless praised. Encouragement means emphasis on strengths and assets, other than faults. It is non-judgmental - accepting the level of accomplishment of each child.

Unrealistic expectations could be stressful to a child. If circumstances or physical inability prevents him or her from fulfilling certain expectations, then you can't say, "You can do it." The kid would be bound for certain disappointment. It's just like saying "It won't hurt" when an injection really hurts. You can't fool children.

Sometimes, you have to help your children set realistic goals. When one of the kids wants to enter a contest, you're all out rooting for him or her – whether it's an art contest, a science contest, or whatever. Some kids start counting their prizes even before they submit their entries. In those cases, you explain the odds and make the project so much fun that it is the effort that counts.

Other discouraging family practices you learned at seminars are: permissiveness (which makes a child unconcerned about others' rights), inconsistent discipline (results in feeling that life is unfair) and denial of feelings. A person who is not in touch with his or her own feelings can never relate to others.

"Poor you," mothers often say to a child after bumping his or her head. Sometimes, parents even go to such lengths as spanking the object that caused pain to appease the crying child. It's not funny. It's stupid. Pity breeds a discouraging family atmosphere. It does not help build confidence in the child.

When your kids come to you for help, be glad. Don't shoo them away by lecturing:

- "Is this the best you can do?"
- "I don't want to see line of 7s or Cs."
- "With these grades, you don't deserve to go to school! Why should I spend thousands if you don't care to study? Do you still want to go to college or not?"
- "What's your ambition in life? To be a janitor?"
- "Don't ask stupid questions. Use your common sense."
- "You should know better."

Most of these are recordings in your minds, handed down to you by your parents and their parents. It's about time you got out of that mode and reprogram yourself by consciously creating an encouraging environment at home.

It is not the one-sided “Honor thy father and mother.” Each family should work out their own “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Security”, with children given the opportunities to give opinions, participate in decisions, and take on responsibilities according to their capabilities.

“Don’t expect to change your teenager.” The beginning of change is to accept one’s mistakes. Saying sorry to your children can do wonders in bridging the generation gap. It is only human to let the children know, “Hey, kids! Parents need some encouragement too!”

Effective Praise: Instill Good Behavior Through Positive Reinforcement, Not Through Bribery or Punishment

How do you discipline your child? Most of the parents would admit to having spanked their children at least once. In behavioral studies, 3 approaches to eliciting a desired behavior can also be found in parents’ discipline styles: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and punishment.

Positive reinforcement entails providing an event (like a reward or praise) that increases the probability of the desired behavior being repeated. With negative reinforcement, a desired behavior is drawn out through the elimination of an adverse event (e.g. child learns to wake up earlier for school every day because getting caught in traffic makes him nauseous). Punishment, often confused with negative reinforcement, involves increasing an adverse event to decrease or stop negative behavior.

Child experts agree that, of the 3, positive reinforcement is the best way to draw out positive behavior in children and even keep negative behavior in check.

Positive Reinforcement VS Bribery

Some parents mistakenly associate positive reinforcement with bribing or giving material rewards. In bribery, you promise something bigger and more valuable than the behavior you are expecting. You also tend to negotiate or beg, even increasing the value of the prize, just to make sure that the behavior you wish is manifested. Giving a child verbal encouragement or small tokens after they exhibit a certain desirable behavior does not qualify for bribery.

Other parents steer clear from positive reinforcers for fear that they might spoil their child. However, it is far from spoiling if the reward given is commensurate to the positive behavior exhibited by the child. Material rewards need not be expensive things; small tokens like stickers or erasers are hardly decadent. Non-material reinforcers are highly recommended: a hug, a wink, and a compliment for a job well done.

Play Your Part

There is no specific age at which to start using positive reinforcement; children learn to relate reinforcers to their behavior after several similar experiences and patterns. Good deeds that were reinforced at an early age become part of the child's personality.

As children grow, their needs will differ in the same way that our expectations of them will expand. So, the reinforcers may change, but the general principle remains. The success of positive reinforcement greatly depends not on the child, but on the adult using it as a disciplinary approach.

When used successfully, positive reinforcement can develop a child's intrinsic motivation. It can provide children some understanding of expectations and behavior.

