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Why It Is Hard to Give Your Child Responsibility

We have just discussed what is known in professional circles as “giving up control.” I am well aware that even if you are one of the parents who is relieved by the idea of taking less responsibility for your teenager’s actions and even if you are convinced that giving up control will work for you and improve your relationship with your teenager, it might still be difficult for you to do it. I would like to discuss the reasons why letting go of responsibility and giving it over to your child may be hard for you.

In short, the real reason you are having difficulty letting go of responsibility is because you want to be a good parent. The problem is that many people have several mistaken ideas of what it means to be a good parent.

What Is a “Good Parent”?

Let’s try a little exercise. Go to Chapter 5 in your workbook.

Here are a number of statements. Put an 'X' in front of those statements that reflect your idea of what the job of a good parent is:

- It is my job as a parent to see that my child turns out honest and considerate of others.
- It is my job as a parent to see that my child has a good self image.
- It is my job as a parent to see that my child uses his potential.
- It is my job as a parent to see that my child is willing and able to work for a living.
- It is my job as a parent to see that my child behaves well in public.
- It is my job as a parent to see that my child goes to school.
- It is my job as a parent to see that my child eats properly.
- It is my job as a parent to guide my child and it is his job to follow my directions.
- It is my job as a parent to care for my child.
- It is my job as a parent to bail my kid out when he gets in trouble.
- I am obligated to sacrifice for my child, because his needs are more important than mine.
- It is my job as a parent to insure my child’s safety, be alert for dangerous situations that he may encounter and protect him from them.
- It is my job as a parent to protect my child from suffering.
- It is my job as a parent to protect my child from making mistakes and failures.

So how many of these ideas reflect your idea of what your role as a parent is?

First of all, if you believe any of these ideas truly reflect your role as a parent, then this indicates that you really are a truly loving and concerned parent. However, all of these ideas are wrong. More than that, if you feel these ideas describe your role as a parent, **this** could be why you are having such difficulty with your teenager.

Now if you hold that these statements describe your role as a parent, I am sure that what I am going to say will seem like another radical idea to you, but let me explain why I feel these parenting ideas are incorrect, counterproductive and in many cases destructive.

How This Definition of a “Good Parent” Hurts Your Child

What is wrong with these statements? I mean, besides the fact that they are not working for you. The main problem with these beliefs is that they are based upon somewhat condescending and damaging assumptions about what your child is and what you are.

Look at these statements again carefully. They define your child as someone who is helpless and dependant upon your constant direction and support to run his life. There is no indication in these ideas that your child is competent or capable of doing anything. In fact, if you think about it, holding these ideas about your role as a parent is very destructive to your child. This approach to parenting treats your child as a helpless and dependent entity incapable of caring for himself on any level. When you adopt ideas such as these as a description of your role as a parent, you are in essence saying to your child that he is incapable of making good decisions, is helpless and needs another person to guide and run his life. A child that internalizes this as a true picture of himself will have a lot of difficulty making good decisions and living as an independent well functioning adult. I think much of what we see in our society today is a reflection of this.

Many people today need to be led and told what to do, because many of these individuals were never really trained by their parents to make meaningful choices. Raised to be dependent upon their parents for their needs and decisions, they never developed the full decision making abilities needed to function as independent adults. As a result, they are looking to be led and told what to do. I once heard it put much more succinctly:

“Most people today walk around with their umbilical cord in their hand, looking for some place to plug it in.”

What causes this phenomenon? Why are so many adults in need of direction and having difficulty making the significant necessary decisions to govern their own lives? The reason is because they were never given the tools to learn how to make these decisions when they were growing up. They were never given over responsibility to run their own lives in a gradual fashion, so that they could develop these tools. They just leave home, from a place where they had almost no responsibility, and are released into a world where they now have complete responsibility for their lives. But they have never learned how to act responsibly. This is why defining your job as a parent as someone who is completely responsible for what your child does and decides to do is so destructive for your child.

How This Definition of a “Good Parent” Hurts You

But also what do these statements say about you? Well, in addition to these parenting descriptions being bad for your child, they are also destructive for you.

This description of the “good parent” defines you as a person that doesn’t really matter for yourself. Rather your identity and self worth is tied to how good a parent you are, which in turn, is measured by your child’s behavior. So this description ties your success as a parent and as a person to how well your child performs. They define your child’s performance by how well he or she fits in with your expectations. But in reality neither of these things is true.

More than that, this description of the “good parent” places you in a role that it is impossible for you to fulfill. These ideas define you as the constant protector and overseer of another human being. The main idea these statements express is that you are good as long as you are a good parent, and a good parent controls their children. Yet everything your teenager is doing is telling you that you cannot control your child. This places you in a situation where you can only fail. These statements define your worth by how well you control a situation which is totally out of your control. If you are feeling trapped, frustrated and a failure as a parent, this is why. You may be expecting yourself as a parent to do what is completely out of your control and then you feel guilty or worthless for not being able to do the impossible.

How This Definition Came About

If this description of the good parent is so destructive and is causing such problems for so many families, how did we come about having these ideas? Well, the truth is for a younger child this description of the good parent is not so far off.

We need to control our young child’s activities for our child’s own good. The problem begins when your child starts to mature, but your parenting style does not change to fit your child’s new needs. Then one of two things may happen; your child may accept your authority and submit to your direction or your child may rebel against submitting to you. Almost all parents would prefer the first option. However, given the ramifications, the second child, the one who rebels, is probably the one who is better off and more likely to be a success in the world. The child who blindly complies with his parents wishes will often be too dependant on his parents and will enter adulthood unprepared, needing direction from others.

Just to summarize, if you accept your definition of a good parent as someone who directs and controls his teenager and is responsible for his child’s behavior, then you are setting yourself up for a number of problems.

This model of parenting robs both you and your child of self esteem. Since you cannot possibly succeed, you automatically will be labeling yourself as "a bad parent" and in the end you will feel frustrated, trapped and feel like a failure. You are communicating to your child that he is not able to make decisions, is helpless and needs you to take care him. You are setting the stage for your teenager to rebel or worse, to be dependent at an age where, with your guidance and direction, he should learn to be independent. In addition, when you feel it is your responsibility to control what your child does, you are taking away from your child responsibility for his actions. That means your child can do anything he wants, good or bad, and he will not feel he has to face what comes out of it. You are the one in charge. That means you will be dealing with the consequences of his actions and not him. This is very bad for both of you.

So, if you feel that it is your job to try and control your child's life, and that is what makes you a good parent, your teenager may be fighting with you constantly to gain his own independence. This is probably making your life and your child's life miserable. But worse, if you are succeeding and you are able to control your child's life, you are setting him up to be a failure as an adult. So if your child is making your life hell right now, this should be some consolation to you. It means that at least on some level his struggle for independence, which is normal at this age, is going in the right direction.

A New View of Your Role as a Parent

I would like to propose to you a new definition of a "good parent" that I think would be wise for you to adopt:

"It is my job as a parent to value my teenager's unique nature and help him or her develop its expression."

Now we have discussed what the wrong view of your job as a parent is, a view that is shared by so many well meaning parents, I would like to propose a different approach to parenting. Again, what I am about to say may seem quite radical, but if you think about it for a while I expect it will make sense to you. So let's begin.

A baby needs a certain level of care and direction in order to survive. You must dress and feed your baby and take care of all his physical needs. As the baby grows, he is slowly weaned off of the need for constant custodial care. By the time your child is a teenager he is able to take care of all his physical needs by himself. But I am sure you realize that being a parent requires more than caring for your child's physical and custodial needs. You must also care for his or her emotional needs. This emotional nurturing is just as necessary for your child's health and survival as the physical care you give. In fact, babies that don't receive emotional warmth fail to grow and they die. This was brought out a number of years ago by a very interesting event.

