



Every Child Has a Mind of His Own

In a letter to the editor of the La Crosse (Wisconsin) Tribune, psychologist Afton Koball and two colleagues raise objections to a recent column in which I asserted that one can be parented badly and still parent well. It comes down to one's perspective, and is, therefore, a matter of choice. Said another way, parenting is influential but not deterministic.

Koball contends that I am ignoring research linking "high levels of toxic stress in childhood to chronic health conditions and even a reduced lifespan." Noted, but that was not the subject of the column in question. Furthermore, I contend that even someone who experienced an adverse childhood and suffers compromised health as a result can still be a very good parent.

Furthermore, studies report norms, not individual outcomes. Undoubtedly, there were subjects in the study Koball cites who suffered adverse childhoods but who as adults did not suffer chronic health issues. Some of these individuals may even have had abnormally healthy adulthoods. The "link" in question does not, by a long shot, refer to a one-to-one correspondence. Said otherwise, what is "toxic" stress to some is not to others. The question becomes: How is it that some abused children fare rather well as adults, even as parents?

The list of high-functioning individuals who experienced significant hardship, even abuse, as children is quite long. It includes Oprah, Howard Schultz of Starbucks, Louis Armstrong, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Many such individuals attribute their success as adults, at least in part, to the adversity they experienced as kids.

Numerous studies corroborate my contention that it is not abuse or adversity itself that disposes one to a negative outcome, but rather the individual's mental response to the abuse or adversity. All of these studies - including the ongoing Kauai Longitudinal Study begun in 1955 and a 2010 study done at the University of Oxford - cite folks who did well despite bad childhoods.

Koball ends his letter by saying that people who have experienced adverse childhoods need counseling. That is psychology's central narrative, but speaking of studies, no consistent body of research compels the conclusion that any form of mental health counseling/therapy can be relied upon to produce positive results. In fact, a significant percentage of consumers report that mental health counseling was a

negative experience, that it made matters worse.

Writing in the Wall Street Journal (November 10, 2017), clinical psychologist Meg Jay shares the story of two brothers raised in a home in which the father was a violent alcoholic. One brother is a drinker and an abuser, while the other is abstinent and a model parent. When asked how they came to be who they were, both brothers gave the same answer: "Given who my father was, how could I not?"

The anecdote illustrates my point: Whether flight or fight, an individual's response to adversity is clearly a matter of choice. As the old parenting proverb has it, every child has a mind of his own.

Celebrate Son's Chosen Education, Career Path

Q: Our 18-year-old son made only slightly better than average grades in high school and finished in the top half of his graduating class. He could have done better, but has a history of underachievement which we explain as boredom. He managed to get into a second-tier state college but has decided after one semester (and as one might expect, mediocre grades) that he doesn't want to go back. In fact, he's telling us that he doesn't want to go to college at all. Instead, he wants to become a diesel mechanic. Needless to say, we're very disappointed, but also conflicted. His father is in favor of this new plan, but I'm inclined to tell him that we'll pay for college only and that he is going to have to figure out how to pay for anything else. What are your thoughts on this?

A: I don't quite understand why you preface your disappointment with "needless to say." Disappointment at the prospect of having a son who is earning a decent living by fixing diesel engines is not the inescapable or default response. And as for telling him that he's going to have to pay for anything other than college himself, well, I suspect you may be letting pride get in the way of clear thinking. In my estimation, you should be celebrating.

For one thing, if you do decide to support his plan - which I encourage - you'll be saving yourselves a significant amount of money. Second, given your son's academic history, the strong possibility exists that he might graduate from college with a degree that would be difficult to market. For that very reason, lots of young people with college degrees are working at jobs that require no more than a high school education. Third, there's nothing shameful about being a mechanic, and whereas gasoline engines may not be the automotive standard in ten years, diesels are going to be around for quite some time.

All in all, I think your son has made a good decision. Let's face it, college is not for everyone - a fact that seems to escape many parents and high school counselors. The world is always going to need plumbers, electricians, mechanics, carpenters, brick-masons, tailors, and so on. When I was in high school, counselors had no problem telling certain kids they weren't college material and helping them explore and find career paths that didn't involve lots of academics. I take it that it's politically incorrect to tell that to a high school student today, which goes a long way toward explaining (a) the dramatic rise in college tuitions, (b) the number of young people who graduate college with degrees that are virtually useless, and (c) the ubiquitous college-loan debt and debt-default problem.

Your question intrigued me, so I did some looking into the mechanics, pun intended, of becoming a diesel mechanic. There seem to be three tracks that all lead to that end. Many community colleges offer associate degrees in diesel mechanics, after which further specialized education is usually needed. Then there are technical institutes that do nothing but train diesel mechanics. Finally, there's the military, where a young person can acquire at least the fundamentals of diesel engines and be paid for doing so!

