

Parents Need to Offer Kids Safety, Structure

by Scott Molaski

Bringing a child into the world and becoming an effective parent is the most difficult challenge most of us ever face. As parents, we learn what works and what doesn't by evaluating our successes and failures. Of course this process takes time, but you are the parent, and you are supposed to have the answers.

Adding to our challenge is a rapidly changing world. Once upon a time, Dorothy needed a yellow brick road; nowadays, she has the Internet, and who has time to develop relationships with straw people, tin men, and heartless lions anyway. In addition to not knowing what yellow bricks even look like, our children question how we could ever believe the Tin Man could survive without a 56 K modem, 24 X CD-ROM, 16 MB RAM, 21 GB hard drive, and 200 MHz MMX enhanced processor. Perhaps, what is most amazing is that this comes from the same child who not too long ago needed his diapers changed and was learning how to hold a spoon.

At this moment in time, we are not worried so much about potty time as we are about academics, athletics (including transportation to and from), youth violence and substance abuse. And by now, your children have seen you in an assortment of roles: educator, religious leader, coach, police officer, transportation director...the list goes on.

Our children want and need our help growing up as they face today's tough issues. They did not create many of the problems they have to confront—we adults did. However, the children are the ones struggling to make responsible choices and to feel worthwhile. If as parents, we wait until a police representative shows up at the door with our child in tow to deal with a problem, our children were not the only ones making irresponsible choices.

Interaction and involvement with our children are the keys to successful parenting. In infancy, we must help them satisfy the most basic physical needs to survive. As they grow older, their needs will change in their quest to feel worthwhile and responsible. When they experience these changes, responsible adults are the SAFE constant. It is a parent's basic and primary responsibility to provide safety, nurturing and structure in the family environment.

Creating a home where people feel loved and valued does not occur by happenstance. Parents must make a plan:

- **Set goals.** What do you want your home to look like and how are you going to achieve your goals?
- **Prioritize communication.** Parents communicate to their child in word and deed every day. How do you deliver your messages? Instead of simply saying, "Yeah, that's good enough" or worse yet, not noticing at all, take time to point out something specific your child does. Use encouraging words that show confidence, such as "You'll make it!" or "I believe in you!" as opposed to saying, "I really think you can succeed."
- **Have simple, fair, and reasonable expectations.** Talk with your children about your family expectations. Most kids have an innate desire to please because if they make you happy, they are noticed. They may astound you with what they can do, but they will only achieve what you expect.

- **Allow decision making.** Establish guidelines early and allow children to begin making decisions based on the consequences of their own actions. This means you have to provide them with choices.

Some parents feel a need to make all the decisions for their child, to appear in control. If this is the case, it is the parent who is out of control. Authority is a relationship issue. If you have an ongoing, positive, constructive, supportive relationship, your child will usually respect your expectations even when you are out of sight and immediate reach.

Other parents protect their child at all costs, never allowing a child to experience the consequences of his or her own actions. In such cases, how will your child learn decision-making skills, coping skills, or effective methods of handling stress? And what is the message you are conveying if your expectations for him or her making good decisions are low? Do you have faith in your own son or daughter?

Overprotective parents won't allow their child to take the training wheels off their two-wheeler, thus denying him the sense of exhilaration and freedom of that first unassisted ride. "Always in control" parents will arbitrarily remove the training wheels when they see fit, thus telling their child that he is incapable of contributing to decisions that affect her. In either case, the child is the one in the driver's seat, and most children have a pretty good sense of when they are ready to go pedaling off by themselves.

- **Set guidelines.** As a parent, you can help children choose the right time of day (well lit with little traffic), or even where the momentous experience will take place (a flat, vacant parking lot.) We can also insist they wear a helmet. (Your local police will support you on this one.) By establishing simple and safe parameters, we show genuine concern and an interest in what our child is doing.

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