Get into Character

Here are key points to help parents effectively wield positive reinforcement:

- Select and define the deed. Be clear on what is acceptable or non-acceptable behavior at home. Provide observable, measurable progress by specifying which behavior you want the child to repeat. Refrain from giving abstract directives. Instead of "Behave while eating" say "Sit on your chair, do not play with your utensils, and tidy up your eating area after eating the food."
- Choose your reinforcers. Reinforcers must be appropriate for – and as valuable as – the behavior. They should match the child's age, abilities, and the effort required to earn them. Kids have individual preferences. A reinforcer that is not significant to your child will bear no value. For example, preschool children will like getting stickers and hugs, while teenagers may prefer getting an extended curfew.
- Timing is everything. Consistency is the key. Make it routine for your children. It helps them internalize rules and expectations. Also, immediately reinforce good behavior. The shorter the delay between the behavior and reinforcer, the greater the chance of strengthening the

behavior. When reinforcing a new skill, reinforce continuously. Once the behavior has been established in the child, then you can gradually delay and decrease reinforcements.

- Be diverse. Varying reinforcers prevents satiation in a child. Use your imagination to come up with different reinforcers. Opt for assorted non-material reinforcers. You will be surprised that not all kids want material things as reinforcers. Hugs, pats on the back, and words have equal, if not more, significance to them.
- Complement praise with encouragement. Pairing reinforcers with words of praise and encouragement works best to retain or repeat a good behavior. Praise usually denotes the person, and some judgment is made on him or her. Encouragement is taking notice of the behavior or action, instead of the person.
- An example of praise is “You’re a good girl!” while “I like the way you helped the lady carry her bag,” are words of encouragement. By using words of praise and encouragement, it puts recognition and meaning to one’s presence and work.

Praising Points

International studies have shown that praise definitely increases people’s inner interest in activities. Anything too much or too little is proven ineffective. Too much praise is ineffective because it comes too easy and often reduces the

value of praise. Too little of it and lack of consistency do not give it much significance, as well. Here are some keywords to remember when giving praise:

- Immediate. Praise kids right after the good behavior occurs. This way, they know instantly which behavior is reinforced.
- Specific. Say exactly which behavior, action, or words you liked. For example, "Thank you for putting your toys back in the bin," or "I like the way you shared your toys with your friends." If the action was partly wrong, focus only on the positive side.
- Frequent. Be consistent in saying words of praise every time kids do something good. Do not let any good or improved deed pass unnoticed. This reminds kids, positively, that a particular behavior should be part of their way of life.
- Sincere. Put emphasis on the feelings and values instead of judging kids as "good" or "bad". For example, if you see your child politely asking for his or her turn in playing a video game, say, "I like the way you asked your brother if you could play after him. I think that was a polite thing to do."
- Varied. Use different praise statements. Repeating the same thing may lose its impact and value. Changing it is also one way to increase kids' emotional vocabulary, which will help them express themselves as they grow.

When Does Spoiling A Child Start?

Spoiling a child takes time. It consists of a series of early life decisions and events which parents or guardians make for young children. The course of these early life decisions can eventually develop a child's preferences: his or her way of reacting toward individuals around him or her, study habits, eating habits, and social skills. Even before the child is ready, today's children have too many options.

Moreover, due to work demands of harried parents, the resulting guilt about time for and with the child can be a potent recipe for spoiling. Today's parent can opt to give in to tantrums and giving too many material things to keep the peace and assuage guilt. Likewise, there may be inconsistencies in the manner of dealing with the child among the adults. The result is a spoiled child.

Take for example these two extreme cases. The first is 10-year-old Chase who was unwilling to go to school and do any schoolwork if he were not to receive any compensation, like toys or electronic games. This young boy would force his will on his parents by banging his head on the wall repeatedly until his demands are met.

Giving in to such demands is not the answer, as they most likely lead to only bigger, unrealistic, and self-centered demands. Another case is 4-year-old Paul who was unable to appreciate his possessions, as he would be given new toys on almost a daily basis. When Paul's toy is broken, he would quickly ask, "Can we buy another one?"

Discipline is often associated with punishment. Actually, punishments and rewards are just aspects of it. Discipline, if applied consistently and with consideration of the child's level of understanding, is the best way of instilling a sense of responsibility in children like Chase and Paul. This starts with the parent being clear about what the child can and cannot do. Slowly, if the parents are clear and consistent, the child internalizes a moral compass to help guide him or her in decision-making.

In the case of Chase, there was inconsistency in the way the parents dealt with him. It was his mother who would set boundaries, like limiting the toys being bought and the amount of time he is allowed to play with his gaming unit. Chase's father, in an effort to spend quality time with his son, would inadvertently sabotage these rules by buying toys and allowing his son to play when they would spend time together.

Discipline is an ongoing process and cannot be done overnight. It requires constant compromise among parents and guardians attempting to instill it on their children. Other factors to take into consideration are family dynamics and personal values. These issues were very prominent in the case of Paul. Paul is the younger of two boys, both coming from different marriages. Paul's mother has difficulty spending time with her children, as she spends most of her time away from home. She also has a tendency to give in to Paul's demands in order for him to quiet down and refrain from throwing tantrums.

It is never too late to instill discipline. Sit down with your significant other today and list down the areas that need to be addressed in the life of your child,

as the effort you make today will shape the man or woman your child will be in the future.

Chapter Three

PUSHING FOR GOLD - THE PARENT TRAP

Do You Expect Too Much From Your Kids? Know the Difference Between Motivation and Pressure

Parents naturally want their children to be the best, whether in academics or extra-curricular activities – or both! Young kids especially find happiness in pleasing their parents, and would do almost anything to garner their approval – from doing simple chores and creating pretty artwork, to accomplishing more ambitious feats like winning in sports or beauty pageants. But how far can we push our little ones without breaking their spirit or setting them up for disappointment?

Over competitive parents usually have many expectations from their children. They are more particular with good grades and performance than with how happy the child is going through schooling or joining an activity. For instance, some parents are still not satisfied when a child receives a B grade, expecting instead the perfect A. These parents see mistakes as unacceptable. Pointing fingers at who is to blame for the ‘failure’ of their child becomes their means to rectifying the situation, ignoring the possibility that there are other factors and variables at play. The worst scenario is when explanations are sought from the children, who may not always know why they performed below expectation.

Why Would Parents Demand Much From Their Children?

Here are several factors:

Family background

Continuing the family 'legacy' is important for most parents. For instance, if you come from a family of doctors, chances are, you will be expected to become one, too, regardless of your capacity or inclination. When one or both parents are achievers, they don't see any reason for their talents not to manifest themselves in their children.

Economic stress

Some average income earners force kids to excel beyond their abilities so they can avail of scholarship grants and minimize the cost of schooling in their budget.

Children owe it to them

Many parents think that the formula to their children's success is to provide them with everything. And since everything is given, there is no reason why they cannot excel.

"If her child can do it, why can't mine?"

Hearing parents boast about their kids' success causes other parents to feel envy and even self-doubt. Because they feel this way, parents then put more pressure on their kid.

Effects on Children

There is a constructive side to instilling competitiveness: children tend to strive more and see for themselves what they are really capable of.

Financial gain is another advantage. If your child performs well, he can be awarded scholarship grants and get good offers when he or she reaches high school or college levels. Prestige and popularity come with territory, too, because 'the ability of the child shines.'

Though instilling competitiveness in our children has its benefits, experts agree that potential negative ramifications outweigh the positive. The following are some of them:

Children become misguided.

When the pressure is too much, the child no longer sees knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge as goals. The grade has become the premium whether or not he or she learns anything that is of value to him or her. Also, the child becomes an unfriendly competitor.

Children can get easily frustrated.

Children under great pressure become very unhappy with one or two little mistakes. They may start blaming themselves for the slightest setback. They may start having sleepless nights. They will take every mistake of failure as the 'end of it all.' This kind of mindset – where personal worth is measured by grades, accolades, and other quantifiable achievements – can be detrimental to their self-perception.

Children become fearful.

With expectations set high, children may fear punishment from their parents every time they fall short. If children have difficulty in certain subjects or areas, they need support and guidance early on. However, since they are afraid

of 'disappointing' their parents, they will not come out and say, "I am having a hard time understanding this." Nothing is resolved; no course of action is taken.

This fear of failure also translates itself into children's unwillingness to take risks, to explore, or to try something new, thus stunting their development.

Children develop over-dependence on parents.

Children under tremendous pressure from their parents are usually unable to think for themselves. How happy they are with their achievements depends on how happy mom and dad are. They feel that their parents approve every move they make.

Children become socially isolated.

Constant bragging of parents about their children to others may not always be graciously received. This may even create a wall between the child being bragged about and others (friends, the school, community, even relatives). A child may develop either an unhealthy superiority or inferiority complex. The feeling of being better than everybody else, because a child was constantly drilled that he or she is, can result in ostracism by peers. Similarly, feeling inferior to others may cause children to retreat into their shells.

Children measure self-worth with achievements.

When children hear their parents comparing them with others, it only translates to two messages: either "Mommy and Daddy love me because I am perfect," or "They say I'm not as good as the other kids."

Thus, the need to succeed arises, but only to satisfy the desire to be accepted and be loved. Before anyone notices, what begins as self-doubt

escalates into serious anxiety, which can lead to more serious problems, such as power struggles, eating disorders, and depression, even at a very young age.

Children need to know that they will be loved whether or not they receive any accolades. Preschoolers, in particular, should be guided more on mastering age-appropriate skills that will serve as their foundation for later learning, not on reaping awards or medals. The universal rights of children include not only the right to have food, shelter, and education, but the right to play as well. Therefore, it is important that parents find ways for children to also relax and have fun.

