

SMART PARENTING

Raising
Happy
and
Responsible
Children
in the
21st Century



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CHILDREN IN THE 21ST
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THE CHALLENGE THAT IS PARENTING

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.

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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.

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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 1: 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

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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”.

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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

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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

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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 2: 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

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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),

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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

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