

## **YOUR "PERFECT FIRST"**

Most of you know that I spend the majority of my time doing "well" exams. This isn't because I don't want to see your child when he or she is sick, but because of my passion about the parenting of first children.

After reading some special books, which helped change my life and what I believe about parenting, I came to realize that it is very important that we change the "recordings" we made while listening to and watching our parents parent us. This is called creating a narrative in our mind about what happened in our childhood, and doing this is very important in helping us to parent in a different way. (Our parents did the very best that they could with the information that they had at the time and with how their lives had been set up in their own early years of childhood.)

Two important premises must be prominent in our thoughts about parenting:

**(1) CHILDREN MUST BE ABLE TO ACT THE AGE THEY ARE.**

**(2) CHILDREN MUST BE ABLE TO SAY WHAT THEY THINK.**

A first child most often has two people watching her all the time, i.e. she is over-attended. (It is interesting that this over-attending seldom if ever occurs in twins or multiples.) Our first child is an experiment, and they see in our eyes the excitement and pride that we have about everything that they do. It's the first time this child that we made has ever done each of these things. (A second or any other child never receives so much attention and praise.) By the time our "perfect first" is one year old, she has figured out that she has the ability to cause things to happen and to create certain responses in us, her adoring parents. Herein lies the potential for creating what for me was an "emotional waste of time" for almost 50 years of my life. I spent hours and days trying to please others, because I thought if they were happy then they would like me and then I would be valuable to them. This is referred to as deriving one's power from an outside source or being other-powered. In truth, each of us has great value (self power) and none of us is responsible for any other person's happiness. Self-value, self-power and happiness all come from within. (First child parents will likely understand this concept better than others.)

If a child does things which cause his parents to be happy and this behavior is often rewarded with praise and quite often with gifts, then it follows that the child will do these things more often. And if these are "good" behaviors, then this works very well for us as parents and we tend to say things like, "You are such a good girl" or "Daddy is so proud of you". The downside of this situation is that each child will eventually start to do things which do not make us happy, and it then becomes possible for our first child to begin to care too much about what we think about what she does based on what will make us happy.

First children are frequently described as being perfectionist or self-driven and are quite often pleasers or performers or both. Pleasing others is nice and being able to perform in front of others is a talent. Doing either, not because one feels good inside but to make parents or others happy, can easily lead to measuring one's value, not as self-value, but as other-value. We have been working on self with our children since birth, as in self-calming, being self-entertained, and encouraging self-control. The difficult part of parenting in the first three years is helping our first to know that he is wonderful and unique and loved without causing him to think that he is this way because it is his job to do this for us (so we will be happy and proud).

The neurobiology and neuropsychology studies from UCLA and elsewhere in the last ten years have been able to identify very specifically how babies and toddlers lay down in their brain their "perception" of "Am I Wonderful" and "Do I Matter". It is not about what we say and do as parents, it is about how each child perceives what is seen and heard. The look on our face and the tone of our voice can say a lot more than any words. It is in these first three years that we lay down in our mind our original interpretation (and the associated feelings) of what has happened to us. A child can either perceive that she is a wonderful valuable person or that being "herself" is not working, in which case she may decide in the early years to be someone else. This leads to what I refer to as "wearing a costume". I believe that I decided to wear the doctor costume by the time I was five years old. I had many allergy and illness problems as a young child, and my parents always thought the doctors were wonderful. Since the things they said and they way they responded to my "misbehavior" (acting my age) were perceived by me as being me wasn't working, it was an easy choice to decide to wear the doctor costume. Many people will tell you that they knew early in life what they were going to "do when they grew up". And many people around us continue to wear those costumes, and it makes it very hard to get close to them and know the real person inside.

I continually reexamine this issue, and have developed a few suggestions through reflection, reading and watching children and families "grow up":

1. Asking a first child a question about what he did is always better than telling him what we think. "Aren't you excited you can do that?" is better than "You make me so happy when you put on your shirt." "Didn't we have a fun time at the store today?" is better than "You were such a good boy at the store today."
2. A smile or a hand on the shoulder when you child is doing a "good" self thing is better than spoken words. "I love you!" is always appropriate.

### 3. IF WE DON'T SET IT UP, WE SET THEM UP!

Setting life up is everything. In order for your toddler to be able to act her age, her world must be set up with proper fences (boundaries) which prevent her from getting to places where acting her age will be dangerous to her or cause a problem for us. If we set things up properly, we won't have to spend most of her day asking her to not act her age, (In toddler world, anything that is visible is doable. She is not trying to drive us crazy, just acting her age. Most, if not all, of what our parents referred to as "misbehavior" was in fact us acting our age when they didn't have it set up correctly.) I think there is a very real possibility, that if we spend much of every day say "Stop that!", "Get out of there!", "Don't do that!" or "I told you not to go in there", that our child may well decide that we don't like who she is and decide to be someone else, for example, "the perfect first child".

4. Whenever possible, avoid labeling your child. Words like good, big, pretty, and smart are all value judgments and can give a child the impression that we are in charge of his value. When we measure children with words, they learn to come to us to find out if they have value. "Do you like my clothes?", "What do you think about my report card?", "Do you like this picture I drew?", or "Are you happy that I poop in the potty?" are all requests for measurement by someone other than self. It conditions our child to be "too concerned" about what other people think and to expect to be measured by others. Thus they may spend much or all of their time making others happy without realizing that happiness comes from within. (And the other they choose to be measured by, such as a boss or job, may not be those that really matter most, i.e. wife or children.)

5. Listening to what our toddlers have to say, even if it's a ***strong irrational opinion*** which is the definition of a tantrum, will go a long way toward helping them to develop a strong self and good boundaries. Too many of us first children have struggled much of our life with saying "no" or saying what we really think. Another reason to learn to listen to them early in their lives is the adage that "if we listen to them at 3, they might listen to us at 13".

The four books:

1. John Bradshaw *On the Family*
2. William Sammons *The Self-Calmed Baby*
3. Wayne Dyer *What Do You Really Want for Your Children*
4. Daniel Siegel *Parenting From the Inside Out*

Other suggested reading:

1. Jane Nelson *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years and Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World*

2. Kathryn Kvols *Redirecting Children's Behavior* (the appendix, as found on the Sea View website, describes "possibly annoying but normal behaviors for each age. Redirecting is a good technique but can be time consuming and misperceived as micromanagement.