

Parenting Challenges and Skills for Effective Formation

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Abstract

The 21st century presents novel opportunities and different challenges for family life and parenting. The child today is living in a different world than the previous generation. Parents wonder if their children will be able to survive in this world and learn new job skills for a new century. Many factors can aid the parents in their journey of becoming effective parents. This article discusses how parents can lay down the foundation of a healthy adult and happy future by adopting certain strategies. Hence, to be effective parents, one needs to be able to let go and be open to new learning.

Parenting in the 21st Century

The 21st century presents novel opportunities and different challenges for family life and parenting. In fact, over the last ten to twenty years, parenting has become the ‘talk of the town.’ The print media, the visual media, NGOs, social groups, religious organizations – everywhere parenting is being discussed. The reason is obvious: times have changed, the joint family system has almost come to an end, children have more pocket money to use or misuse, electronic media are at their disposal, and educational institutions have become a place for completion rather than for cooperation. Also, humanities have become unpopular; value

education has become less and less effective, parents are not able to have quality time with their children and many more reasons.

The child today is living in a different world than the previous generation. The changes in technology and social systems take place at a furious pace. Children today have information at their fingertips. Parents wonder if their children will be able to survive in this world and learn new job skills for a new century.

Today's children are raised with 'mouse in hand' (Long, 2004). Entertainment technology (Television, Mobile phones, the Internet, iPads and video games) has become so sophisticated so swiftly, that the adults and children alike are bombarded with information and entertainment at a furious rate. The effect on children, in this era of speed, is tremendous. They just do not know the world in which these gadgets are not there to help. In the same manner, parents are also turning more and more to the technology to seek answers to their parenting queries.

Aided by the progress in technology, the whole world has become one global village. There are more intercultural/interreligious, inter-caste experiences today. In many ways, the protective influences exerted by socialization process prove inadequate when faced with different experiences. Today, there is earlier menarche among our girls; physical growth is faster and markedly early. The body reacts in unprecedented ways as it comes in contact with rapid changes in lifestyle, diet, and physical mobility. In effect, parents feel inadequate to deal with the associated changes, having no benchmark to compare their experiences with.

Decades of economic stability have influenced the majority of today's youth. The consumerist culture that today's children grow up in leaves them with no experience of a life without luxury – in transportation, in clothing, in food habits – and having less of essentials to live is beyond their imagination. Earlier systems of education – both formal and informal – are fast becoming redundant. The technological advances result in an influx of information and ideas on a 24-hour basis (Long & Hoghughi, 2004). As a result, parents today expect their children to start learning earlier. There is significant emphasis on productivity, and the ability to deliver. This emphasis can lead to less tolerance of being different, not being able to perform in the highest five percent of high functioning individuals in any chosen field. This pressure is present in academics, in extra-curricular activities, in even hobbies such as playing

a musical instrument, which should ideally be relaxing. Parents are not free from this pervasive pressure. In a dual income family, both parents are part of a workforce of similar life cycle stage parents. This leads to comparisons and unhealthy competition and discussion which can add on to the stress that the parents face. This is compounded by the tendency for the parents to see their children as extensions of themselves. Since there are only one to two kids per family, the parent's attention and expectations revolve around those two.

All these social factors lead to an overloading of attention, luxury and exposure for the children. The children today are given the stimulation and information at an adult level. In the absence or unacceptability of traditional means of corrective discipline in the society (Hoghughi, 2004), often, children are left with an overload of information that they are developmentally not able to process. This leads to significant incongruence for the children. In their search for answers to this conflict, they fall under various influences, some good, but many bad. Many of the concerns that today's children go through can be traced back to this incongruence.

The universality of parenting is such that there is constant comparison of what one has gone through as a child with what today's children are going through. We pride ourselves in the fact that children in 'our' times grew up spontaneously. Children used to grow up on their own and they were not 'parented' consciously. But today it is a concern, something to worry about; some parents asks themselves and others – “Am I doing the right thing?”, “Can I scold like this?”, “Is it ok to punish?” etc.

