

Parenting

Important note: *Everything I say below is only my opinion, which is based on my own experiences, or based on what I have read, heard and observed. There are no absolute truths or ultimate answers.*

One of the best passages on children and parenting is written by Kahlil Gibran. I quote a part of it below:

*Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.*

*You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
But seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.*

I think this type of philosophical understanding is crucial for happy parenting.

Every child is unique and so, there is no standard formula for parenting. Getting to know your child is paramount.

Raising children is a challenging but potentially fulfilling activity. It undoubtedly enriched me immensely and helped me develop a deeper understanding of life. When I saw my first child being born (I was present at the delivery), my world view changed dramatically. Watching the new life starting its journey certainly seemed like a miracle of nature. I also suddenly became aware of an immense responsibility that was being thrust on my shoulders. All sorts of thoughts ran through my mind: *Will my son be normal? Will he exhibit special gifts? Will he develop bad habits?*

Most of us get no formal training in parenting. We learn largely through actual hands-on experience and by remembering how our parents practiced their techniques on us.

Early Stage of childhood:

It seems that women are born with stronger parenting instincts. They are the ones who initiate "project children" by pushing their husbands to do the needful. Then they go through the

tremendous pains of childbirth willingly and with great anticipation. Their tolerance seems limitless when they spend endless sleepless nights nursing and looking after their babies. Babies are very demanding creatures. They get hungry every few hours; they complain about the slightest discomfort; and they have very poor communication skills! Mothers suffer through all this with utmost patience and energy. Most fathers cannot dream of undertaking such an enterprise even for a week.

Considering this, the father is better off ensuring that the prime caretaker -- the mother -- is in a position to play her role as painlessly as possible. He must enable the mother to focus on childcare, leaving everything else to others. He must ensure that the mother gets whatever she wants, that she gets to make all decisions regarding the baby, and that she is well-fed and in good health. In addition, the father must also pitch in and just follow the mother's orders, whether they pertain to changing diapers, rocking the baby to sleep, or whatever.

Intermediate Stage:

As the baby grows, the father starts seeing more meaningful opportunities of contributing to the parenting process. As the child crosses the age of 1 or 2, its hunger for attention and interaction takes monstrous proportions. Its energy levels shoot through the roof. The mother is no longer able to cope with its demands alone. At this point the father must step in. He can play a big role in entertaining the child, creating a learning environment for it, and looking after its physical well-being and safety.

Steady-state:

After about 2 to 3 years of age, this steady state begins and lasts for a long time. I think the framework of parenting during this stage should rest on a basic set of values. Parents should attempt to inculcate these values in their children. This is my recommended list:

- Discipline
- Self-reliance
- Humility and simplicity
- Freedom and Responsibility
- Love for learning

Discipline is about following certain basic, sensible rules of conduct. Every community has such rules. The household must become a training ground. These rules must be as few as possible; they should be easy to explain, understand and follow, and be consistent. They should apply to everyone. Examples might be: keeping things clean and in order, being polite with guests, taking care of certain household duties, and so on.

Self-reliance is about taking care of personal needs without help, causing as little burden on others as possible.

Humility and *simplicity* are easy to understand. Praising children for their achievements should be done with caution. The praise should contribute to their *confidence*, not to their *arrogance*. (In fact, praising for *effort* is better than for *achievement*, since the latter can set a dangerous bias.) Your children should not be made conscious of any special status you may have in the society by virtue of money, power, or position. Language is an important factor in humility. Teach your children the art of communication: how to be gentle, what words to avoid (e.g. "hate"), how to keep quiet and listen.

Simplicity is about frugality. It's about avoiding pampering your children with expensive toys, gifts or activities. It's not a matter of whether you can afford these things; it's a matter of teaching an important value. It's about teaching your children about environmental awareness.

Freedom is about being able to make personal decisions, developing independent thinking, feeling unencumbered and stress-free at home. It comes with *Responsibility* which is about not blaming others, dealing with consequences. *Freedom* is the hardest value to teach. Parents often go overboard and dish out freedom of the wrong kind or at the wrong time. *Freedom* should be given only when you feel the child understands its value and also the associated *responsibility*.

Love for learning must not involve focusing on certificates and grades – they come automatically. Lifelong learning is not only a survival skill but it is also the best way to live a rich life.

Walk the talk:

It is extremely important to understand that children learn through observation and not so much through lectures. In fact, lectures can even have the opposite effect! You must *practice* everything that you want to *preach*. All the values listed above – and any others you wish to inculcate – must be an integral part of your own words and actions for there to be any chance that your children *might* absorb some of them. Sometimes, your children will be pulled between opposing forces – values that come from the outside environment such as friends and values that come from you. There is no guarantee which ones they will choose, but, Nature has fortunately given more inherent power to parental influence, which, if applied through persuasion and example and not through coercion or emotional blackmail, is likely to prevail in this battle. Just stay engaged with your children's lives through love and support, without the temptation of control, and you have a good chance of success.

