

“How to be a Good Parent: It’s all about You”

November 2010

In this month’s *The Mind* by Scientific American, Robert Epstein presents the results of a research study of 2,000 parents about what makes a good parent. In his list of the 10 most important parenting competencies, just 5 of them were about the parent/child relationship; the other 5 related only to the parent. And 3 of those mention “modeling:” Relationship skills (having a healthy relationship with your partner models relationship skills), Education and learning (having a good education models learning and educational opportunities) and Health (eating healthy and being active models a healthy lifestyle).

Psychologists have found that children really "do as parents do, not as they say." Being a positive role model for good behavior is far more powerful than specific training or disciplinary measures in raising children. These processes of identification and imitation overshadow any statements, rules, and prescriptions for good behavior. Children develop behaviors through observing their parents in day-to-day life. Every behavior that a parent engages in should be worthy of imitating because children will imitate it.

Bruno Bettelheim's observed, “While most parents are ready to teach their children discipline and know that they are the ones to do so, they are less ready to accept the idea that they can teach only by example.” Parents who are congenial, non-defensive,

nonintrusive, consistent, and generous have a positive impact on their child's personality.

The fact that our children are looking to us to see how to be is enough of a reason for us to focus on our development as a person. Only if we have developed integrity in the way we live our own lives will we be able to provide our offspring with the necessary model for mature, adult functioning. Our honesty and maturity are far more important in determining the healthy development of our children than any techniques prescribed by child-rearing experts.

Live your own life

We can best help our children not by sacrificing ourselves for them, but by trying to fulfill our own lives. When we are involved in an honest pursuit of our goals, we serve as positive examples for our children. To teach our children how to live "the good life," we have to genuinely value ourselves, accept all of our feelings, wants, and priorities, and actively participate in our own lives. To the extent that we retain our capacity for feeling and a willingness to invest fully in our lives, we will have a profound positive effect on the personal development of our children and on their future. Bruno Bettelheim said, "We need not make any claim to be perfect. But if we strive as best we can to live good lives ourselves, our children, impressed by the merits of living good lives, will one day wish to do the same."

Instead of living their own lives, many parents live through their children. Rather than offering to their children, they are taking from them. These parents are in fact acting out emotional hunger, an unsatisfied longing for love and care caused by deprivation in their own childhood. They confuse intense feelings of need and with feelings of genuine love. Sustained contact with an emotionally hungry parent leaves a

child feeling drained and empty.

Rather than striving to fulfill the role of a "perfect" parent or even a "good" parent, mothers and fathers can offer their children much more by being real with them; by admitting their shortcomings and weaknesses, sharing with them the history of their own formative years, revealing their personal struggles as well as their successes, and in general relating to them as honestly as possible. Ultimately, parents' humanity and compassion for themselves are the most significant attributes for compassionate child-rearing.

Let your children love you. Parents who have grown up with an image of themselves as unlovable are often resistant to having close, tender moments with their children or to having their child look at them with love. When parents cannot bear to feel their children loving them, they respond negatively to them. Books on child-rearing fail to give this phenomenon the importance it deserves. In *Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice* I wrote:

Our children need to be able to feel their loving feelings for us, for the people we really are behind our roles as parents. If we deny this opportunity to our children, they will suffer emotionally. We need to learn to be receptive to our children's spontaneous expressions of affection and love toward us. This seems obvious, yet it may be the most difficult task faced by us as parents.