Be confident of your children's lead: Let them learn at their own pace, and be there to hold their hand when they need it. Keep in mind that accomplishments in infancy, toddler years, and preschool years do not necessarily predict a child's success in adulthood.

Just as parents do best, love and accept your children for who they are. Allow them to be themselves and hit that road the way they see it. Each child is unique. Respect their ways of learning, growing, and thinking. Ultimately, children's true measure of greatness depends on the guidance and values their parents give them.

Quiz: Are You A Push-For-Gold Parent?

A 'yes' to more than three of these signs means you have to lighten up a bit!

- I feel extremely disappointed and worried when other children reach milestones earlier than my child does.

- During family gatherings, I urge my child to perform tricks for everyone whether he or she likes it or not.
- My child has the best voice in class, so he or she deserves to have the center spot in the special number.
- It doesn't bother me when other parents tell me about their kids. My child's accomplishments always outdo theirs.
- I always ask my child's scores in quizzes and exams, then asks what his or her classmates' scores were.
- I always air out my complaints to my kid's teacher whenever I feel that my child didn't get the grade I think he deserves. I demand explanations and don't give up until I am satisfied with the answers.

Chapter Four

VALUE FORMATION AND INSTILLING GOOD BEHAVIOR

Helping Our Children Make Good Choices

What can parents do now to prepare their kids in the right direction towards thinking for themselves and making good (or better) choices? Experience tells us that prudence can be realistically achieved not at seven (age of reason) but by the age of eighteen.

Spanish educator David Isaacs, PhD suggests that parents lay the foundation for prudence by instilling four good habits during the first seven years of life. Namely: obedience, sincerity, order, and justice. He believes that these four habits are needed in the progressive development of other good habits within the next three phases: charity and fortitude (courage) in elementary level (8 to 12), faith and temperance (self-control) in adolescence (13-15), and hope and prudence (sound judgment) in young adulthood (16-18). Furthermore, those who have these virtues will naturally find happiness and human maturity, he concludes.

Obedience

A loving but firm parental authority exercised in each home prevents domestic chaos – clutter, sickness, hunger, shouting, violence, disrespect, and rebellion. Imagining chaos in infants and toddlers may seem tolerable, but when we project this in adolescents and grown-ups with a voice, a choice, and plenty of muscle... no one wants to end up the loser. Young children must learn to obey

their parents' reasonable demands (not mere trivialities), but they also have to hear kind simple explanations to common rules, situations, and events.

It is through a consistent, regular, and clear communication of the parents' pleasure or displeasure, approval or disapproval, happiness or sadness toward ideas, words, and/or actions that children begin to experience and understand the value system of their family. This value system will be validated, respected, or rejected in later life based on the methods used, attitudes absorbed, emotions attached, and information gathered from home, school, or elsewhere. Inconsistency will easily confuse inexperienced young minds, which have not yet learned the purpose of life.

Sincerity

Sincerity (telling the truth at the proper time and to the proper person) must be practiced at home. The children must imbibe it in the context of helping loved ones to improve (out of charity and justice). Children will likely be more confident in this type of home environment and prefer it to a contrary one.

It will be difficult for the good and true to be embraced by those who grow up with lies and end up with bad habits (or vices) and muddled criteria. If they turn cynical and become individualistic – instead of accepting their vital role in the success of their own family, as well as the larger community – they delay their own chances for true and lasting happiness. And no parent consciously wants this to happen!

Thus, it is critical for parents to expose their family members to reliable criteria and genuine good (not mere apparent good), so that they can encourage

their children's potential abilities to know the truth and to love good. This is done using two of their more important, separate, but interlinked powers of the intellect and the will present in the soul of human beings, making us all accountable.

Order

The third habit of order provides the family, especially the young children, a sense of predictability and stability because procedures are followed and many things are done properly at their place and time. Nothing ruins a child's equilibrium more than disorder – in his caregiver, his schedule, his bed, and so on. Even parents need order to maintain their own well-being and sanity. Note that a lot of affection is more effective than reasoning in making sure family members get along well.

Justice

The young inherently value justice because of their natural demand for parental time and love, in competition with siblings, work, and other distractions (to a child's mind). They are ready to understand the importance of fairness in what is due them (or others) in ordinary circumstances. Adults are expected to apply rules and sanctions equitably lest children rebel and defy authority figures and rules.

Children must get the message that life makes sense, rules make sense, and consequences make sense. They need to see things as they are over what they seem, and be able to choose a path that will lead them closer to universal values, or their 'true norths.'

