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EFFECTIVE PARENTS ARE STRATEGIC

This article is written for all parents who sometimes wonder if they are doing the right thing and if they are good parents. They probably think that parents should never feel anger, disappointment or anxiety about their children. Some parents are desperate because their children don't listen to them and don't meet with their expectations. Some think that being permissive is letting their children do everything they want without any guidance. Some pretend - and it is costly in energy - that they are perfect and their children are perfect, which they know pretty well is not the case.

The purpose here is to give all parents who want to help their children grow healthy and feel comfortable with it - at the lowest cost in suffering for them and their children - guidelines to deal with some typical situations they are daily confronted to, a quick view of the specificity of the child's stages of development and their consequences on education and general recommendations on its goal.

This article is inspired by the strategic approach developed in MRI Palo Alto and intends to be mostly pragmatic. Everything written here is suggested to be experimented and inspire the reader to find a path to adapt his own behavior.

Nothing is to be taken as one hundred per cent true in every case: it generally works in most cases.

As therapists, we mostly meet, in our practice, children who are depressed, angry and oppositional, confused and afraid, doing their best without getting satisfaction.

*What is important in the way parents deal with their children is naturally the immediate response but **mostly what they are learning about dealing with others and establishing an authentic and rewarding relationship.** They are integrating a pattern they will reproduce later with their friends, boss, coworker and spouse until they hopefully discover a new way of coping more adapted to the new situations they are confronted with.*

This article presents:

*in a first part, **a few typical situations related to behavior in the family and at school** and how to deal with them ;*

*in a second part, **an exploration of the main transition periods in the child's development and their implications:***

0 to one year (beginning of language and motor skills, reciprocal relation is founded),

2 to 3 years old (from baby to child: individuation or separation stage),

8 to 9 years old (end of primary school: autonomy claim and access to abstract reasoning),

13 to 15 years old (end of middle school: wanting to be an adult).

*A third part gives **general recommendations** about both aspects of parenting: nurturing and setting rules and my personal view on the outcome of education.*

Finally, I recall a few important points for the attention of the parents.

I. A few typical situations and how to handle them?

Most parents are confronted to the same situations but treat them differently according to their parenting style. The parenting style is the outcome of the parent's belief about what is the role of a parent, what is a well behaved and healthy child and their personal experience with their own parents. Another factor in the parenting style is the personality of the child. Parents tend to react differently to their children adapting their response to the child's behavior or needs.

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We are presenting hereafter a few situations we met in our practice and give a strategy to deal with them.

1) My child is in pain

The first reaction of an adult when his child is in pain is to try and reassure him. It's nothing, you'll be OK. And this is far away of what he is feeling, so the child is now not only in pain but also angry and desperate because his parents don't understand.

Another kind of answer is getting still more worried than the child and their anxiety increases the child's fear. If a child falls and gets up immediately but the mother is so anxious about it, then the child starts crying wondering what's happening to him.

These are the two extremes. The strategic way to deal with it is:

- Listen to the child about what he thinks happened and how he feels about it.
- Acknowledge his pain real or imaginary and validate it.

- Give a new meaning to the situation that allows him to deal with *it*.

Case (given by Carol Erickson):

Your injury is bigger than your brother's. They have colours and look how they are each different from the other. The pride of being special and focusing on the interest of her injury distracted her from the pain and she could deal with it.

2) My child is aggressive

He fights with his brother at home. He hits his friends. How to understand the situation globally and help him solve the conflict?

- Through observation of situations, questions and listening, parents can understand the frustration that leads to this attitude.
- They create a new strategy to make him feel comfortable and then he behaves in a friendly manner.

Case (in my practice):

A 9 years boy was aggressive with his little 3 years brother because he shared his room and used his books, his games, etc. The elder brother had no space for himself and was generally scolded in any dispute because he was the eldest. The parents decided to separate them and they had each his room. The fights stopped and the eldest brother started teaching the youngest the alphabet.

3) My child doesn't speak to me

Silence is a withdrawal when the child is overwhelmed by an event or feeling he thinks he cannot talk about.

The parent is hurt by that situation. Finding the roots of the problem requires patience and trust to get over it. Again observation, questions and listening leads to clarification that allows to build a strategy to solve the problem and restore the relation.

Case (given by Carol Erickson):

A little 8 year old girl stopped talking to her parents. She wouldn't say a word. Carol played with her in the session without trying to make her talk. The girl said from time to time: I don't want to. And she answered: Sure, you don't. Finally at the end of the session, the girl said: " I don't want to have a baby". The explanation was that her uncle kissed her on the mouth and she thought she could be pregnant.

4) My child doesn't concentrate at school

Confrontation provokes resistance or hostility. Another way to approach the situation is to understand it: what is affecting him? How to support him, step by step, in a problem resolution process?

How to stimulate his motivation in a rewarding response?

Case (in my practice):

A mother had cancer and tried to hide it from her child because it would be too difficult for him to know about it. So the child saw his mother being tired, irritated, eating less, staying away from him from time to time and having long conversations with his father. He was worried and anxious about his mother. When she explained to him she was sick and she would recover with time, he understood what was happening because he could put words on it instead of imagining the worst scenario and mainly that he was responsible for his mother's suffering, he started again getting along at school.

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5) My child has a limited skill

How to create the situation to his development? What challenge does he respond to?

How to encourage his dreams and hopes?

Case (given by the father):

A father described his situation with his 6 years old daughter who had problems reading. He proposed to her 5 books with plenty of images and only one with written stories. He told her: I know you are more comfortable with images, that's why I gave so many books with images so that you have fun with them, this last book is very difficult for you, so may be you can have a look at it in the end. His daughter

left all the books with images and started with the written book and went on with it. She felt challenged, she was interested in trying her best to be up to it.

6) My child resists doing his homework.

How to change the meaning of the situation?

How to change his habits?

Case (in my practice):

A mother complained about her child not doing his homework until she came back from work. And when she was there and giving him all her attention, she realized he did it rather easily and quickly.

She understood that waiting for her to do his homework was his way to keep her attention and have her commit herself to him all that time as she was very busy otherwise with different other issues. As she gave him the opportunity to play with her when she came home, if he did his homework before, the problem was solved.

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7) My child doesn't want to go to school

How to listen? How to ask a question? How to deal with his stress? How to be neutral or caring when you are setting limits?

How to gain your child's attention and respect to get his agreement?

Case (given by Cloe Madanes):

The child refused to go to school because she wanted to stay at home and take care of her depressed mother. When the mother got a job in her school as a volunteer, the child went back to school naturally.

The purpose of these few cases is to guide each one's reflection to find his own way to develop new skills as a parent.

II. Four transition periods in a child's development and their consequences

When your child says NO, it doesn't mean he doesn't love you, it is part of his development process.

Generally, parents expect from their children :

1. More autonomy
2. More adaptation
3. More responsibility
4. More obedience
5. More gratitude

When and how these expectations are adapted to the stage of development of their child?

- How to understand the child's reactions according to his age and context?
- How to be proactive and in control so that everyday life and most of all transitions don't degenerate in painful crisis and useless traumas?

There are **critical windows** in the child's development. It is important to be aware of them to develop certain skills and attitudes when it's the right time. Trying too early is useless and too late is difficult.

Most difficulties in adult's life are the consequences of mishandled transition periods. So let's have a look at them to understand them and deal with them more efficiently.

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A. From 0 to one year:

The child develops then the beginning of language and motor skills. When the child crawls around to take into account an object even if he doesn't see it, he develops the concept of object **constancy**.

The reactions of his environment at that moment create anchors which can be activated when he is an adult. A relation is built between the child and his environment, mainly the mother. Reciprocal relation is founded in the first age. Encouragement and reward are the basis of the child's trust in his environment and in himself;

B. From 2 to 3 years, also called the terrible two

This stage is a **period of individuation or separation**, when the baby transforms into a child. Then, the child's main words are: **No, mine, and why?**

By saying No, the toddler discovers his own existence and tests his limits. He starts building his identity as separate from his significant others and seeks to understand his environment.

Parents who don't get into a power struggle with their child allow him to be acknowledged as a person.

C. From 8 to 9 years old (end of primary school: beginning of autonomy claim).

Although, the child conquers his autonomy step by step all through the previous periods by mastering language and motor skills, at that period, he claims it from his parents in the social field. He wants to be recognized as a **responsible grown up person**. He says he is a preadolescent and sometimes wants to behave like an adult. He cries for freedom. At that time, the child can accept reasoning and cause effects relation.

D. From 13 to 15 years old (end of middle school: wanting to be an adult).

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Now, he is an adolescent. He seeks for his identity by attacking his parents and expresses the **chaos** of overwhelming sensations and thoughts. He wants to understand and reinvent the world so that it becomes his world. He experiences doubts and anxiety about his main choices, his identity as a person, his sexual and social identity. So he is in ebullition, fragile, demanding and often contradictory.

All parents know the importance of this period, which is generally questioning their own choices and identity. That's why it's difficult and requires calm and strength to accompany that existential trip.

III. General recommendations

You love your children, what creates your frustration is that you want them to listen to you. Frustration leads to anger and loss of control. How not to lose control and be more effective?

A. Be nurturing and structuring

Parents often hesitate: should I be firm and set rules because my child needs structure or should I be loving and nurturing because this is what my child needs to get his strength and grow healthy? The answer is naturally both in the adequate moment. We give hereafter suggestions on how to deal with these two objectives.

1. How to show your child you love him ?

Show him he's important through daily attentions.

Watch his successes, listen to him telling about them.

Motivate him : congratulate him, encourage him, reward him on basis of real facts.

Listen to his fears, doubts and frustrations.

Help him get over them.

Take into account his desires, his needs.

Help him recognize his emotions.

Propose to him a challenge.

Give him a choice

2. How to help your child getting structured ?

Apply known, explained and accepted rules.

Define limits acceptable according to his age and needs.

Don't get in a power struggle.

Talk little.

Don't repeat.

No yelling: your tone of voice should be neutral or benevolent.

Define a clear goal with a deadline.

Make realistic demands.

Be firm.

Don't overdo it to calm your anxiety.

Know your tolerance threshold.

Give moderate consequences, adapted to the mistake.

Be your child's ally.

Keep positive thinking.

B. Three things seem to me essential in education.

1. Joy is the first one.

Joy is a stage of development independent of external events. Happy people enjoy:

1. Being in the **present**.
2. Express **gratitude**.
3. Show **openness**: they offer help and aren't self important.
4. Behave with **grace** and are **optimist**
5. Aspire to **self transcendence**: they have committed goals.

These competencies are mainly developed through imitation of the adults. This is quite incitative for the parents to guide their children by acquiring such self discipline themselves.

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2. How to treat a mistake is a second significant point.

There are the four steps to manage it :

- **Recognize** that it is a mistake.
- Take **responsibility** for the behavior.
- **Apologize** for doing so.
- Look for a **solution**.

The best way to teach it is to practice it.

3. Define a goal is the third important thing

To help children identifying their goals and expressing them in a clear and concrete way opens to them the possibility of elaborating a strategy to attain them. They then feel responsible for themselves and have **satisfaction** when they reach their goals.

That gives them a motivation and a frame of mind for success.

Conclusion:

Many studies on success stories show that the most important factor for success is not intelligence or skills but the ability to relate to people, to make friends and to negotiate in order to reach your goal, what is called now emotional intelligence (Gottman).

Emotional intelligence is the ability to get along with others. It requires curiosity and awareness of others, tolerance for frustration and the ability to defer gratification.

Unfortunately, schools don't teach communication or parenting. So every adult has to take responsibility in developing these skills for himself and his children, not only for their success in life in general but also for their wellness and happiness as children and later as adults.

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Let's recall a few important points.

1. **If your children don't do what you want, it doesn't mean they don't love you.** May be, they don't understand what you want or can't do it. **May be the problem for you is the solution for them.**

2. **Doing more of the same thing gives the same result.**

If you seek for a change in your child's behavior, you'll probably have to change your own strategy.

3. **Reinforcement works better than punishment.**

What is the first step in the wanted behavior? Mark it and give a reward. Be regular in your behavior.

Avoid giving too much instructions. Step back and give your children space.

Encourage every little success.

4. Ask from your child things his **stage of development** allows him to do.
5. **Difficulties must be handled before becoming problems.** Address them in a proportionate, adequate manner. Don't ignore them and don't overdo action.
6. **Play with your child** : it develops his intellectual, motor and social skills. Share a **hobby** with him that is also fun for you.
7. **Read** for your child. These moments you spend together will be his best memories.

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Emotional intelligence - Daniel Goldman

Nursing your baby - Karen + Crake Pryor

Parenting - Jane Brooks

Teaching empathy - Barbara Both

Strategic human intervention program - Jeffrey Canada

Don't shoot the dog - Karen Prior

Everyday get a little closer- Irving

Autism- Thinking and pictures - Anthropology on Mars- Temple Grandon

A few websites to explore among others

Lekotek.org

Bruce Perry: childtrauma.org and Scholastic.com

Mybabiesplanet.com

onetoughjob.org