

## Proactive Parenting : August 2015 Strength from Struggles

In a wonderful book by John Baucom PhD., "Simple Secrets of Parenting" (odd title cause not much is simple when it comes to parenting), the author lays out what he calls the ABC's of parenting. "A" is for Acceptance, and the often difficult but critical need to accept your child for who they are, not who you would like them to be. "B" is for the importance of your Behavior as parents. The message is that you are the first and most important role model for your child and how vital it is that you "walk the walk and not just talk the talk". Actions truly speak louder than words for children (of all ages). "C" is for Catching your child doing something right. It's so easy to see what they are doing wrong, and to continually focus on the negative. It often takes more work to notice the positives, but encouraging just one positive behavior will lead to another. Children want your attention above all else (including material things) and they will work to get your negative attention if they don't get any encouraging feedback.

I won't go through the whole alphabet, but one of my other favorites is "G" for; Give your child the opportunity to struggle. This one may seem counterintuitive, but it gets to the heart of one of the most difficult parts of parenting; keeping the balance between wanting to give to and do things for our children (as we "hold on to" them) and the need to encourage independence, let them struggle a bit, learn from their mistakes, and "let go". An essay, "Let the Butterfly Struggle", by Michael Josephson, paints an image that has helped me, as a parent, remember this valuable lesson. "There's a parable about a new mother (but could just as easily be a father) who discovered a butterfly struggling mightily to escape its cocoon through a tiny opening at the top. She became concerned when the creature seemed to give up after making no progress. Certainly the butterfly wouldn't make it out without help, so she enlarged the hole slightly. On its next try, the butterfly wriggled out easily. But the young mother's joy turned to horror when she saw its wings were shriveled and useless. Her well-intentioned intervention had interrupted a natural process. Forcing the butterfly to squeeze through a small hole is nature's way of assuring that blood from the creature's body is pushed up into the wings. By making it easier, she deprived the butterfly of strong wings. Childhood too is a sort of cocoon. If children are to emerge emotionally strong into adulthood, parents must allow, even encourage them to struggle, make mistakes, learn from them, and pay a price for bad judgement and conduct. Of course parents should be ready to protect their children from serious harm. But being overprotective can itself inflict damage. Adversity is not always an enemy. It's often some adversity that helps a young person develop wings strengthened by self-confidence and self-reliance."

A telling example of how far out of balance we have become in many areas of raising children, as parents, and as a society, is the movement to restore some

element of challenge and risk to playgrounds around the US. This movement started in Europe, but is picking up momentum here in the states. We have become so overly worried about safety that we have essentially legislated out most of the physically challenging features of many playgrounds, thus depriving children the ability to build their core muscles, develop gross motor skills, overcome fears, and push themselves to take healthy risks. No one wants unsafe playgrounds where children are regularly getting hurt but we have to continually strive to maintain a balance between overprotecting and indulging children vs. allowing them to take on challenges and build skills and confidence. So while there are still a few weeks of summer, this is a great time to get outside and let your child try some things that will take some work and grit to achieve. Maybe it's riding a two-wheeler, or climbing to the top of the jungle gym, or swimming across the pool. Stay close by and encourage, but give your child(ren) the space to try. They'll be building muscle strength and coordination but more importantly, emotional strength and character.

This principle applies to all aspects of life at home and at school, and while it can be very difficult to watch your child struggle, it is during the natural process of experiencing 'growing pains' that they actually learn to; dig deep, problem solve, rely on their own ingenuity and skills and intelligence, and above all where they learn to pick themselves up and move on to a place where they have a stronger sense of self. In the end we cannot "give" them a sense of self, they have to build it for themselves. Of course we should always be there to support and encourage them but it is so important to resist the urge to do for, and rescue them. It's the old "roots and wings", and they have to fall a few times before they can learn to fly! And we all need strong wings so we can soar!

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