Communication Tip

When parents speak with young children, alone or as a group, they must establish eye contact and/or hold them at close range, preferably at eye level, to maintain warm direct communication and rapport. It may be necessary for mothers and fathers to bend over, squat or kneel; or put down the newspaper, telephone, or cooking pan as well.

In addition, a calm soothing tone of voice is preferred when giving instructions, and a firm serious one for reprimands. Smiling or laughing when children do wrong, and indifference or anger when they do right, goes against the proper formation of good criteria and good habits. The goal is: a clear mind and a strong will.

In small doses, at an early start, both mother and father can provide daily cues to their children about essential distinctions between fact and opinion, important and urgent, cause and effect, problem and solution, family and friend, male and female, public and private, right and wrong, rights and duties, life-threatening and life-saving, eternal and temporal... the list can go on. At times, it may be necessary to consult the right sources before making any decisions and following these through. Slowly, both parents and children understand their value system and communicate on the same level.

Finally, a most important daily habit worth fostering until old age is self-reflection, answering the following three questions: What did I do right? What did I do wrong? And what can I do better?

Self-Esteem: Your Child's Armor Against Danger

As parents, we fear the worst for our children. We see an imperfect world, where strangers and circumstances can discourage, frighten, harm, or endanger our little ones. But kids need not be plagued with thoughts of a dangerous world, and parents shouldn't feel the need to create a protective bubble around them. The best defense is to empower kids with a boost of confidence and how-to-deal skills when facing possible dangers.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is the collection of beliefs or feelings that we have about ourselves, or our 'self perceptions.' How we define ourselves influences our motivations, attitudes, and behaviors, and affects our emotional judgment.

Self-esteem includes other qualities, such as self-confidence, pride, independence, self-reliance, and self-respect. Experts say we develop our self-esteem during childhood, and it constantly evolves as we are shaped by the different social interactions and experiences we go through.

Enhancing a child's self-esteem is the first step to ensuring his or her right to personal safety. Keeping children away from physical harm is only secondary. Programs have been developed to teach children self-protective skills, and families recognize and respond to potentially unsafe situations. Children who are conscious of their self-worth feel good about themselves, pulling out all the stops to any sign of threat or danger. Moreover, self-esteem develops the same positive communication skills and attitudes, which children could pass on to the next generation.

A child's self-esteem is based on a positive relationship with parents and eventually teachers. Parents can foster that can-do attitude in their children with a "Wow!" or a "That's great!" every time they accomplish a feat. These positive comments form children's first concept of success, which ultimately leads to a healthy self-perception.

But praise and positive reinforcement alone will not make children feel better automatically. Providing them with lots of love, care, and understanding is equally significant. Children who are happy and confident may still experience low self-esteem because they do not feel loved. Likewise, children who are loved and pampered at home may still feel inadequate and incompetent, thus ending up with low self-esteem. Hence, a balance of both should be present.

Delivering positive messages and engaging in constructive communication lead to a healthy self-perception. Try these time-tested tips to enhance your child's can-do attitude.

1. Limit the "Don'ts" to the barest minimum.

State your requests positively. Too many negative words in your sentences will only lead to a child's self doubt.

2. Let kids complete their sentences.

Avoid interruptions, as these disrupt their train of thought or make them forget what they're saying. Otherwise, they'll feel as if their ideas are insignificant and not worth listening to.

3. Establish eye contact.

Be a good model of conversation by giving kids your full attention. This communicates that you are interested in what they are saying, and that you are stressing a noteworthy idea, as well.

4. Take turns in the conversation.

Agree on who speaks first, and who speaks next. It is important for parents to encourage kids to verbalize their ideas and feelings, but to also wait for the go signal to speak. Children should be able to understand that if people talk all at the same time, they will end up understanding nothing.

5. Keep a calm, uncritical, and non-irritable manner when explaining.

Keep your “speech” concise. Use language that kids will easily understand, explaining to them what they need to do, and why they should or should not do it. Speaking in a calm tone also keeps panic from rising within them.

6. Criticisms should still be present.

We should also take notice of shortcomings or misbehavior as we see it or learn about it. Explain why an action is not acceptable, and allow kids to think of ways to avoid doing it again.

Smart Thinking

Facing challenges and rising from them is a way to help strengthen a child’s spirit. Though parents would prefer to totally shield their children from threats and hardship, doing so would cause as much damage. And let’s face it: Adversity is inevitable. But training our children to become prudent and intelligent thinkers is a surefire way to protect them from possible harm.

An effective method to hone children's thinking skills is to practice what if scenarios with them. Children need to feel as if they have discovered why they should avoid potentially dangerous circumstances. Parents can engage in a dialogue with their kids. It's important to let them think for themselves, to foster their problem-solving skills. Parents shouldn't dictate the solution, but rather, allow kids to answer first, and then guide them unhurriedly to every possible avenue.