I realize that you'd rather tell people that your son is a pre-med major, but it sounds to me like he's given this a good amount of thought. What remains is deciding exactly how he's going to obtain the necessary education and training. Please, support him. And take the money you're going to be saving over the next four years or so and see the world. Like I said, celebrate!

Nip Toddler Misbehavior in the Bud

Q: My parents recently told me that my husband and I are letting our toddler run our family and that it's becoming increasingly uncomfortable for them to visit or have us visit with them - they live 10 miles away - because of her misbehavior. Mind you, she is only 28 months old. They told me, for example, that she should be toilet trained already. Her pediatrician, however, told us to wait until she was closer to three. In addition, she throws frequent tantrums and often refuses to do what we tell her to do. That's normal for this age, right? Anyway, my parents told me that I ought to begin reading your column and books so I thought I'd just write you and get your opinion on all this. By the way, my parents had me when they were older and are sort of stuck in the old ways of doing things.

A: Saying that your daughter is ONLY 28 months old may go a long way toward explaining this situation. Your parents, being "stuck in the old ways," understand that the most advantageous time to deal with any given misbehavior on the part of a toddler is when it first appears - by nipping it in the bud, so to speak. This very active approach to discipline recognized that misbehavior snowballs roll downhill very rapidly (and yes, I realize I'm mixing my metaphors).

For better or worse, major disciplinary precedents are set during the third year of life (24 to 36 months). These precedents determine, to significant degree, whether the child's discipline will be relatively easy or extremely difficult from that point on. I'm going to guess that your parents are concerned that by excusing your daughter's behavior on the basis of her age that you are creating a significant disciplinary "debt" that will create ever more stress down the road for all concerned.

I'm sure you want nothing more than for your daughter to be a happy child. Consider, then, that obedient, well-behaved children are much, much happier than disobedient, ill-behaved children. Common sense confirms that and so does the best research into parenting outcomes. I urge you to get a move on before your daughter becomes a full-blown family tyrant.

First, create a "tantrum place" - a safe and relatively isolated place where you put your daughter as soon as a tantrum begins. A half-bath works well. When screaming commences, in she goes until the screaming stops.

Time-out does not generally work well with older children or major discipline problems, but it can be very useful with a toddler. The child's room, assuming it is not a self-contained entertainment complex, will do. Five or ten minutes in relative confinement for disobedience sends a powerful message to a child this age. Use a timer set outside her door to let her know when her time of repentance is up.

Your parents are also correct concerning toilet training. Just as it is easier to house-train a 4-month-old puppy than it is a one-year-old dog, it is easier to train an 18-month-old than a 3-year-old. Do not wait a day longer to begin teaching your daughter the inestimable benefits of clean underwear.

My book, Making the "Terrible Twos" Terrific, is a treasure-trove (if I do say so myself) of helpful tips on discipline with toddlers. I'm sure your local library, if they don't have a copy in stock, can obtain one for you. The same goes for Toilet Training Without Tantrums, which has saved many a parent lots of money they would have otherwise spent on disposable diapers.

Concerning the "old" ways of raising children, which we abandoned beginning in the late 1960s and began listening to mental health professionals tell us how to "parent," it is now plain as day that professional advice, based on psychological theory, has resulted in a parenting catastrophe. Over the past fifty years, for example, the mental health of America's children has been in free fall, with no end in sight.

The Book of Ecclesiastes, one of the so-called "wisdom" books of Jewish scripture, says "there is nothing new under the sun." Concerning children especially, that is spot on.

Respect Is Claimed, Not Owed by a Father

Is a father owed respect from his children? Actually, the question, from a father, was rhetorical: Isn't a father owed his children's respect? The dad in question maintains that because he loves his children unconditionally, provides their standard of living (he is the sole breadwinner), and has made many sacrifices - financially and otherwise - on their behalf that he is owed their respect. By the way, his children are six, ten, and fourteen, and the disrespect at issue - sass, ignoring, demands, emotional outbursts, and the nebulous but widespread "bad attitude" - is emanating primarily from the older two but the six-year-old is beginning to follow her siblings' footsteps.

No, a father is not owed respect from his children. Respect is not an entitlement. It is not really earned, either. It is claimed. An individual who occupies a leadership position - including the leadership of children - claims the respect of those he leads by consistently acting in a morally, ethically, and authoritatively competent fashion. A leader who displays those qualities will be respected. That is true of leadership wherever it is found - in the business world, classroom, military, church, and family.