Parents Should Mature to Ensure That Children Grow

In any discussion on parenting concerns, it is important to start from the premise that very few parents want anything ill to befall on their children. In this process, we might be guided by what we have experienced as a child, what we have observed elders do – our parents or others, what we have received as tips and inputs from different sources, and perhaps through trial and error. Most of the strategies that are employed in parenting can be categorised under the core activities of care, control and development. Most of the problems start when we are blinded by what we believed to be the best in our actions and fail to reason it out with the child. At times, we are also so convinced that we are doing the right thing, that we turn a blind eye to the various indicators to the contrary. As is true for any relationship, parents cannot start 'parenting'

when the child reaches puberty or starts giving voice to his needs and concerns. It would ideally be a process, in which parents will make an effort to develop, so that the child develops. Research has shown that the parenting style and practices have a significant influence on the child's development (Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Many factors can aid the parents in their journey of becoming effective parents.

Become a learning parent. There are two types of parents- one type is teaching the parent, and the other type is the learning parent. Teaching parent behaves like the traditional teacher – giving instructions at every point, checking, controlling, evaluating, comparing, grading, always have an eye for mistakes. Authoritarian style of parenting best describes this group, who are “obedience- and status-oriented, and expect their orders to be obeyed without question” (Baumrind 1967).

The other category is ‘learning’ parent. These parents try to change and grow to facilitate change and growth in their children. Whatever happens to the children in their growth process will become a learning experience for them. In today's technological influx, when children become experts on the smartphone and internet, the parents will learn at least basics of it. When children are moody or angry too frequently, the parents will want to know more about the psychology of childhood/ adolescence and how to deal with it. When peer influence seems to be going wrong, they will explore ways to turn it to positive. They will do everything possible to ensure that they will not alienate themselves from children. They are a TEAM – *i.e.*, Together Each one Achieves More. Children's friends become family friends. As the parents make an effort to modify their life and priorities to suit the children's growth, the whole family becomes child-centred.

Learning parents take lessons from what is happening around. A boy by name Suraj (name changed) was doing grade X in Doha (Qatar) a few years ago. He was everyone's favorite, very close to parents, friends, and teachers. He failed in three subjects in a class test. He couldn't stand it, became depressed. What will all my well-wishers think about me? How will I face them? What is the meaning of life? Why should I live? He went to the internet to find out the meaning of life. There were people on the internet to tell him that life is meaningless. He left a note entitled “I am a failure” and left the world.

Recently in a school in Kerala, a student in higher secondary level tried to copy in the exam with the help of smart watch. He was caught. His mother was asked to come to school. The teacher in a very sober manner tried to convince the student and his mother about the seriousness of the matter. Even this was too insulting for the boy. The same evening he closed his life. Instances of this nature can teach us a lot, far more than what textbooks and classes can teach. As we are alert the events happening around us, the parents need to take concrete steps in teaching children to be assertive when situation warrants it. They also need to be sensitive enough the traumatising effect of failure in today's competitive society, and support the children to do better. Teaching the children to handle the crisis in everyday life with better equanimity is essential in this.

An eye to see what is there instead of looking for what is not there. Teaching parents are fault finding parents. Out of parental concerns, these teaching parents always point out mistakes. In fact what we should highlight is the good things, indicating (only indicating) the areas for improvement. When the positives grow, the negatives have to vacate. When the sun rises, the darkness has to leave the place. Parents have to learn to appreciate, looking for the strengths in the child and communicating them. If used properly, appreciation can work miracles and contribute to the growth of the child into a good human being.

Empowering interventions. Empowering interventions will improve self - esteem and self-confidence. Disempowering interventions make the children think that they are useless. They will break them down. The neutral type interventions are those who neither promote nor break them down. There are many ways in which parents can empower their children. A look of appreciation, a word of appreciation, a touch of appreciation – these are the bare minimum.