Academic success and career development:

I write about this specifically because a lot of parents feel ensuring these two is a part of the parenting duty. It is not! Every child is aware of the need to learn; indeed they are already programmed by Nature to learn and compete and survive. Parents should only aid this innate drive by providing a learning environment, offering to help (but not take charge), and taking interest in what the children are learning and doing (as well-wishers not as critics). When parents take the driver's seat in these matters, they only create stress for their children ("Oh, my

parents expect me to this and this") and for themselves ("She is not doing as well as that kid next door, it's a disaster!").

Of course, modern life has become extremely complex and parents could do a lot in terms of "creating/providing a learning environment". This may include, for example, trying to get into good schools, creating opportunities for various activities like sport and art, sponsoring the learning process, etc. But, even these, I think are not necessary, and should be pursued without causing stress (financial or otherwise) and with a "supporting mindset" (rather than the "taking charge" mindset). So, for example, by all means encourage your kid to explore interesting activities like music or sport or swimming, and even push a little, because kids have no idea what they might enjoy. But, watch very carefully for that fine line beyond which it will become a stressful burden for the child. My daughter's Russian piano teacher Elena -- who loves piano beyond anything else -- told me that at the age of 10, her mom put her in a piano class with the agreement that Elena would try it for a year before quitting. Elena hated the class -- like everything else her parents asked her to do -- for about 6 months, but shortly thereafter she fell in love with the piano and is now grateful to her parents.

Although kids love learning by nature, the environment conspires to kill that interest -- bad teachers, horrible textbooks, are some factors. You, the parents, must not join that gang of joy-killers. Instead try to explain to your kid that there is no "bad subject", that all knowledge is interesting. Find out how your kid learns, because every kid may have its own style of learning. And most of all, take away the pressures of performance and success.

Long Term:

Of course, parenting never stops. It continues through the child's career, marriage, and even his/her own cycle of child-rearing. Parenting during this phase must be purely supportive and non-intrusive, and delivered without expectation. The temptation to stay closely involved should be avoided ruthlessly. Many parents become so emotionally involved with their children that they have difficulty in finding meaning in their own lives after the children have left their parents' homes. This is a dangerous but natural phenomenon and can be mitigated by developing independent interests and by undertaking new adventures even while active parenting is in progress.

Learn with your kids:

As Wordsworth implied in his line "Child is the father of man", there is a lot to be learned from children -- their innocence, their curiosity, their openness, their joyfulness, and so on. In addition, if you are parents, you get doses in patience and tolerance. Every new generation brings in new cultural, religious and political ideas and new behavioral patterns -- many of which will test the boundaries of parents' mindsets. If you have a "learning mindset" you would suffer less from these tests and enrich your own life more.

Impossible parenting goals:

These are just a few examples of unreasonable (in my opinion, of course!) and hopeless expectations that some parents entertain.

- *Ensuring that your children are satisfied with you:* Very rarely, if at all, children are satisfied with their parents. No matter how much time and effort you spend on them, they might think it wasn't enough. No matter how much money you spend, they might think you were stingy. And so on. They might even blame you for some of their own problems. Clearly this objective is a futile one to chase.
- *Becoming "friends" of your children:* Elements of this objective are actually valid goals and highly desirable. For instance, winning your child's trust and confidence is very important for you to be effective parents. Letting the child know that you will always support and love him/her through the thick and thin of life is critical for the child's happiness.

But, beyond that, developing "friendship" is not a practical objective. It often conflicts with your desire to do what is right for your children. Moreover, the child will most likely not be interested in counting you as a friend. In my opinion, "becoming friends" should be viewed as a "pleasant" side-effect, and not a standard policy of parenting.

A special note (especially for mothers): From an emotional perspective, parenting seems like a guaranteed way to suffer heart-breaks. It's a one-way love-affair, and that's how Nature has designed it for all creatures. Parents love their off-springs, but the off-springs are eager to break the leash and get on with their own lives. And that's perfectly natural. We cannot change that fact, nor can we control our emotional involvement in our kids; but this understanding of its one-way nature might help us "accept" our predicament and deal with it better. (For example, mothers need to let go when their sons fall for young women!)

- *Treating children as "adults":* Every person has a level of understanding of things which is determined by his/her age, natural gifts, and circumstances. This is especially true with children. It is potentially harmful (not to mention unnecessary) to introduce ideas too early. It is tempting for parents to believe that their child has the IQ of Einstein and the maturity of a Sage. You must properly estimate your child's level of maturity and decide what ideas/activities will suit.

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