

Kids?!?! You Just Raise Them!!!

By Stephanie Bachmann Mattei Ph.D.

For some of us, parenting education may seem an extravaganza. Our parents did not take parenting classes, nor did they read books about parenting. And we turned out okay, didn't we? So, why bother?

We live in an ever more rapidly changing world. First of all, our life style has changed dramatically, and as child-rearing environments change, so do parenting approaches. In the 1950s, society and therefore parents, placed high value on obedience (a parent-centered approach based on the father as the absolute authority, holding total control, handing down non-negotiable morals and rules - "Thou shalt not", "Don't you dare" - in a closed and structured environment).

In the 1990s society started valuing more and more independent thinking (i.e. self-direction and self-responsibility). Nowadays, our children need to be taught *how* to think rather than *what* to think, because society does not expect blind obedience to authority figures but values thoughtful and meaningful contributions. And we now know that raising a child with attunement and empathy offers a solid foundation for the emotional health and the development of emotional intelligence in human beings.

What Child Development Studies Show

Today we also have a lot of studies and research on child development available compared to 50 years ago. In addition to that, astounding scientific information about brain development has emerged in the last 20 years.

For instance, studies have proven that the "spoiling theory" (dated in the 1920s) is actually detrimental to the healthy development of children's brain. We now have lots of scientific evidence that when a baby cries he/she is communicating a need (for nourishment, warmth, comfort, connection, safety, etc.) and is not trying to control us. By responding to those needs with loving

presence, the baby's brain develops circuitries that will foster trust in relationships.

Research shows that parents' and even pediatricians' fear-of-manipulation mind-set did not understand how babies develop, their brain capabilities (and self-soothing is not one of them!), how they communicate, and that a baby's cry is actually a remarkable survival skill.

Western society family structure has also changed: the support of the extended family is almost non-existent in our North American mobile society. Our next of kin may live hundreds/thousands miles away. Divorce, single parenthood, mothers working outside the home, blended families are all challenging situations we face in our time. We need constructive tools to respond to those exceedingly stressful situations.

Discipline problems were also very dissimilar 50 years ago compared to the ones we face today. Drugs, alcohol, teen pregnancies, HIV, life-threatening violence, destructive role models, and suicide were not dealings our parents had to dread, at least not to the extent we do nowadays.

In other words, being a parent presents different complexities today than it did 50 years ago. If we take seriously our responsibility to empower our children to lead self-fulfilling lives, make constructive decisions, experience life-giving relationships and solve conflicts peacefully, we need to develop different skills than our parents had and passed down to us.

How NVC Fits In

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) offers remarkable tools to support parents to learn skills to be mindfully present to themselves and their inner life as well as to the life of their children.

In NVC we aim at establishing a quality of relationship based on trust and connection, necessary ingredients to *meet* (befriend not necessarily fulfill) everyone's needs. The focus is on connection, compassion and authenticity.

We aim at sharing power, defined as "power with" not "power over," (i.e. taking unilateral decisions in areas that will affect our children and where they could actually be included in the decision making process) nor "power under," (i.e. giving in and/or giving up.) And we aim at tapping into the joy of giving from the heart or co-operation (i.e. "operate together"), rather than forcing actions and behaviors out of a sense of duty or obligation, fear or shame.

So much research now points to the fact that the latter comes to a huge emotional price where the child is actually left with two options: rebellion or submission. In both cases, a loss of personal connection with one's own intrinsic motivational needs takes place as well as a loss of inter-personal connection with the parents, shifting the relationship from cooperative to oppositional.

