

The Awesome Job of Parenting
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Being a parent is an awesome job. The problem is that people are not taught how to be parents. Unless we think about how we parent our children, we may unconsciously be a negative influence on their growth.

For centuries, the approach to parenting has been “doing what comes naturally.” This approach, of course, can result in bad or inadequate parenting. To be a good parent takes thought and patience. To be a great parent requires creativity and more.

The first characteristic of a great parent is a high-level of *self-awareness*. Self-awareness is understanding what motivates us to behave the way we do – it means having some knowledge of the thoughts, ideas, beliefs and desires that control and dictate our behavior. Understanding our own behavior can greatly assist us in appropriately parenting our children. Self-awareness is essential.

Being thoughtful people, who regularly reflect on and analyze our own behaviors, takes work and requires us to want to know what makes us “tick”. It means:

- being willing to be honest with ourselves about our strengths and weaknesses;
- looking at our own childhood to discover how we were parented;
- thinking honestly about the impact our behavior has on our child’s life; and
- realizing that we ARE our child’s first teacher.

One of the most important things a parent teaches his child is how to form and maintain relationships. Children learn from us, from the very first moments of their lives, how to relate to others and form loving relationships. Children learn how to relate to others from their interactions with us, their parents.

Observers of human behavior have evidence that life is, in many ways, an ongoing effort to recreate and/or redo the experiences of early childhood. Our adult relationships typically are re-creations of the relationship we had with our parents. The old saying, “Like father, like son”, is probably truer than fiction.

To realize that we teach our children how to relate to others is both exciting and terrifying. To know that our children will, in their own lives, repeat what they experienced with us, can be frightening, especially if we don’t feel good about our own relationships. Remember, you can’t teach your child how to do something that you don’t know how to do yourself.

Knowing the impact our relationship has on our child’s life should motivate us, rather than frighten us, to do all in our power to help them learn how to create and sustain good, loving relationships. People can learn how to have good relationships! Its within our ability.

For the sake of our children, therefore, we need to examine our own relationships. If they are not loving and fulfilling, we need to change them. In our modern world, the ability to establish and sustain healthy, loving relationships is a critical skill! If they are unhealthy and abusive, we need to change them. Remember, our children learn how to have good relationships from us. Good relationships don’t just happen by magic. They are created by thoughtful work.

True, loving relationships are tricky. They are, as some authors suggest, “works of art”. Like any work of art, a good relationship requires its creator to:

- be thoughtful and engaged, putting his whole heart and soul into the work;
- want to produce something beautiful;
- desire to communicate something of meaning and worth; and

- be patient and persevere in the work.

Loving relationships also take time to produce. They cannot be rushed. If they are not developed gradually and thoughtfully, they can become distorted by desire, attraction and unconscious motivation. While physical attraction sets the stage for the development of a relationship, it does not have the power to sustain a relationship over time. Attraction alone cannot make a relationship work. Long-term, loving and healthy relationships are only created when partners have shared values, dreams, and passions – when partners work to make their relationship healthy.

For example, a good relationship requires partners to be attuned to the natural pace of each other – it requires being in-synch with one another. Building a relationship is like learning how to ballroom dance. To be a good dancer, a person has to learn how to synchronize or match his moves with those of his partner – how to be in-synch with the other - as the dance goes on.

There are things a person can do to enhance the possibility of developing good and loving relationships. First, partners need to become aware of the unconscious forces that make them act as they do. Second, partners must know each other's beliefs about relationships. Third, partners must never “presume” they know what the other person in the relationship thinks. Finally, partners must become aware of the fact that we choose to be in a relationship with another.

Good relationships are the product of self-reflection and deep communication with our partner. Everyone knows, however, that real communication is not necessarily easy. To talk about our relationship with our partner requires a great deal of honesty and willingness to actively listen and genuinely accept the beliefs of others.

True communication with a partner should make us aware of the fact that one, common misconception about relationships is that people do not have control over with whom they fall in love. While it may seem romantic to think that we have no control over our feelings, the truth is that we are not at the mercy of our attractions, passions and desires. *We can choose* with whom we fall in love. This means, of course, that we must believe that *real love is a choice* and *physical attraction is not real love*.

Humans seem to frequently confuse physical attraction or lust for love. They are, in reality, not the same. Lust is not love. This truth, if understood, can make a real difference in what we teach our children about loving relationships. Great Parents teach their children that (1) relationships need to be nurtured, (2) life experiences have the ability to dull or distort relationships, and (3) humans can choose with whom to fall in love. Great parents teach their children that good relationships need partners who are willing to give and take a little for the sake of the maintaining and building their relationship. When parents have a healthy and loving relationship, the chance of their children developing similar relationships is greatly enhanced.

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