

Are Parents Doing it Right?

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In the eyes of parents, teachers are the “other parents” of their children. Therefore, parents have (or should have) a legitimate concern about what teachers do with their children. Will the teachers be an influence for “good or bad”? Will they help the children to learn? Will the children like the teachers? Will the teachers help them to develop acceptable levels of discipline and behaviour?

Conversely, in the eyes of teachers, parents are the “other teachers” of students. So teachers have a concern, also legitimate, about what parents do with students when they return home from school. What kind of home environment does the student have? Will parents ensure that students do their homework? Will parents be critical of teachers’ disciplinary methods? Will parents expect too much of teachers, especially with respect to correcting problem behaviours that students develop at home?

Parents suffer if the teacher-student relationship is bad; teachers suffer if the parent-child relationship is bad. Each has a stake in the relationship that the child has with the other party. Despite this mutual interest in each other’s behaviour, parents and teachers seldom have a very close or significant relationship with each other. They don’t see each other very often and when they do, their time together is usually extremely limited. Because of this unfortunate situation, one can understand why parents have traditionally been very ineffective in influencing teachers to change and, similarly, teachers have been equally impotent in trying to modify parents’ behaviour.

In reality, parents and teachers are rather independent and separate agents; each having an important relationship with the child, but neither enjoying a close relationship with each other. This scenario results in a great deal of miscommunication between both parties, and this usually works to the detriment of effective learning for children. But although many educational experts would agree that this triangular relationship among teachers, parents, and students is an integral ingredient in the all-round growth and development of children, it is not always easy to foster a healthy relationship.

Parents are the first teachers of their children. When it is considered that during the first five years of life, a child is a formidable learning machine with a brain that is well adapted to learning and experimenting, the importance of the quality of parental teaching becomes clear. Parents are not merely the first teachers but, by far, the most important ones, and the parent-as-teacher role often lasts until the child becomes an adult and sometimes beyond. Many parents are extremely effective teachers when their children are infants. Their “area of acceptance” is very broad, and they seldom have unrealistic expectations so that most of their children’s behaviour is acceptable to them. If a child cannot grasp a rattle, that child is not condemned, punished, or labelled a “psychomotor underachiever.” Most parents would simply try again the next day.

Most parents also extend a great deal of freedom to their infants with respect to their readiness for learning, the rate at which they learn, and what is actually learnt. The

infant's capacity to learn is accepted and trusted. Seldom are there serious questions in the parents' mind about their infants' innate learning potential. Unsurprisingly, there is complete vindication of the trust and acceptance displayed by parents as evidenced by how much the infants learn, almost completely on their own, for example, how to roll over and how to pick up an object.

There is something very beautiful about parents as teachers when their children are mere babies. It is as if they are inherently equipped to be effective teachers of very young children. Professional teachers could learn a lot from such parents!

As infants begin to grow older, however, something appears to happen to parents. They begin to lose their teaching effectiveness. They start to "train" their children. They begin to "teach lessons." They push too hard. They use rewards and punishments. They lecture and evaluate. They compare their children with other children. They worry and fret. They begin to blame their children for not living up to the parents' expectations, and they begin to use their power and authority in a negative manner. This is a common occurrence in many homes where too many parents try to "teach" even before their child is ready. In so doing, they usually adopt ineffective approaches that often meet with negativity and, sometimes, resentment.

It is essential for parents to realise that there comes a time when their role as teacher is not as significant as the role of teachers at school, and that they can be more instrumental in fostering and facilitating their children's learning if they promote the important roles of the teacher in the minds of the children. Very often, students are not sensitised to their own roles and obligations in terms of respect, discipline, and courtesy towards teachers because parents do not reinforce this attitude. This is a major cause of indiscipline and deviant behaviour in many school environments.

Parents need to become teacher facilitators who work in meaningful ways behind the scenes to equip their children with the attitudes and understandings that will make them good students at school and good children at home. Children should be sensitised not only to the important roles of teachers but also to their own roles in the classroom and in the school. It is only when parents realise that this is a significant aspect of their parental responsibility that are able to make an effective contribution to the growth and development of their children, academically and otherwise. Only then will we be sure that our parents are doing it right!

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