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Understanding Yourself as a Parent

Abstract

"One day at time, we *can* grow and become better parents. Our children deserve that."

Posting about parenting responsibly from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/understanding-yourself-as-a-parent/>

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Understanding Yourself as a Parent

 [all in allthings.org/understanding-yourself-as-a-parent/](http://allthings.org/understanding-yourself-as-a-parent/)

Tara Boer

September 9,
2016

Parenting has been one of the most humbling adventures I've ever been on. Whatever I learned in school and from the textbooks gets thrown out the window when my three-year-old refuses to let me buckle her in the car seat while my 9-month old is screaming for his bottle. Every [Karen Purvis](#) intervention, [Love and Logic](#) strategy, positive parenting technique, and _____ (insert parenting model here) is quite honestly very difficult to apply. I'm pretty convinced though that my generation is fairly concerned about being good parents. It's not a coincidence that you can scroll Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and every social media network and stumble upon information that convinces you that there's a better way to do things.

I'm privileged with the opportunity to hear many stories about parenting, children, and family functioning. I get to rummage through research and books to find best practice and brain literate conversations about raising kids. Through these stories and opportunities, I can surmise that there are a few core practices that can help parenting just go a little bit better.

Deal with your "stuff"

Last week I told my daughter to put her puzzle away before we left the house. My "threenager" let out a huffy "uggghhh," and stomped away towards her puzzle. Though I secretly grinned, I couldn't help but see that she's a scary reflection of how I respond when I feel overwhelmed or frustrated.

Every event and experience first travels through our limbic system, the part of our brain that processes emotions, and then makes it way up to our rational brain.¹ We cannot fully integrate and learn from experiences unless we allow both parts of our brains to be engaged. Our emotions are an instrumental part of who we are, how we behave, and how we connect with our children. Thus we must be emotionally intelligent (EI). IQ is said to explain only 20% of what we make of our lives. You should also know that individuals with high emotional intelligence outperform their peers 70% of the time and 90% of top job performers have high EI's. Being emotionally intelligent is made up of four main skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.² We can set our children up for success by helping them learn to identify and manage their emotions while helping them acknowledge how their feelings may be impacting them and their relationships. Children develop empathy, respect, and self-regulation skills as we continue to help them experience the world in this way.

I've met many children and teenagers who say "my mom just does not understand," or "my dad would have no idea what I'm going through." Many adults come from emotionally barren homes and have unresolved hurts in their past that prevent them from being emotionally attentive and present. We cannot expect our children to respond to anger, sadness, anxiety, and stress if we ourselves have developed unhealthy patterns of coping. We can only lead our children where we ourselves have gone.³ Good or bad, our children will mirror what they see and experience.

Instill confidence and self-worth

This past year while I was on maternity leave, I went on a pursuit for adult conversation and found myself watching Judge Judy as an interviewee on a talk show. I was curious to listen to her as I admire her wit, boldness, and lack of fear in confrontation. Her spirit was surprisingly gentle and her demeanor was kind. She advocated for the idea that we have a responsibility to instill confidence in our children, something someone had obviously done for her. She claimed this to be one of the most important things we can do for children.

I'm buying it.

I'm increasingly surprised by the amount of children and teenagers that step in my office with notable deficits in their self-esteem. What would surprise you more is these aren't only the kids who are bullied, traumatized, or lacking material resources; these are kids that are actively involved in extracurricular activities and their schools. These are smart kids and these are "popular kids."

Tell your children what they do well and how hard they work. Praise them for how much they care about others or how creative they are. Focus on praising their character and the journey, not just the desired outcome (for example, getting an A on a test). Depression and anxiety can manifest themselves in children and teens who have learned to put their worth in their accomplishments and others' approval of them rather than their God-given personality and character. Children need to know that their choices are important but their worth comes in being created and loved by a good, good father. Our ultimate goal is that our children will put their identity in Jesus Christ and if they are to be able to focus on this eternal goal, they should never feel more safe, affirmed, and loved than they feel at home.

