

Parent-Child Relationships – Children

Information from...

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

“I want so much to be a good parent.”
“I want my child to succeed in life.”
These anxious remarks are a common refrain among parents. All too often, parents are afraid of making a mistake that could mark their child, or fear “leaving out” something important. But let’s make one thing clear right from the start: parenting is something you learn as you go along. Trusting your basic common sense and your instincts, and talking things over with others, is still the best way to go. Having faults does not disqualify you from being a good parent – we all have our strengths and weaknesses. After all, to err is human, but to be perfect is impossible.

These two fact sheets on parent-child relationships are aimed at giving you a helping hand. Although they are intended mainly for parents of school-aged children, the information is general enough to be of equal benefit to

parents of younger children. The first sheet deals with children’s development and needs, while the second focusses on the role of the parent and on ways of facilitating the parent-child relationship.

1. Being a Child Today

When a child is born, he is totally dependent on the care provided by those around him. It is in these conditions that his physical, affective and social development begins. When he reaches adulthood, he will assume responsibility for himself and for his continuing development.

Childhood is a relatively short period in life, and yet it is a time for much learning. Every child begins life with a certain hereditary endowment. Indeed, an attentive parent will quickly identify a number of character traits. These

traits are the basis for the child's personality, but the manner in which he is raised will have an impact on the way he expresses this personality.¹ The child himself plays an important role in his development through the way he acts, interacts and reacts. He, in turn, influences those around him.

Furthermore, because today's child is constantly exposed to new realities, he will grow up to be different from his parents.

2. Child Development

Children grow in stages²

- Children do not develop at a regular rhythm. The process of development can be likened to a stairway whose steps are neither the same height nor the same size. Some steps can be climbed quickly, while others take longer. Each child progresses in his own way and at his own pace.
- Learning experiences are followed by a pause. This pause is necessary, in that it enables the child to assimilate what he has just learned. Practice allows his confidence to grow. He must be able to pause before moving on to the next challenge.
- Taking on a new challenge involves leaving behind a certain element of comfort. A child may be afraid of walking to school by himself, but his desire to become a "big boy" will encourage him to persevere. At times, learning can be difficult. Nevertheless, each new learning

experience adds to a child's confidence and pride (not to mention the pride of the parent when he hears his child say: "I did it!").

- A child's development can be interrupted by regressions and fixations. Regression involves turning back to a stage or a behaviour that is familiar. Fixation involves an arrest in development. Children (and adults, for that matter) use these methods to regain confidence in themselves.
- Each completed stage serves as a springboard for the next. To achieve independence, a child must take on age-appropriate challenges. Otherwise, his development will be compromised. Throughout this process, we must remember that the parent's support helps the child succeed.

Ways parents can help their child develop

- Each age has its own challenges. Placing excessive demands on a child who is neither old enough nor mature enough to meet them is only setting him up for failure. And too many failures will prevent him from developing self-confidence. This, in turn, will leave him feeling incompetent and fearful when facing future challenges.
- Waiting too long to introduce new expectations is also inadvisable, because the child will have lost interest in – and hence his motivation for – developing the required skill.

Moreover, if it is too easy for him to master a skill, he will not learn how to overcome difficulties, persevere and try hard, and he will think less of himself. It is worth repeating: these challenges must be in keeping with the child's abilities.

- To find out whether my child is able to do what I am asking of him, I must show an interest in him, monitor his development, pay attention to his efforts, stimulate him, trust my instincts and, when in doubt, consult other sources of information.
- I must try, then, to find the moment when my child can reasonably be expected to handle the challenge I am giving him. But that is not enough: I must also show him how to learn the skill and give him the chance to practise it. This can be slow going, but practising is the only way my child will learn, and it is normal to have to repeat something over and over again.
- From an early age, much of what a child does is rooted in the need to be loved. The more he feels he is satisfying his parents, the higher his degree of pride and self-esteem. This leaves him feeling that he has a loving, solid relationship with the people around him. But if he always feels inadequate, if he has difficulty understanding what is expected of him, his self-esteem and relationships will suffer. Hence the importance of clear messages, realistic expectations, parental consistency (parents acting

as a team) and encouragement when the child succeeds. This will help him in his development.³

The role of the parent

Essentially, my role as parent is to be there for my child. Children (and, for that matter, teenagers and adults) need help, encouragement and confidence in order to meet challenges. It is only by doing things that my child will acquire the basic confidence that will drive his development. But he needs me to help him. I do so when I discuss with him how to go about achieving success (*e.g.* studying for an exam in one of his weaker subjects) and what methods he can use to help himself (*e.g.* inviting a friend over or preparing a study schedule). I also am helping him when I teach him to learn from his mistakes so that his next experience will be a successful one.

