

Parenting

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Note: Everything I say below is only my opinion, which is based on my own experiences and observations. – Swami Devanand

One of the best passages on children and parenting was 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.

Raising children is a very challenging but 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

Discipline is about following certain basic rules of conduct. Any 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 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*. They 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*.

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' home. 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.

Impossible parenting goals:

These are just a few examples of unreasonable (in my opinion, of course!) 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.

- *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 estimate your child’s level of maturity and decide what ideas/activities will suit.

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