

## Proactive Parenting August 2017

### Home Grown Citizens and Leaders

In the classic children's book, "Make Way for Ducklings", Mrs. Mallard, with the help of several Boston Policemen, leads all her ducklings safely to their new home in the Boston Garden. Not far away is the State House, the seat of government in Massachusetts. Any connection? Well, yes. New York Governor Mario Cuomo once wrote an article entitled; "The Greatest Invention of Man; One's Family. An institution that will outlast any government". Cuomo went on to write; "The family, I believe, is the most important institution that mankind has ever constructed. It is also the oldest, toughest, most resilient, and enduring". It is safe to say that our country is in need of responsible leadership at all levels of government, and Governor Cuomo's comments remind us that families, of all shapes and sizes, are the building blocks of society and incubators of its citizens and leaders. Parents and guardians, like Mrs. Mallard, grounded in loving relationships, 'lead' their children as they model values of; respect, integrity, responsibility, open mindedness, fairness, and compassion.

This is a tall order and parents cannot do this incredibly important job alone. They need responsible leaders at the national, state, and local levels focusing on policies, resources, and organizations that will support and ensure the physical and mental wellness of children of all ages and the parents who are raising them. In his new book; "Together is Better", Simon Sinek posits that; "Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge. Leadership is not about a rank or position to be attained. Leadership is a service to be given. With good leaders we feel like we work for each other, and great leaders inspire us to have confidence in what we can do." The thrust is to be strong yet humble, visionary yet grounded, and open to, rather than threatened by the richness and diversity of ideas and viewpoints." Hence the message that together is better. Working with others to reach common ground can lead to healthier and more productive environments in which to work and live. Connection and compromise are valued over contention and control. Trust is essential. So perhaps one way to begin to foster this kind of leadership is to nourish it in our own homes. If we think of families as microcosms of society, they are arguably an essential place to model and teach about rights and responsibilities. As parents go about making family decisions they can model ways to; make sure everyone's voice is heard and valued, discuss difficult issues in ways that may become heated but are not hurtful, encourage perspective taking, and teach the importance of weighing individual interests within the context of the whole family. From a young age, if a child trusts that his or her voice will be heard and basic needs met, then with age, s/he can learn when to put other's needs first and balance individual needs and wishes with those of others. This is at the core of what being a family is all about, that we care about one another, help each other, and are even willing to sacrifice for the common good.

So much of good leadership involves making good decisions, and the groundwork for teaching those skills starts at an early age. Children continually hear, see, and feel the tenor of adult's discussions, respectful and open minded, or otherwise. Children won't understand the deep implications of the positive or negative fabric of their parent's relationship and decision-making, but they feel its impact and will imitate what they see and hear. On some level they can tell if one voice is valued over another. Over time this can send powerful messages to both boys and girls about the value of their own voice and the part they can play as they begin to make their own decisions. As children become adolescents these experiences are their first and most enduring examples, hopefully, of positive and trusting relationships and decision-making.

Of course parents need to make most decisions when children are young, but even giving kids the chance to make small decisions, like what part of the bedtime routine to do first, sows the seeds of making good choices. As kids progress towards adolescence, giving them a voice in some decision making, in a way that builds with age and their ability to act responsibly, will teach valuable skills. Family discussions where kids get opportunities to respectfully; express opinions, share ideas, make plans, weigh consequences, hear all points of view, and contribute on whatever level is appropriate, can be empowering experiences for teenagers. Recently I have been fortunate to witness a leadership style up close that bears many parallels to the unmatched importance of leading a family. The style encompassed leading with courage and humility, and taking the risk to invite authentic collaboration. The result was an opening up of space for rich possibilities, space that invited lively discussion, and allowed for the leap of faith required to share honest thoughts and ideas. This space and process fostered genuine learning and growth, and empowered each person in the 'community'. In every family and on every level of our society all children need to see more examples of this kind of leadership, the kind that models that we are indeed "Better Together".

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