



More Thoughtful Parenting for the New Year

AS WE CELEBRATE THE BEGINNING OF a new year, it's common for parents to think about new year's resolutions. These often involve losing weight, saving more money or trying to be more patient. While striving not to overburden parents with more "to-do" resolutions, I do encourage parents to think about ways that they can engage in more thoughtful parenting.

Thoughtful parenting is a form of reflective parenting based on a child's individual temperament, the family's values and a parent's strengths and weakness. It is the opposite of parenting based on impulsive, reactive and one-size-fits-all decision making. Although we sometimes encounter situations that require quick, decisive action, thoughtful parenting entails reflecting upon those situations. If they occur again, a more thoughtful plan of action is available. In the spirit of more thoughtful parenting in the new year, I offer some thoughtful parenting resolutions that all moms and dads (including this writer!) can ponder as 2009 begins.

Don't shield your child from difficulty. As your child grows and becomes more involved in school, sports or other social groups, situations involving competition, personal success and difficult relationships become more prevalent. As they watch these situations play out, parents find it hard to refrain from shielding their children from failure, challenging situations and difficult people – be they teachers or friends. Yet the most valuable teaching moments occur when your child is *not* chosen for a certain team, does *not* receive a desired grade or struggles with a difficult task or person. Let's face it. Life, for the most part, involves very little daily winning, sunny bosses or permanent success. If that is all you permit your child to expe-

rience, imagine the difficult, disenchanting path he will walk as an adult.

One must instead learn to find happiness, satisfaction and value even in one's challenging work and relationships. When your child does not win a school competition or does not score in a ball game, this is the time to talk about true life success – trying one's best while learning and having some fun in the process. I often encourage parents to use examples of failure and discouragement from their own lives – particularly from their childhoods – to help their children learn to handle such challenges. Children are eager to hear about parents' lives and personal struggles. And they will learn their parents' ways of handling frustration.

Teach that happiness comes from relationships and helping others. One question that I have begun asking my own children every night is: Who did you help today? While they initially couldn't see how it was possible to help someone every day, they have slowly begun to see more opportunities for lending a hand. Did your child help her teacher when her books fell? Did he help a classmate struggling with the math lesson? Many studies show that people who engage in altruistic acts are happier. Learning that happiness which comes from helping others lasts longer than instant gratification or the momentary thrill of acquiring new "stuff" will serve your children well throughout their lives.

Evaluate your home life and parenting. Parents often say to me, "I just don't know how my family got to this point." The unpleasant truth is that family problems generally do not pop up. They are created and percolate over time. They often involve many causes, and frequently, we fail to see matters unraveling until there's a crisis. The reassuring news is that even the best parents fall victim to this human frailty.

Periodic parenting and family "evaluation checks" are therefore important. Have you noticed that your son has become mouthier? Perhaps your daughter seems to be crying every time you ask her something. Since these can be signs of underlying stress, it's important to evaluate if other issues are contributing to it. Has someone lost a job, increasing stress levels at home? Is one parent traveling more and the family is adjusting to the new schedule? Is one parent drinking excessively?

Alternatively, slight changes in child behaviors can be signs that we, as parents, are sliding in our consistency and discipline. The busy-ness of daily life is sometimes the greatest obstacle to thoughtful parenting. Suddenly we realize that, yes, we said he would have to go to timeout...but did he? Or we realize that the 3-year-old is crying for the third time in ten minutes and we just gave her what she wanted simply so we can finish dinner. While common, these situations demonstrate that we're sliding from our original parenting goals (e.g. I will not give in when she cries.). At these moments we need to stop and modify our parenting to prevent bigger discipline problems in the future.

All parents know that childrearing is exhilarating, challenging and sometimes tedious. Yet it's by far the most important and significant job they will ever have. Unfortunately, thoughtful parenting does not come with an operations manual. It's the challenging product of tireless and consistent reflection, evaluation and discussion.

And it's the most important resolution parents can make for 2009. ❖

Editor's note: Aranda is a licensed clinical psychologist (#PY5983) who specializes in educational testing and child and adolescent therapy. More information about her can be found at www.helpingtampafamilies.com.

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