NVC has supported me and my own family in creating a family life we love and truly cherish. Learning and integrating NVC have helped me:

- Understand my children's and my own needs.
- Experience connection, compassion, and trust.
- Bring healing to my heart.
- Take full responsibility for my life without losing self-respect and spiraling down into shame, guilt or blame.
- Support brain integration (not just behavioral change) in my life and in my children's lives.
- Model as consistently as I can the behavior I value.
- Live as much as possible in line with my values.
- Hold myself with compassion when I behave in ways that are not in line with my values.
- Heal from rifts and breaks in trust and attend to the interpersonal repair work.
- Understand and befriend intense emotions such as anger, guilt, and shame.
- Cherish each other, and celebrate our life together.

This is not to say that we need to reject all that our parents believed and did. We do not need to throw the baby out with the bath water, so to speak. A capacity to persistently hold on to that which is life-enriching is indispensable. And we do need the wisdom to discern what we need to hold on to, and what we need to change, recognizing that our parents did what they thought was best to do, given the information they had available at the time, and the social conditions and personal situations of their lives... which, by the way, is exactly what we are doing today: doing the best we can given the inner and outer resources available to us in the moment.

Surely, we can continue telling ourselves that "this is the way it has always been done" or reject the challenge to learn new parenting skills by reassuring ourselves that, "If it was good enough for me, it's good enough for my children. They will turn out okay."

Our Response Ability as Parents

Do we believe that our children are here with a purpose, and that their lives are filled with intrinsic meaning? If so, our response-ability as parents is to help them unfold their unique qualities and develop their talents in order for them to fulfill their potential and contribute to life. Turning out okay may not fully capture the deepest longing of our heart.

We may have recognized along the way that many traditional parenting tools hinder the highest inner development of our children: An example? The "3P" punishment, praise, and privileges (rewards) make our children outer-directed people-pleasers who depend on others' approval rather than relaxing into a strong trust in themselves and in their abilities to choose what is meaningful to them and to live in line with their own values.

Fear of punishment and shame inducing practices also do not support overall brain integration, and in particular the development of the brain circuitry that allows for self-regulation, i.e. the regulatory system which is responsible for emotional modulation and behavioral self-control allowing for social interaction.

Attuned, empathic parenting, on the other hand, fosters the development of regulatory ability which correlates to the ability to sooth one's high and low emotional and behavioral reactions.

Parenting is the toughest, yet the most meaningful "job" we'll ever have in our lives. Parenting education can help us grow as human beings, empower us as parents and also support us in uncovering not so healthy patterns of interaction, and replace them with practices and tools that foster a wholesome and balanced development in our children.

But most importantly, parenting education and information can shed some light on our core intentions and values around how to raise our children and hold ourselves with compassion in the process. it takes commitment and courage to accept the challenge, and take a good look at ourselves and the behaviors we have that do not integrate the long-term vision for our family life with the short-term needs we may be trying to satisfy in the moment. It is daring to be open to growth. Change is inconvenient, hard work, and scary. A capacity to change is indispensable, and it is a major opportunity for our personal growth.

A Committing to Constant Growth

By patiently committing to constant growth we give our children a very important message: they matter to us. And hopefully, out of this deep connection and trust with their parents, our children will envision a world where everyone's needs truly matter. They will learn that relationships can be based on trust, mutual care and a sense of partnership where power is shared because the interdependent quality of interpersonal life is recognized and experienced on a daily basis. Our children will grow having the skills for self-reflection and self-regulation, being able to understand, express and meet their needs, to empathize with others and trust that they're heard, known, and loved unconditionally.

In closing, I would like to pass on a challenge I received from Dr. Daniel Siegel, M.D.: think of the generational impact your parenting choices will have: imagine your child holding his/her child, and realize the power of what you are passing on.

The Parenting Matters Teleconference

I cordially invite you to join me at The Parenting Matters Teleconference sponsored by the NVC Academy and me. Dr. Daniel Siegel will be our key note speaker sharing about the latest cutting-edge information on brain science and parenting. The upcoming virtual conference is packed with world renown parenting speakers who will offer us practical tips for parenting from our heart even when under duress.

For more information and to register please visit:

[*The Parenting Matters Teleconference*](#)

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