We can't control what our children do every minute. But we can help them think, early in their lives, about what is and what is not safe, so we can trust them to take responsibility for their actions and to make safe decisions now and as they mature.

Here are some possible danger scenarios, plus pre-emptive tips:

Bully Alert

Bullies pick on kids who are often alone, shy, quiet, and look like they can't stand up for themselves. Kids become victims of bullies because they have a very poor self-concept, believing their own dignity and self-worth are unimportant. What's worse is that most bullied kids are too afraid to tell their parents – either because they are scared their parents will think they're weak, or because they think their parents won't do much to rectify the situation.

What You Can Do

To help kids deal with bullying and prevent them from becoming bully victims, teach them the lesson of reciprocity. Help them realize that relationships are reciprocal, and that they should treat others as they wish to be treated. They

will come to realize that people act as they do for many different reasons. Asking children questions that pay attention to their and other people's feelings also helps. These questions include:

- Why do you think bullies need to pick on others?
- Do you have another reason?
- What do you think a bully is feeling or thinking?
- How would you feel if a kid bullies you?
- What can you do or say if you're being bullied?

By fostering a climate of empathy at home, children learn the value of self-worth – for themselves and for others. According to child experts, you should let your child know that he or she has a right to insist that others treat him or her with respect and dignity. They are not to tolerate cruelty of any form, whether in real life, in the form of nasty jokes on sitcoms, or in other forms of entertainment.

Stranger Danger

“Don't talk to strangers” is not necessarily the key. We cannot expect our kids to do this if we adults break this rule every time – in the grocery store, waiting in line at the movie house, or even in school. Children should know that most adults they encounter are basically good people. Often, these “strangers” are actually people who can help kids in case of emergencies.

What You Can Do

Teach kids to pay attention to their instincts. Parents should tell their kids to listen to that voice in their heads; if they don't feel safe or they feel it's not right, they shouldn't go through with it. We need to give children safety nets of

people they can go to if they need help, such as uniformed law-enforcement or security officers, a store salesperson with a nametag, the person in an information booth at a mall or other public venue, or a mother with children.

Next, describe the proper way to handle a stranger. A common ploy for abduction attempts are for strangers to pretend that they are a friend of the child's parents, and that the parents – who are either sick or injured – asked them to pick the child up on their behalf. To help children deal with this particular situation, let them run the scenario in their heads, then ask them the following questions:

- What do you do when a person you don't know says mommy or daddy asked him or her to pick you up from school, and that you should hop into the car?
- Do you run to your teacher, the principal, or the security guard?
- What do you do if the stranger grabs you?
- What do you think is the safest thing to do while waiting for mommy or daddy after school?
- Do you stay with your teacher in the classroom or the principal's office?

Should a stranger grab your kids, children should be taught to run for help and scream, kick, make a loud noise and keep yelling something like "You're not my mother!" or "You're not my father!" More importantly, teach your child from a very young age why he or she should never go anywhere with any adult, without your permission, whether that person is a stranger or a friend.

Chapter Five

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Before They Even Go To School, Kids Learn a Lot of Skills from the World of Play

For children, play is naturally enjoyable. And since it is their active engagement in things that interest them, play should be child-led, or at least child-inspired, for it to remain relevant and meaningful to them. Children at play are happily lost in themselves; they are in their own realm of wonder, exploration, and adventure, pulling parents in at times with a frequent “Let’s play, mom!” as an open invitation into that world.

As early as infancy, children immerse themselves in play activities with the purpose of making sense of the world around them. Play gives children the opportunity to learn and experience things themselves, which is vital for their development. Although peek-a-boo games seem pointless to adults, tots are awed by the surprise that awaits them as they see the suddenly emerging faces of people they love.

Stages of Play

During toddlerhood, children experience a motor-growth spurt that equips them to solitarily fiddle with anything they can get their hands on – be it a construction toy or the box from where it came. Toddlers also love breaking into song, wiggling and jiggling to tunes, and imitating finger plays they are commonly exposed to.

Preschoolers begin extending their play to involve others, whether they bring others in at any stage of their game or they plan their game and its players’

way ahead. Their physical and motor skills allow them to widen their play arena, from dramatic play to table games to outdoor pursuits.

School-age children start appreciating organized play – such as innovated songs and rhymes, games with rules, relays and other physical activities, sports and projects that they can accomplish over a certain time frame.

Play Perks

Why the big fuss about playing? Play benefits the child in ways that might be a tad difficult for adults to imagine.

1. Play brings pure and utter joy.

A toddler who jumps into an empty box and runs around the house ‘driving a car’ shows the sheer happiness that play brings him or her. When children are asked what they did in school and they answer ‘play,’ it is a clear sign that these kids remember a feeling of genuine joy that is captured in this four-letter word.

