

7 Principles for Getting Back to the Basics of Parenting

In my practice as a family therapist, I'm often asked for the "right answer" to parenting questions such as should children start kindergarten later so that they are at the top of their class, or is worthwhile sending children to private school, or should we move to a better school district so children will be at an advantage for getting into a top college, be successful, etc.

These are not questions about good parenting practices, but are related to values about being "the best" that permeate today's culture. In this culture of having it all, we define ourselves by what we have, and tend to compare ourselves to others' accomplishments and possessions. These beliefs leave many parents feeling guilty that they are not giving their children enough of an advantage, or the things that they "need" and that they are missing the boat regarding what children really need from their parents. Below are 7 principles that will help us get back to the basics of raising children who have internalized their human worth and value. These principles place the focus on social and emotional connectedness to community, rather than on achievements and material possessions, as conditions for character and worth.

- 1) **What do you value?** Take some time alone and as a marital couple/parenting unit and ask yourself the tough questions:
 - a) "What do we value?"
 - b) "What meaning do we make of our lives?"
 - c) "What do we want our children to value as adults?"
 - d) "What personality characteristics do we want our children to possess as an adult?"
 - e) "How do we translate these beliefs/goals into everyday living/parenting?"

Every challenging parenting decision you make, take out your list and question whether your decision is consistent with your values and goals for your children. Ask yourself, if I do _____, what message am I sending my child?

- 2) **Community Begins at Home.** Have regular family meetings to discuss and plan important aspects related to family living. Who is responsible for household chores? Money for chores sends children the message that they are entitled to get something for their contribution to the family, not an internalized sense of cooperation and contribution. Plan regularly scheduled family fun time. Allow for time to resolve difficulties family members may be experiencing. Anchor family decisions back to the values defined above and use these values to help children with decision-making.
- 3) **Natural and Logical Consequences.** Utilize these so that children learn the relatedness of their behavior to consequences in their social every day world. This will allow them to internalize the rules of life rather than react to rules because an authority figure is evaluating their behavior. Remember that the word discipline means to teach/lead not bribe and reward. Yelling and spanking model power and control in relationships. Bribing and giving children things as contingencies for positive behavior teaches children to behave if they're given something. Consistent and firm teaching leads to socially and emotionally healthy people.

- 4) **Actions Speak Louder than Words (or Practice What You Preach).** Children do what you do, not what you say. Model in your every day life the values and characteristics you listed as important for your family and your child to develop. If you model respect, you will get respect. If you model power (through yelling, threatening, and bribing) you will promote power struggles with your children.
- 5) **Don't Focus on Keeping Up with the Jones's.** Like the saying goes, "If everyone else jumped in a lake, would you?" Base your parenting decisions on your values, not as a means to measure yourself or your children against others. This will teach your children that decisions are based upon internalized convictions not as a way for them to feel better about themselves by having or doing what others' do.
- 6) **Effort versus Achievement:** Children are encouraged, demonstrate greater perseverance, choose more challenging tasks, and discover internalized accomplishment when parents/teachers focus on effort (You worked really hard in math, I'm proud of you) versus achievement (You received an A, I'm proud of you or You received an A, here is 10 dollars).
- 7) **Model the importance of relationships and emotions.** Limit the amount of passive play a child experiences through television and video games and focus on relationship with family and friends. Allow your children to express emotion, help them label emotion and learn to cope with emotion.