The following are some of the traps we set for our children under the guise of love:

- *Overprotecting a child* has the effect of cutting off his wings. Examples of overprotective behaviour include doing things for him, preventing him from assuming responsibility for the consequences of his actions, forgiving him and shielding him from frustration and difficulties. On the other hand, *allowing a child too much freedom*, being indulgent and permissive and failing to set limits also have a detrimental effect on a child's development.

Both these approaches prevent the child from finding out what he can do, practising and improving his skills, and feeling good about himself. What's more, they make him insecure and deepen his dependency on adults.⁴ He is afraid and unsure of trying his hand at various things. Whether he is passive, withdrawn or hesitant, or, at the other extreme, is eager to defy authority and take on challenges that he is really not up to, he risks experiencing repeated failures and developing a feeling of incompetence.

- *Being authoritarian.* When a parent uses severe punishment to enforce obedience, he instils fear, mistrust and dissatisfaction in his child.⁵ The child is concerned more about the parent's reactions than about what he should be learning.

Parents who are affectionate but firm, whose expectations of their child are clear and adapted to his abilities, and who encourage, respect and listen to their child but are not afraid of being strict with him if called for are creating conditions in which he can thrive. He will develop curiosity, self-discipline and self-assertiveness, and will be able to look after his own needs.⁶

It behooves parents to ask themselves: "How do I exercise my parental supervision? What do I encourage and why?" For example, a parent may overprotect the child to spare him from excessive punishment at the hands of a violent spouse.

3. I Need to Eat, Drink, Sleep... and Feel Secure

Throughout his development, a child needs security. A child feels secure when the following needs are being met:

- *The need to feel loved* by the people who matter in his life. The parent should pay attention to his child and respect him for what he is. He must not succumb to the temptation of living out his dreams and ambitions through his child.

Paying attention to the child means finding out who his friends are, knowing what types of food or clothing he prefers, remembering his teacher's name and so forth. A host of little things make the child feel important in his parents' eyes.

A child "picks up on" the words his parents use to talk about him, the way they act with him and the home environment. A child who is regularly reprimanded and put down ends up feeling worthless. On the other hand, an environment that allows for mistakes, accepts personality differences and is warmly supportive communicates love.

A child who feels unloved by his parents desperately seeks their attention through tears, harassment, complaints, thefts, repeated failures at school or other behaviour that invites rejection. The parent must take the time to meet this need for love, and he must accept this altogether normal

dependency. A child who is regularly punished – when all he wants is to be loved – will remain dependent.⁷

- A child *needs to form an intimate, lasting relationship* with those around him.
- A child *needs a structured upbringing*. Clear rules and a routine in place since infancy meet the child's need for security. He feels confident because he knows the limits he must adhere to, can anticipate his parents' reactions (*e.g.* giving him a hug when he does something nice) and can do things on his own. He also knows that the purpose of these rules is to look out for his well-being.

A child is able to adjust to different rules in different homes. But he will find it extremely difficult to adapt if his parents' rules are not consistent with the values they espouse.

4. Self-esteem

Developing good self-esteem enables us as children – and later on as adults – to assert ourselves, believe in ourselves, form an accurate self-image and overcome life's obstacles. For instance, a child will find it easier to overcome his problems at school if he has a positive attitude. A lack of self-esteem, on the other hand, will leave him doubting himself – regardless of whether he succeeds or fails – and constantly comparing himself to others. Parents can help their child build good self-esteem by paying particular attention to the following needs:⁸

- First and foremost, *the feeling of being loved*.
- *The feeling of being capable* (“I feel good about myself”). It is by looking at the results of his actions that a child determines whether or not he should feel good about himself. Consequently, it is important that he experience successes. To do so, however, he must learn how to ask for help and how to accept it without feeling that he is a burden. The parent should direct his encouragement at his child's efforts and perseverance rather than the results.

When a child hears: “Way to go in math – that's the kind of effort we like to see!”, he learns how to give himself credit for the things he does well. When he is constantly compared to others, the message he receives is that his value can be determined only in relation to that of other people. “I'm good if you're worse than me” becomes his way of judging himself. This leaves him one step away from competition, criticism and put-downs.⁹

- *The feeling of having some control over one's life*. A child must be shown that he too is responsible for his own development. To do so, the parent should include him in what is going on around him. He could, for example, encourage the child to express his point of view when a decision is being made that concerns him and help him identify the consequences of his choices. If the

parent constantly decides for him, the child will develop a deep feeling of powerlessness. He may become dependent and let others make his decisions for him.

