

# Children's Most Important Teachers: Parents

by Rosemarie Eisenberg

**Have** you ever found yourself amused at your toddler when he or she did or said something that was just like you? Chances are, you were not only amused but surprised as well. You might well have wondered, "When did she pick that up?" or "I don't remember teaching him that."

In the first few years of life, children absorb an enormous array of information. They learn how to walk and talk, to keep away from the hot stove, their own way of looking at and interacting in their world—and they learn it from us! Being a parent is probably the most influential teaching position any of us will ever have.

In my profession, I am constantly reminded how well children learn from their parents. I often feel that rather than putting people in trances, I am waking them up to see that even though they are mature human beings, independent and free of parental control, they are still carrying around their mom's and dad's voices in their minds. Many of these messages are positive and life-affirming, but what of those that are judgmental and critical? They are there as well!

The woman who eats sweets compulsively tells me her mother put 12 cookies in her school lunch box each day. She thinks of sugar as energy.

The man who finds it hard to take a risk or implement a new idea at work remembers being slapped as a child when he was rhyming words and accidentally said an obscenity and he was too young to know what he had done.

Men and women who smoke heard their parents say constantly, "I need a cigarette."

People who tell me "I'm my own worst enemy" almost always had parents who put them down and were constantly critical. They carry their parents' voices in their heads and hear them saying, "That's not good enough, you're not worthy, etc."

The messages we got from our parents are often the same messages they received from their parents. They also are very likely the same messages we will hand down to our children. If you doubt that, ask yourself whether you've ever found yourself doing or saying something just like your mom or dad. More often than not, these turn out to be the very words or acts that we promised ourselves we would never say or do!

It would be terrific if we could say that the majority of us came out of healthy, well-adjusted, nurturing family backgrounds, and the majority of our parental messages were positive and self-affirming. That's just not the case as more and more of us are admitting that we came from alcoholic or physically, sexually, or emotionally abusive homes. The redeeming side of all this is that by admitting the problem, we can begin to break the cycle.

No matter what our backgrounds, we all received a variety of parental messages as children. These messages are the foundation of our personal inner dialogue, that inner voice that constantly

reaffirms those childhood messages. This voice may be nurturing and supportive or it may be critical and self-deprecating.

We talk to ourselves more than anyone else in the world. But what are we saying? Only by paying attention to our self talk, only by looking at our childhood messages are we free to accept or reject them. Our children don't have that choice. They hear us, they watch, and they learn.

Our parents were models for us, and we are models for our children. It is unrealistic to think that we will always say or do the right thing. There will be situations we will regret. But, by and large, it is not a particular instance a child will remember, it is an atmosphere, an attitude.

We want to create a loving atmosphere, so the child's inner voice says, "I'm loveable, I'm worthwhile, I deserve good people and things in my life. I deserve to be happy."

We want to create a gentle, safe environment where the child is free to explore, so the child's inner voice says, "I can do it, I'm capable, I can try something new. It's OK to make mistakes."

We want to create a healthy atmosphere by eating well, exercising and generally taking good care of our bodies, so the child's inner voice says, "My body is important, I will take care of it, I will treat it with love and respect."

In short, we want to create an atmosphere for our children that engenders positive self-regard, high self-esteem and a sense of their own power in their lives.

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Original publication date: 4/22/90 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon