

Starting Where They Are At

A father came to a meeting last week with several pages of notes about his child, many examples of how difficult the child was being. He was surprised (and a bit offended) with my response: Your child is acting like children do at that age, now please tell me how you parent at the most challenging times. He said he gets worried, frustrated, disappointed, discouraged, sad, angry; and he gives suggestions, reminders, advice, consequences, words of encouragement, all trying to change his child immediately or at least as fast as possible. But his child insists on changing more slowly than he would like.

There is always a time lag between when we want our children to be done with a problem, attitude or pattern of behavior and when (months or years later) they are finally done. This time lag is a high-risk period because it requires us to parent calmly and patiently when we are (in the words of the father above) worried, frustrated, disappointed and discouraged. While there are numerous factors that influence our ability to permit the time needed for change to occur, here is one “all-purpose” strategy that has helped many parents.

Start where they are at. This is what the father was not doing. He had his invisible rulebook controlling him. His child should not be acting this way at this age. Period. His inner thoughts and some of his statements revolved around the following:

- We talked about this last week.
- How many times am I going to have to talk with you about this?
- Apparently being grounded for one week is not enough. How does two weeks sound?
- Don't talk back to me. Can't you get it through your head that this is not the way to act?

If the father had been able to *start where his child was at*, there would still be a need for teaching and probably a need for consequences. But he would have *felt differently* and he would have been able to *parent differently*. His inner dialogue would more likely have been like this:

- You are a work in progress and you are still figuring things out.
- This is why children have parents for so many years.
- I will work with you on these mistakes you continue to make.
- You know the drill. Same consequence as the last time you made this kind of mistake.

Children are challenging and parenting is difficult and there is no magic approach that makes children cooperative and respectful every minute of every day and parenting a piece of cake. But that is not the goal. The goal is for us to make things slightly better by our presence rather than slightly worse. Children are often like a smoldering fire and it is always better for us to be more like a wet blanket than additional fuel. We are their reservoir of confidence, a comforting rather than an anxious presence. Parents do not usually disagree with this in principle, but that does not make it easy to pull off day after day, with two or several children tugging at us with various needs and demands. Add to this a hectic pace of life, car and house problems, financial issues, our worries about our parents, future costs of college, and a list that is usually described as endless.

The moments with our children are just there. We can either start with them or push against them with our preconceived notions about the kind of moments we ought to be having. They are all potentially useful in our efforts to move our children in the direction of the long-term goals we have for them. A disrespectful moment provides an opportunity to talk about how it feels to be on the receiving end of an unkind word or comment. A chore that is not done is one of the ways that children learn that in life people who do not show up for their day job do not get their pay check. These experiences are needed in childhood and similar experiences need to be repeated over and over again in order for the learning to take root and become part of the child's character. In fact, some teenagers who seem to have their heads screwed on straight were quite challenging as children. And there is no shortage of successful adults who share stories about what they put their parents through when they were teenagers. So, hang in there. Refuse to panic. Learn how to view the most challenging moments so that you can start where your children are at that day and stay connected with them no matter what.

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