2. Play fosters socio-emotional learning.

What does a ten-month-old baby who shrieks at the sight of her stuffed toy have in common with a ten-year-old boy who plays basketball with his friends? They both deal with their confidence as they choose to embark on their play activities. At the same time, they are displaying their independence in the decisions that they make. These two children are also internalizing social rules in their respective play situations: the baby waits patiently for her stuffed toy to appear, while the school-age child has to contend with an impending loss in a ball game.

3. Play hones physical and motor development.

Play often involves the use of the senses, the body, and the extremities. When children play, they exercise their bodies for physical strength, fluidity of movement, balance and coordination.

Perceptual-motor ability, or the capacity to coordinate what you perceive with how you move, is an essential skill that preschoolers need to develop. A three-year-old who is engrossed in digging, scooping, and pouring sand into a container must match his or her perception of the space in front of him or her with actual hand movements, so that he or she can successfully fulfill the motor activity.

4. Play facilitates cognitive learning.

Play is vital to the intellectual development of a child. We live in a symbolic world in which people need to decode words, actions, and numbers.

For young children, symbols do not naturally mean anything because they are just arbitrary representations of actual objects. The role of play is for the child to understand better cognitive concepts in ways that are enjoyable, real, concrete, and meaningful to them. For instance, through play, a child is able to comprehend that the equation $3 + 2 = 5$ means 'putting together' his toy cars by lining them up in his makeshift parking lot. When he combines 2 triangles to make a square during block play, or writes down his score in a bowling game, the child is displaying what he knows about shapes and numbers.

Through play, the child is constructing his or her worldview by constantly working and reworking his understanding of concepts.

5. Play enhances language development.

Toddlers who are still grappling with words need to be immersed in oral language so they can imitate what they hear. They benefit from songs and rhymes that provide the basis for understanding how language works.

When these tots are playing with toys, adults model to them how language is used to label objects or describe an event. At play, preschoolers use language to interact, communicate ideas, and likewise learn from dialogues with more mature members of society.

6. Play encourages creativity.

Barney the dinosaur was right about using imagination to make things happen. A lump of Play-Doh suddenly turns into spaghetti with meat sauce and cheese; a small towel transforms into a cape that completes a superhero's wardrobe; and a tin can serves as a drum that accompanies an aspiring rock artist. Play opens an entire avenue for children to express themselves, show what they know and how they feel, and to create their own masterpieces.

7. Play provides bonding opportunities.

Play is an important factor in child development. It provides for interaction, experimentation, and moral development. Here are some ways by which parents can encourage and support their children's playtime.

- Let your child be the player-leader. Let children initiate their activity, set their own theme, choose the parameters where the play will take place. Play becomes a venue for children to express their feelings and be in control.
- Help them help themselves. When your 5-year-old asks for help, say, figuring out how to piece a puzzle together, stop yourself from coming to her rescue and first ask your child questions that allow him or her to help himself or herself. Say, "Where do you think this piece should go?" Afterward, commend his or her success.
- Play attention. Once you make a commitment to play with your child, watch for the following signals: Does he or she want you to actively play a part in the activity? Does he or she need encouragement? Is he or she tired or hungry? Does he or she need to take a break?
- Have a play plan. If you seem to have little time for playing with your child, consider using self-care chores to have fun with him or her. Also, get support from other people in your household, like older siblings, household help, or the child's grandparents, so that they understand why play is important and how they should continue to encourage it.

Chapter Six

PROMOTING GENDER SENSITIVITY

We find it normal when boys mess around with plastic popguns and girls play with floral patterned tea sets. But if they trade toys, most of us are overcome with uneasiness, shock, or even anger. Experts say that kids grow into well-rounded adults if their parents allow them to explore all possibilities – and this includes stripping them of gender biases. Therefore, seeing your baby girl play with toy cars and Junior play with Barbie Dolls shouldn't be viewed as a threat, but as an avenue for children to reach their full potential.

Children begin to form their own concept of gender identity – or the sense of being a boy or a girl – by age one. Some say gender identity is biologically determined. Most psychologists, however, believe that gender identity is determined by environmental factors, particularly in the way parents, relatives, and peers treat children. Once a child's gender identity is established, "gender stability" takes place – which is when children develop gender-typical behaviors.

Though physically different, both girls and boys should be given equal opportunities to develop their potentials to the fullest. Doing so boosts their self-image and emotional stability. By removing gender stereotypes, you allow your children to explore and develop latent gifts and talents that could otherwise be left untapped.

It is possible to raise children who are not 'sexist' in their points of view, who have respect for both males and females. Positive parent and teacher child interactions are crucial in forming bias-free outlooks, attitudes, and actions in

children. For instance, encourage both boys and girls to keep their rooms clean, fold their own clothes, and put their shoes in place. Just because a woman usually cleans up the mess, it doesn't mean that only females perform these chores. Also, mom and dad should switch household chores once in a while. Dad can do the cooking or iron the clothes, while mom takes out the trash or washes the car.

Allow both girls and boys to express their emotions. A boy has as much right to break out in tears as a girl has to show assertive behavior in venting her frustration. In addition, boys should be taught to be nurturing and compassionate, while praise and courage should be instilled in girls.

Prompting Gender-Issue Discussions for Kids

While watching a movie or TV show, ask your kids these questions:

- Count all the characters in the show. How many are girls? How many are boys?
- Do the boys act differently from the girls? How? Why do you think that is the case?
- How many characters in the show were aggressive or violent? How many of the aggressive or violent characters were boys?
- Which character do you want to be? Why?
- What did you like about the show? Did anything in the show bother you?

The above questions will help you better introduce gender sensitivity to your child. In fact, these questions not only promote equality but also instill in

your child the values of being sensitive to other people's natures, as well as a sense of personal responsibility. This way, you allow him or her to think for himself or herself, instead of relying on other people for opinions all the time.

THE MAGIC OF HUGGING

How This Simple Act of Affection Yields Major Gains in the Child's Health, Disposition, and Overall Development

In a November 2005 issue of the "The Straits Times", a leading Singapore daily broadsheet, there is a report on Singaporean scientists' ongoing efforts to find a way to transmit 'cyber hugs.' "The team is thinking of a wireless pajama suit for children," says research director Adrian Cheok, "which would use the Internet to adjust pressure and temperature to simulate the feeling of being hugged. Parents in a similar suit could be 'hugged back' by their children."

You may be wondering why science is showing keen interest in such an everyday gesture. Indeed, while you've relied on it as a natural painkiller after your little one has scraped his or her knee, hugging unwittingly has many other positive side effects.

Various studies have shown the close association between the positive emotions derived from this simple act of affection on the one hand and on overall well-being on the other. Hugging and close physical contact have been advocated by countless child experts as an invaluable element in child development.

Hugs Build a Child's Life Skills.

Children who are exposed to hugs are often very expressive and warm, while those who aren't hugged very much or aren't shown affection by their family usually grow up putting a distance between themselves and other people.

Hugging is a gesture of affirmation, appreciation, and acknowledgement. A child who is hugged often acquires a positive self-concept, whereas a child who is hug-starved or doesn't receive any other form of affirmation at home will start asking, "Am I loved here?"

The indispensability of hugging and physical contact in a child's development can be attributed to as early as the child's fetal days, when the warmth and snugness of the womb simulates the feeling of being hugged. The skin of the baby is exposed to warm amniotic fluid the whole time.

Children in hugging households are equipped with emotional skills that facilitate healthy interpersonal relationships. In fact, hugging and other forms of touch therapy are employed by child experts to help abused children recuperate from emotional trauma. Touch therapy is used a lot, especially with children who have been sexually abused, studies show. It is used with great caution and at a pace the child is comfortable with.

Hug therapy, if successful in these cases helps restore a child's ability to cope, to trust in people again, and to emotionally express him or herself – factors necessary in forging healthy intimate relationships as an adult.

Hugs Build A Culture of Peace.

There are differences between 'hugging' countries and 'hands-off' countries. For instance, American babies are put in nurseries separate from their parents' rooms. For other cultures, this is not practiced and the babies are immediately roomed in with their mothers. Hugging has been found to affect

cultural predispositions towards aggressive behavior. That is, this is said to be why some cultures are more violent than others.

THE CHALLENGE THAT IS PARENTING

Whoever said parenting was easy must be daft or has not experienced being a parent at all. Child rearing is a continuous process and does not stop even after the child decides to move out of the house when he or she turns eighteen. Even with years, centuries, and millennia worth of experience, nobody can still determine what parenting methods work and what do not. Parenting is unique to every setup and to every child and remains as unfathomable as ever. With this nature, the best we can do is to prepare ourselves for a bumpy ride and cross our fingers that we rear people who will be significant contributors to society.

We don't own our children. We're merely here to teach them the ways of life as we know it so that they succeed and survive gracefully in theirs. We can choose to forego being parents and decide not to have children to escape this difficult feat altogether, though it is highly doubtful that we would be able to experience the level of happiness and fulfillment we would have if we chose to become parents.

Being a mother or a father is one of the hardest jobs in the world. But it is also the most rewarding of all.

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