

Parents Earliest, Most Important Teachers

by Juvata Rusch

Children are always learning, absorbing all sorts of notions through observation of others, what they do, and their interactions. Our children learn from watching us.

Being our children's first and most important teachers can be seen as an amazing opportunity or a heavy burden. For most parents, it can be some of both.

Does that mean we have to be perfect, because we are always modeling behavior for our children? No, not only because it is impossible, but because our children aren't perfect either, and one of the important things we can model is what to do when we make mistakes. How do we clean them up? How do we apologize? Part of the opportunity of parenting is continuing to grow ourselves.

These two concepts—that we have individual values from which we parent, and that our children are always learning and absorbing—can be used as a way to analyze troublesome situations. When you feel confused, ask yourself these three questions:

1. Given my values, what do I want my child to learn in this situation?
2. Is what I'm doing congruent, in line, with teaching her that?
3. Is there some negative side effect as well, some other learning that I perhaps do not want?

For example, if your child refuses to leave the park when you say it is time to go, you might ask, "What do I want my child to learn here?" And the answer might be, "To obey me, to leave when I leave." So perhaps you say, "If you don't come with me now, I'm going to leave you here." Your child believes you, gets off the slide, and comes running after you. The answer to "Am I getting what I want?" would be "Yes."

Then you ask about negative side effects. "Is there something else I don't want him to learn?" In this case, there are some, for if the child believes you, he may learn to fear that you really would leave him alone, and fear of abandonment is one of a child's worst fears. If the child does not believe you, he may be learning that you don't mean what you say, that again, you are untrustworthy. So by using the threat of leaving to teach obedience, you may also be teaching two other things you don't intend.

Using the same example of leaving the park, suppose you are a father and when your child did not want to leave, you said, "I know you love it here. It's lots of fun. You'd really like to stay. But I need to get home. Mommy's waiting for us. Do you want to go piggy-back or walk with me and step on all the cracks as we go to the car?" Here you would be teaching that you understand how she feels even if you have to set limits, that she has choices within your limits.

Suppose your child still doesn't want to leave? You may have to pick him up like a pig in a poke crying all the way with you saying, "Yes, I know you don't want to go, it's hard, isn't it?" Then you would be teaching your child that you respect his feelings while you still mean business.

Asking the question of what you want your child to learn in any given situation, given your values, can keep you on track in filling your child's suitcase as the days go by.

Think again: what has to happen between now and leaving home for your child to know everything you knew then that was important as well as all those things you didn't know that now you wished you had? What kind of experiences will you need to provide through the years for your child, beginning now?

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