There was an orphanage where many of the babies failed to grow and many of them eventually died. They were all receiving proper food and good medical attention, but the babies throughout the orphanage were dying. That was everywhere except in one wing. In that one wing, the babies were gaining weight and thriving. Nobody knew why. The care was identical, the diet was identical. Yet throughout the orphanage the other babies were wasting away and the babies in this wing were doing quite well. The administration decided to put a twenty-four hour watch on this wing to see if they could figure out what was happening that was making the difference.

And they did find out. But the difference wasn't the care and it wasn't the food and it wasn't the nursing staff. The difference was the night cleaning lady. In every wing of the orphanage, the staff that cleaned came in at night, did their job and went home in the morning. But the night cleaning lady in this wing was different. She loved babies. Every night she would pick up each baby, sing to the baby and cuddle and play with it. Then she would put it down and move to the next one. What they discovered was that the babies in the other wings were deprived of love and that's why they were dying. Every night the cleaning lady was sustaining, with warmth, the babies in her wing and that is why they were thriving.

On one level you can show your love to your child by taking care of his bodily needs. This is definitely a way to show your love. But your child also needs emotional love from you. That love is a very personalized nurturing of his inner essence. Your child needs you to cherish and love those aspects that make him unique.

Each human being is unique. If you have more than one child, you have probably noticed that each child will react to a specific situation in his own unique way. Each child has a certain personality, a certain intellect, certain physical abilities, particular likes and dislikes and a certain emotional makeup. These things make your child unique and special. No one else in the world has your child's makeup and no one else in the world will make decisions and react to situations exactly the way your child reacts. This is why your child is unique and special. This is also one of the things that make being a parent so much fun. You are constantly amazed and surprised by what your child will do next.

This uniqueness is your child's inner essence. It is something that you must nurture and love in order for your child to be healthy. When babies don't get any nurturing of their emotional essence they die. Children don't die, but they do grow up with low self esteem, depression and other emotional problems. Cherishing your child's uniqueness is the most important thing you can do for him. You have already been doing this at some level for all of your child's life; otherwise it would not be possible for you to have any type of relationship with your child. But what often happens is that this type of love, which your child so much requires, gets lost and covered over by doing those things that parents often think is their duty to do.

Your Teenager's Ability to Make Decisions

So your child's uniqueness is something that you should nurture. Your young child needs this form of love and your teenager also needs this form of love.

A major aspect of your teenager's uniqueness is his decision making ability. This is one of the main ways your teenager expresses his uniqueness. It is your role as a parent to help your child develop this unique decision making ability.

Your teenager's unique decision making ability is an outgrowth of his essence. The choices your teenager makes will reflect his own personality and meet his own emotional needs. Because the fact that the decisions your child makes come from his inner essence, they are uniquely suited to him. More than that, because your teenager is unique, only he can make those decisions that are truly right for him. You can not make these decisions for him; however, what you can do is help your teenager develop and express this ability.

When parents force their decisions on their children, they are squashing their child's uniqueness. This is very harmful for your child and takes a significant toll on your child's self esteem and sense of self worth. I am not advocating that you never have responsibility for your child's decisions. I feel that when your child is younger, there are many judgment decisions that he does not have the maturity to make. This is because a small child lacks the ability to think in an abstract manner, so he may not see dangers that would be clear to anybody who can think that way. No child will jump in front of a speeding automobile, but a small child might run into the street because as long as he doesn't see the automobile it does not register in his mind that one could be coming from around the corner. However, your teenagers have the ability to reason abstractly. Your teenager needs to be given the opportunity to exercise this ability and use it to make meaningful choices for himself. In that way he will be able to create a life that is uniquely suited to him, which is something that no parent, no matter how well meaning, can do for his child.

Treating Teens as Responsible Adults

I have been trying to show you how essential it is for you to encourage and promote the development of your teenager's decision making ability.

When you allow your child the ability to make his own decisions you are allowing him to express his own inner uniqueness and develop his personality. In reality this is a very deep expression of love and respect. You are saying to your teenager, "I want you to be you. I value who you are."