Reactive parents and responsive parents. Reactive parents easily get angry and explode. When the children answer back or disobey or go wrong, they lose their control and pay back in the same coin. Such is the provocation, so is the re-action. They forget that they cannot take back the words they use, which can have far reaching consequences.

Responsive parents are aware of themselves – who they are, the age of the children, the nature of provocation, consequences of overreaction, *etc.* in a given triggering situation. Instead of reacting, they will respond. This means they will create a decision space between the provocation

and their response. Victor Frankl (1959) remarked in his influential work on Logo Therapy, “Nobody can hurt me without my permission.” This is, in fact, the theme of his book “Man’s search for meaning.” A learning parent will say to himself, “Nobody can make me angry without my permission.”

Learning parents are assertive, never aggressive. Again, there are three types of parents based on the way they respond. One is the aggressive parents who are prone to attack physically or verbally. They will wound the feelings of the children. Another category is a submissive parent. For them everything is ok. Always passive, and giving children the impression that they can do anything and everything as they wish. There is no one to question them. Both these are unhealthy. What we need is an assertive parent, who will be gentle, but firm. They will not shout or beat, but they will talk from the adult ego state. This goes in line with the authoritative parenting style as described by Baumrind (1967).

Role modeling and exposure is far more educative than advice. If the parent wants their children to develop the habit of reading, it does not help to advise merely. It is far more effective to take them to a book exhibition where they will see hundreds of book lovers. The parent can ask the children to go around and select the books which they want to buy. The condition is set that they should read what they buy. The upper limit of investment in books (regarding rupees) also needs to be indicated at the beginning itself. Exposure visits to observatories, hospitals/ nursing homes, old age homes, rehabilitation centers, etc. can be educative and facilitate growth for both the parent and the child in many ways.

Be good listeners. Most effective parents are those who devote quality time for listening to children. Every day as the children come home from school or college, they will sit with them for a heart to heart conversation. Whatever happened in the school/ college, on the way, in the class, during the interval, a moment of thrill, moments of dullness, frustration everything will be shared.

Am I a good listener? Each parent has to ask himself/ herself

- a. A good listener will give undivided attention to children when they start sharing
- b. A good listener-parent will be non- judgemental
- c. She/he will listen with the heart rather than with the head or ears.

- d. She/he will not merely listen to what is shared but will make them share more, by asking questions, paraphrasing what has been shared, etc.

Be a role- model. Children are very sensitive to incongruence. When they are very young, they will innocently point it out. For example, the mother tells the child what vegetables are necessary for health (i.e. you should not be pure non-vegetarian.) If the mother is not taking vegetables, the child will point out the incongruence. Later on, the child learns not to comment depending on the mother's response. But that does not mean that they do not observe. We must walk the talk. If parents have a reading habit, children will easily pick it up. If punctuality, helpfulness, prayerfulness and such qualities are seen practiced at home, children will follow that path. A good leader is one who knows the way, shows the way and goes the way.

Fear not, God is with us. There is so much being written and spoken about parenting, that a parent might become nervous about parenting. One thing to be kept in mind is that parenting is a dynamic process and much depends on our openness to analyze ourselves and move forward. As the poet H. W. Longfellow wrote, what we need to do is

Act, act in the living present,
The heart within and God overhead.

Faith in God helps, Prayer has power. Be truthful and go ahead with sensitivity to how the children are shaping. Avoid proxy- parenting and in- absentia parenting. Leave everything else to God Almighty.

Conclusion

When we look at the reach and significance, parenting emerges as one of the most fundamental and universal concern of society. It also implies lifelong interaction. Parents do many things for and around their children, in different contexts, throughout their common life spans, aimed at promoting children's welfare. While it is difficult to find a formula that fits all in this process, certain guidelines can be developed and propagated to aid the parents and the children in this process. The care, control and development parenting activities that the parents do are to be age and culture appropriate as well as sensitive to the societal changes that occur from time to time.

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