

Proactive Parenting: November 2015

Parenting: It Takes a Village of Support

We have all heard the phrase; "It takes a village to raise a child". What we often don't stop to think about is that it also takes a village to 'raise' and support parents. Recently at school we held a parenting workshop, and perhaps more important than any specific strategy or parenting technique that was shared, I hope the parents left with the knowledge that they are not alone in dealing with the difficult challenges that come with raising children. In this "Facebook" age, where people put forward sanitized versions of themselves and/or their families, it can be enormously helpful to know that there are no perfect children, or parents, or families. Listening to parents so honestly share their challenges made me want to share some excerpts from the very first column I wrote, over two years ago, laying out some of my strongly held beliefs based on many years as an educator and parent.

I believe...in the power of family. I believe in the overwhelming joy and constant work of parenting. I believe nothing so important can be done without some support. I believe balance is essential for children; that we must help them discover and learn without pushing, give praise but also teach humility, teach them that with each right comes some responsibility, help them to be confident and compassionate, help them in ways that lead to independence, teach them that while they may be completely unique, they are no more "special" or valuable than any other human being, treat them with respect and expect respectful words and behavior in return, and give them roots and wings, or in other words... love them and let them go.

By now you have heard the cliché that parenting is one of the hardest jobs you will ever have. It requires a huge dose of humility and the knowledge that each child comes with their own personality and temperament that we must figure out and work with, but ultimately cannot change. It also requires constant effort, consistency, courage, empathy, a real sense of humor, a large dose of wonderment, and so much more. It takes all of who we are to raise these little people to adulthood, but there is perhaps no endeavor in which we learn more about ourselves than through the journey of raising a child. Our strengths and weaknesses are laid bare as we deal with the big and little issues that arise nearly every day and throughout every phase of our children's lives.

The enormity and complexity of the task brings me back to one of my strongly held beliefs, namely that we cannot and should not "go it alone". If you find that; far too many mealtimes, bedtimes, or excursions ends in a meltdown, or your child is unusually anxious about school or anything else, or they seem particularly challenged in an area of development (speech and language, social skills, etc.), then it is time to get some support. There are so many resources available to parents but often the biggest hurdle is having the courage to reach out and ask. It can be so helpful just to know that other parents are dealing with the same issues. Good places to start

include; your child's pediatrician, your child's teacher, and other professionals at their school (directors, counselors, psychologists, etc.). There are varied approaches to helping you reach a calmer day-to-day family life, but the basics are the same no matter what approach you choose. These basics start with unconditional love and reasonable limits, particularly a few reasonable rules based on your family's values and priorities. These rules should be geared towards your child's age and developmental level and focused on helping them learn to be safe, gentle, and kind. They must be enforced consistently, except when kids are really sick, etc., and above all you must; 'say what you mean and mean what you say'. Limits help children feel safe because they know what to expect. You are giving them a solid floor underneath them so they don't have to be constantly "testing" to discover the 'line in the sand'. Next, it is important to have routines that will anchor your child and your family during the everyday parts of family life, like mealtimes, and bedtime. You can build in choices that your child can actually make, like wearing blue socks or red socks, but the basics, like the fact that they need to wear socks, should be non-negotiable.

As you build the loving framework that comes with consistently enforced rules and routines, another rule of thumb is; 'less is more', meaning once a rule or routine has been learned and practiced, the fewer words the better. There should be no lengthy explanations or negotiations, simply restate expectations. Through all this it helps to remember that you are constantly modeling for your child, so as much as humanly possible (we all will get tired and lose our cool) it is critical to speak respectfully to your children and each other and to expect that your children will do the same. As parents we must; 'walk the walk, not just talk the talk'. We all have our ups and downs and the sooner we seek out support (through extended family, friends, professionals, etc.) the happier and more fulfilling our lives, and our children's lives will be.

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