Likewise, a leader who does not consistently act in a competent fashion may obtain obedience, however reluctantly, from the people he or she leads, but will not obtain their respect. The problem here, even when the people in question are children, is the leader, not the led (albeit the led are certainly behaving problematically). The fact is, leadership positions are sometimes occupied by individuals who are not effective leaders.

Parents fail to claim their children's respect by yelling, giving into emotional outbursts, and trying to be liked (that's the short list). Today's parents are especially guilty of the latter. Today's parents, by and large, do not seem to understand that proper parenting is an exercise in leadership. They seem to think that proper parenting is largely a matter of striving for and maintaining a wonderful relationship with one's kids.

As anyone who understands the mechanics of proper leadership will attest, attempting to have wonderful relationships with one's presumed followers - no matter the context - renders effective leadership impossible. In parenting, one of the signs of a parent who is prioritizing relationship - a parent who wants to be liked, in other words - is children who lack respect for said parent. They often act toward the parent as if he is a peer because unbeknownst to him, that is what he is trying to be. The problem is his doing, but because the most overt misbehavior is coming from the kids, the parent thinks the kids are the problem. That's an example of judging the book by the cover. It's a mistake that leads to ramping up discipline, a response that not only fails but also usually makes the problem worse. Ironically, whereas striving for relationship undermines leadership, proper leadership eventually leads to proper relationship.

When a child's disrespect is the issue, the person whose behavior needs to change is the parent (more often than not). The good news is that children possess an almost built-in respect-and-obedience-response to adults who act competently. Another way of saying

the same thing: Proper child behavior is not obtained by using proper consequences (reward and punishment); it is obtained by delivering proper leadership. With any child, consequences will have to be occasionally used, but consequences that are not backed by competent leadership will fail.

The dad in question then asked, "But shouldn't respect, like love, be unconditional?"

Again, no. The two are different issues. Love that isn't unconditional isn't love. It's manipulation. But respect that isn't unconditional is still respect.

I suddenly feel an Aretha Franklin flashback coming on.

Children Need Unconditional Love and Unequivocal Authority, Not Respect

I was fresh out of grad school when psychologists and other mental health types began recommending that when speaking to a child, an adult should squat down to eye level with said child. Supposedly, this submissive posture is a means of demonstrating respect for the child while, at the same time, avoiding any implication that the child must pay attention and obey because the adult is bigger.

Was this recommendation based on evidence that when adults spoke to children from an upright position, said children felt disrespected, humiliated, and intimidated? Of course not! Has said research since been done? Of course not! As is typical of professional parenting advice, this recommendation was snatched out of thin air. Do mental health types continue to recommend the equal-opportunity squat? Of course!

Around this same time, the most influential parenting pundits in the mental health professions were promoting the democratic family - a family in which there is no effective distinction between parents and children, no clear source of authority. In this utopian family, children are given an equal voice when it comes to family decisions (restaurants, vacations, thermostat settings, and so on), and disagreement between parent and child is negotiated until a win-win outcome is achieved. Oh grand! The only problem with this postmodern scheme, which no one seemed to notice, is that the person who determines when a win-win outcome is achieved is the child. If parents end the discussion, the outcome is not democratic.

The democratic family hasn't quite worked out. You may have noticed that in many families where parents do the equal-opportunity squat and negotiate with children, the result is tyranny. Need I identify the tyrant? In said families, the parents are afraid of upsetting the tyrants because they want the tyrants to like them. One can readily

identify parents who value their children's approval; to wit, they do not tell their children to do anything. They merely suggest, as evidenced by the fact that every "instruction" ends with the question, "Okay?"

Circling back to the supposed need for parents to respect their children, the begging question becomes, "What proof exists of a child's need for adult respect?" The answer: Not a shred. Sixty years ago, before parents began listening to mental health types tell them how to properly raise children, parents did not claim to respect their children, yet child mental health was far, far better than it is today. Children need unconditional love and unequivocal authority. They do not need, nor have they earned, respect. This is a new idea, and as is the case with most of the new ideas concerning children that have emanated from the mental health professional community over the past fifty years, this new idea is yet another wrong and worthless idea.

But ideas, right and wrong, have consequences. In the case of wrong and worthless childrearing ideas, the consequence is a plethora of parents who are confused, anxious, stressed, and guilt-ridden. They squat, negotiate, make only suggestions that end in "Okay?" and try their best to demonstrate their respect for their children.

Unfortunately, their children do not return the courtesy.

John Rosemond
The Leadership Parenting Institute
New Bern, NC
www.rosemond.com

Do you agree that there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to parenting?