

Assess Values You Want Your Children to Share

by Juvata Rusch

Parenting is one job where by the time you're just getting good at it, you aren't needed much anymore. You aren't exactly fired, but perhaps forced into early retirement.

Take a minute to think about what you want to accomplish in your years of parenting. First, imagine your child at 18, ready to leave home for college or work or marriage or perhaps all three. Your child is leaving and has a suitcase filled with things learned and experienced during your life together. What do you want to make sure is in that suitcase?

What skills—physical, social, creative, intellectual—would you want to make sure your child has to be successful in life? What beliefs would you want your child to have about herself? About other people? What attitudes toward work and challenges?

How would you want him to handle mistakes and disappointments? What would you want your child to appreciate, to feel passionate about, or to find joy about in life? What did you know when you left home that you were very glad you knew? What did you not know that you wish you had? What memories do you want your child to have to remember fondly? What will be in your child's suitcase? Good stuff or junk?

Your answers to these questions are your parental values, which provide a sense of the learning experiences you want for your child. We are our children's first and most important teachers, not in the ABC sense, but more in the "who I am and what I'm capable of, and what I can expect from the world" sense.

Children learn from observing and being part of what we do and don't do, what we say and don't say. We are not the only influences in our children's lives; other family members as well as teachers and youth leaders may be important.

Certainly, much is written these days about the enormous influence of peers and television on young people. The challenge for busy parents is to make the time and energy to be with their children in positive ways before the years have disappeared, and the opportunities are gone.

Now let's examine what we as individual parents value for ourselves and our children. What "valuables," such as honesty or independence, do we want to see packed in that suitcase?

We need to know what we value, because when we don't, we often feel dissatisfied and don't know why. Being clear about our values also helps us distinguish between our long-term and short-term goals.

If we don't know what we want, it is hard to develop a plan to achieve it. We need to have a clear idea of where we want to go; otherwise, we might find ourselves in San Francisco, when we thought we were on our way to New York.

What may be important to one person may not be to another, so we say values are individual. Couples may not have the same values about certain things. What is important to one partner may be less important or completely irrelevant to the other.

When you begin parenting together, you may notice new differences between you in your values. Things may get a little sticky, and call for good communication, negotiation, and perhaps compromise.

You may have individual differences not only in how you discipline your children, for example, but also what you discipline for. What behaviors are you going to encourage or discourage as you parent together?

Some of our values also change over time. Ideas and principles that we felt strongly about when we were younger may not be so important to us as we have lived and grown, and others may now be more important.

Some of the values we hold dearest as parents may conflict with one another. Obedience and independence sometimes conflict, as may honesty and politeness. Often our values conflict when we look at our long-term and short-term goals for our children. Our long-term goal to encourage independence and self-sufficiency may conflict with our short-term goal to be on time for an appointment when our child says, "Do it MYSELF, Mommy!"

Are there times you may have felt conflicted between two positive values, such as cleanliness and creativity? As an experiment, make a list of 10 or so human traits you admire and try ranking them from highest to lowest in priority. If you prefer, rank the following characteristics that parents often report they value: courage, cheerfulness, independence, sensitivity, persistence, obedience, creativity, honesty, intelligence, cooperation, generosity, sense of humor, curiosity, flexibility.

Perhaps we can have compassion for ourselves at the times when we feel as if our minds are mush and we are hopelessly indecisive. We are not blithering idiots who can't tell a child "yes" or "no;" we are simply caught in a value conflict.

When we find ourselves confused, we should ask ourselves what our short- and long-term goals are, what the value conflict is, and choose between them, knowing there will be many more opportunities to encourage or discourage certain characteristics.

If we pretty consistently choose obedience over independence, there will be certain results. If we chose creativity over cleanliness or order again and again, there will be certain results.

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