- *The feeling of having a moral code.* Obeying his parents' rules is the child's first step in meeting the normal requirements of living in society. As he grows older, he learns other viewpoints – in school or from a group of friends, for instance. He compares these viewpoints with those of his parents. This is how he begins to develop his own moral code.

Research¹⁰ has shown that the children of authoritarian parents have less self-esteem and self-control than the children of democratic parents. Indeed, a harsh, rigid form of discipline based on punishment does not encourage children to be co-operative, sensitive to the needs of others and rule-abiding. To help their child develop these qualities, parents must take the time to show him how his behaviour has consequences for himself and for others. Parents should not hesitate to repeat this exercise with their child. Comments like: "Jamie had fun playing with you this afternoon because you took the time to consider what he might like to do" give the child insight into his behaviour.

5. When Behaviour Speaks Louder Than Words

Children express their happiness and their pain through their behaviour. One child may sleep poorly for several nights, another may exhibit aggressive behaviour or a lack of motivation in school, still others may withdraw into their shells – all are expressing through their behaviour what they cannot tell us in words: that they are having difficulty coming to terms with something or other (a move, a divorce, etc). We must be sensitive to our children's behaviour changes, especially if they are sudden. Whenever our children are troubled by something, we must help them overcome their difficulties.

6. Where to Turn for Help

For your child to develop harmoniously, he needs respect, love, guidance and basic common sense. As a parent, your greatest challenge lies in realizing that you are up to the task and in trusting yourself. You have all the necessary resources. If you hesitate, make a mistake, recognize this and change your approach, you will be setting a good example for your child.

If you feel like sharing your experiences with other parents, go right ahead.

If, on the other hand, you:

- feel out of your depth or ill at ease;
- feel that your child is not responding to you any more, is always up to no good or is provoking you;
- feel that violence is the only way you can get your child to obey you;

do not keep these concerns to yourself. Talk them over with a person you trust or someone who can refer you somewhere else. You can also contact a parents' self-help group, a hotline, Parents Anonymous, your LCSC, a shelter for battered women, a women's centre or a support group for violent men.

Suggested Readings and Audio-visual Materials

Gordon, Thomas: Parents efficaces. La méthode sans perdant. [Teacher effectiveness training], Éd. Le Jour, Montréal, 1976, 445 p.

Laporte, Danielle, Duclos, Germain and Geoffroy, Louis: Du côté des enfants. Éd. par l'Hôpital Ste-Justine et le Mensuel Enfants, Montréal, 1990, 289 p.

Patterson, Gerald R and Gullion, M Elizabeth: Comment vivre avec les enfants. [Living with children], Éd. La Presse, Montréal, 1974, 93 p.

Le Magazine Enfants, 228 ouest, rue Laurier, Montréal (514) 270-5539

Your local public library also has some excellent books available.

The family violence audio-visual resource catalogue of the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence contains over 70 titles of films and videos. These may be borrowed free of charge from the regional offices of the National Film Board.

Footnotes

1. Olds, Sally W and Papalia, Diane E: Le développement de la personne [Human development]. Translated by Françoise Forest. Quebec adaptation by Lucie Goulet. Études Vivantes, 3^e édition, Montréal, 1989, p. 239
2. Cloutier, Richard and Renaud, André: Psychologie de l'enfant, Éd. Gaëtan Morin, Boucherville, 1990, p. 354
3. Ibid, p. 352
4. Baumrind (1971), Ambron (1981), quoted by Cloutier and Renaud, p. 412
5. Olds and Papalia, p. 240
6. Ibid, p. 240
7. Cloutier and Renaud, p. 412
8. Olds and Papalia, p. 296-297
9. Portelance, Colette: Relation d'aide et Amour de soi. L'approche non directive créatrice en psychothérapie et en pédagogie., Éd. du CRAM, Montréal, 1990, p. 239-240
10. Hoffman (1979), Loeb, Horst and Horton (1980), quoted by Cloutier and Renaud, p. 426

In this text, for stylistic reasons, the masculine shall be deemed to include the feminine.

This document was prepared under contract by Danièle Fréchette, a psychosociologist specializing in conjugal violence and family crisis intervention. We would like to thank the following people for their invaluable assistance: Suzanne Dessureault, in charge of the parents program at the Centre Mariebourg; Janice Ireland and Gisèle Lacroix, program officers with the NCFV; Andrée Lamontagne, educational psychologist; Femmy Mes, program officer with the Child Care Programs Division, HWC; Richard Meloche, communications consultant; Ginette Pelland and Denis Provost, parents; Jean Tison, a psychoeducator with the Montreal Catholic School Commission; and Dawn Walker, Chief, Child and Family Health Unit, HWC.

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