Understand development and attachment

Most studies on early attachment indicate that only 50% of the adult population had the desired "secure attachment" as a child. These are children whose parents were emotionally available, perceptive and responsive. A child that was securely attached to a caregiver then becomes an "free adult." He/she is able to negotiate needs, give and receive affection, and be autonomous.⁴ Secure adults are more likely to successfully manage stress, be emotionally healthy, and enjoy fulfilling relationships.

And for those of you that come from homes where "feelings weren't talked about," there's a chance that you join the 40% of the population who had an insecure-avoidant or insecure-ambivalent attachment and now parent as an "entangled" or "dismissing" adult.⁵ Parents of avoidant/ambivalent children were sometimes emotionally unavailable, imperceptive or unresponsive, and gave mixed and unreliable messages. Some of them were rejecting. Entangled and dismissing adults often feel disconnected from intimacy and find it difficult to understand what they are feeling. They often have difficulty articulating how they feel about their own parents or about past relationships. Their logical world dominates the emotional world and their ability to connect with their children suffers.⁶

We have a responsibility to work towards establishing a secure attachment with our children. It's equally important that we learn our attachment style and the implications this has on our temperament, emotional intelligence, quality of relationships, and ability to successfully connect and parent our own children.

Discipline means "To Teach"

If you lose your cool at a staff meeting and swear at your boss, you are obviously lacking some skills. Although a consequence such as being placed on administrative leave might cause you to realize you can't exhibit such behavior at work, you still have to learn to regulate your emotions and express yourself appropriately or a similar incident could happen again.

When our children misbehave they are often communicating that they do not have a skill. If they had the skill they probably would use it. Thus, a more whole-brain approach to disciplining our children would be asking ourselves these three things:⁷

Why might my child be behaving this way? *Is she hungry, tired, or overwhelmed by the expectations? Has he had too much sugar or not enough water? Is she still upset that she can't go to his friend's house?*

What do I want to teach? *Empathy? Respect? Manners? Patience?*

What is the best way to teach this? *Does she need a conversation, or activity? Can I help her write a letter, connect with someone else, or can we play with toys and practice the skill through play? What would a time-out,*

spanking, or sending him to his room teach him? What kinds of associations am I helping him make between misbehavior and relationships? Or misbehavior and emotions? How am I teaching him how to make things right after mistakes?

It can take a lot of thought to discipline effectively. It's worth it though if it means that it's not our adult son that's still throwing tantrums.

Share your faith

I'm simply suggesting that we can go deeper with our children. Jesus did not die a horrible death so we could be comfortable with a "quiet faith." The Apostle John died of old age and Judas committed suicide, but the other ten disciples died as martyrs for the faith and certainly weren't private or quiet about the truth that had been given to them.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 says "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. **Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.**" (bold for emphasis)

Don't outsource the work of Jesus Christ to your local school or youth group. We should want our children to have their first opportunity to enter into a saving relationship with Christ in our homes. As I think about my own children, I hope that God appoints my husband or myself to be the ones to say that salvation prayer with them. Satan attacks the church through individual homes. Protect your home with prayer and open the invitation for the Holy Spirit to allow you to have meaningful, Jesus-filled conversations with your children.

No Guilt

Too many of us hang on to guilt associated with what we have done, should be doing, or could be doing. Satan loves to steal our joy for parenting by reminding us of our failures and shortcomings. Too often he gives us a restless spirit that causes us to compare our lives and our children to others. Take every thought captive, invite conviction, seek repentance, and walk in freedom. If we can't live in freedom after asking for forgiveness how will our children ever feel safe enough to be who God has called them to be? We can trust in God's promise to make us more like Him through these character building experiences. We get stronger, our children get stronger, and our stories and testimonies become the fabric that quilts our family together.

One day at time, we *can* grow and become better parents.

Our children deserve that.