

Parent to Parent

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As a parent with children who are on the verge of becoming teenagers, I am constantly questioning the way I do things: what I say, how I say it, how I act and, more importantly, what messages these convey to my children. It has been said time and time again that parenting is not an easy job; in fact it is one that requires time, energy, effort, skill and, above all, persistence. Recently, I completed one of those online questionnaires [Are you a pushover parent?] that survey the kind of parent you are. The results indicated that I am one of those parents who “like to walk the middle road,” and that while this may not necessarily be a bad thing that it can easily get me into some “sticky parenting situations.”

Generally, I am not one of those who go by what is printed in the books or by what the “professionals in the field” say when it comes to matters of emotions, feelings, and family bonds, because I feel that it is almost impossible to place a quantitative measure on issues of the heart and soul. However, I have to admit that the detailed results of the online survey faithfully reflected the picture I have of myself. Parents will know that the possibilities of situations, the varieties of arguments, and the diversity of behaviours that occur are infinite. Just when you think you’ve gotten to that place where you are seeing things from the perspective of your child/children, the situation suddenly swings and takes on a whole new dimension.

Often, it is not easy for parents to step back and objectively assess the situation. While many who claim to be “good parents” may suggest that this is what they try to do, in reality that is as far as we all can get—trying to assess in an unbiased, neutral, and reasonable manner. I have always believed that with parenthood comes a measure of what I call “stupidity”—caring parents always want to provide everything for their children, as soon as possible, as often as possible, despite the cost [financial or otherwise] sometimes, especially when children, in their creative and manipulative ways, present their cases with the most sorry and helpless expressions, as they often do. We may not wish to admit it, but our children know us very well—after all they have been observing us since they were born—they know **what** works, they know **when** it works, they know **how** to ask, and they know if to ask mommy or daddy and/or **who** to ask first.

Given that some degree of “stupidity” will remain with parents, despite all “strict” and “tough love” attempts to nullify it, my experience has been that it is important for parents to realise that their children are simply growing up and not becoming alien life forms. During this phase, it is very important to stay connected to them while at the same time sending them clear messages about what is acceptable and

what is not, what is allowed and what is not and, most importantly, **WHY** is something acceptable and/or allowed over something else.

While it is easier said than done, active, careful listening is an excellent starting point, especially given the fact that as children grow up they tend to say less (to parents) as they begin to assert their independence. It is therefore very easy for active listening to become a non-issue, simply because there is less for parents to listen to. The onus is therefore on parents to create unthreatening situations to encourage conversations with their children. The idea of respect is also fundamental in any effort to bridge the generation gap, and while this is not often spoken about across generations, I believe that parents ought to treat their children with the same kind of respect they expect their children to reciprocate. This not only works to foster trust between parents and children but also helps to build their character.

“Do as I say and not as I do” doesn’t really work, simply because parents are models for their children and, like it or not, modelling is the best way to promote learning and very often children emulate the behaviours of their parents. On the other hand, “because I said so” frequently works, especially when enforcing discipline, as younger children know that you are the parent/s and therefore have the final say, if for no other reason than that parents are required to provide the support and resources they need. However, in order to preserve the deep trust that children place in their parents to make the best decisions for them, it is important for parents to explain their reasoning whenever possible.

The point therefore is that although the whole business of parenting is not an easy undertaking, it is not a hopeless one—patience, understanding, and foresight often go a long way.

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