

Love and Latitude

“What if the Hokey Pokey really is what it’s all about” reads a sign that graced the walls of a school where I once worked. There is wisdom imbedded in these quirky lyrics; “You put your whole self in, take your whole self out, you put your whole self in and you shake it all about. You do the Hokey Pokey and you turn yourself around, and that’s what it’s all about.” For sure raising kids involves lots of ‘shaking ourselves about’, no clear road map, and doing the best we can every day. Some of the challenges parents face can be framed around the instinctual tendency we have to, ‘put our whole selves in’, with less of an understanding of how important it is to, at times, ‘take our whole selves out’. For very young children we are not often stepping all the way out, rather leaving just the enough space for growth. Space to; build self-help skills, work through challenges, make mistakes, learn to handle frustration, test mental and physical limits, problem solve, negotiate, imagine, create, and build a sense of independence and self-worth. We give the gift of ‘room to grow’ when we let go of our urge to continually fix, rescue, manage, control, solve every problem, and smooth out every bump for them. Getting pushed on the playground, teased on the bus, failing a test, learning to drive, and a million more examples, beckon us to teach kids how to stand up for themselves, how and when to ask for help, and how to practice, study, and function in ways that work for them. Sure we all want the best for our children, but raising them involves an incredibly difficult mixture of; unconditional love; giving to, doing for, teaching, guiding, counseling, and advocating for them, but also gradually allowing them the space and time to become independent, capable, and confident adults. If we do not nudge the baby bird out of the nest, there will be no chances for flying or soaring. Once again, it’s the hard and often messy work of nurturing both ‘roots and wings’.

The very first challenge young children and their parents often face as is the task of separation. Parents are all in, and the emotionally charged work of separation can be as difficult for adults as it is for children. Life is a series of transitions, some loom much larger than others. Whether it’s the first day of preschool or the first day of college, once you’ve done the work to find an excellent school that you believe is the best fit, then a leap of faith to step back empowers your child to work through the transition. In helping a child do this with minimal upset, especially a young one, parents have to be able to let go for a bit, and send the message through words and body language that their child is capable of managing, even thriving without them, and that they trust all will be well until their return. Without letting go, no space exists for individuation, and no distance apart, means missing the joys of a happy reunion. One of the great joys of having three adult children, is that after many years of doing the incredibly wondrous and difficult work of raising them with the support and the space to blossom and thrive, they now enjoy spending time with us. So when you, ‘turn yourself around’ and they are all grown up, you can reap the precious rewards of being together.

On a broader level, many cultural changes have led to parents and society at large to lean heavily in favor of protecting, indulging, marketing to, and overscheduling kids. We read over and over that skills like resilience, persistence, and independent thinking are needed for success in school and life, but we cannot give kids these skills, we must create conditions and environments that value the time and space that allows for them to flourish. It is in being able to do and think for ourselves, and negotiate and collaborate with others, that we build a strong sense of self and competence. If others are always doing for us, directing us, or managing our time, there is little room for developing these skills. Playgrounds

that have few possibilities for healthy risks, organized sports for children as young as three, children who have almost no time for unstructured play, increasing calls for passive and rote learning, in all these examples adults are supervising, entertaining, coaching, and telling children what to do, how to do it, rather than 'getting out of their way' and creating opportunities to be empowered by their own interests, curiosity, and sense of wonder. We can provide support and space. It's like when your child learns to ride a bike. You teach, model, encourage, and hold on, until they are ready for you to let go. If you don't let go, they'll never really learn to ride. Kahlil Gibran wisely wrote; "The teacher if, indeed wise, does not bid you enter the house of their wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind." Being all in, leading children to their own threshold, knowing when to step back, love and latitude, that's what it's all about.