

Parenting in the Present

The most loving gift you can give your child.

My mother once told me that the one thing she would never do was stop speaking to her children for days, the way her mother did to her when she was a child. My mother lived up to that promise. Most parents I speak with have had certain childhood experiences from which they want to protect their children. The desire to protect our children is one of the main barriers to giving our children the greatest gift of all: our unconditional love.

Much as we would like to give our children a perfect childhood, this is a delusion that doesn't serve us or our children. Instead it creates a great deal of difficulties. Parents begin to measure their success based on whether their child is happy, and whether their child is performing acceptably well. In both cases, the desire to measure success results in that parent being unable to simply *be* with their child. Instead, they are busy trying to *change* their child.

The evidence for this occurs when a parent takes the behavior of the child personally, as a reflection of the parent. The child misbehaves in public, and the parent feels embarrassed. The child does poorly in school and the parent responds with anger, shame and pressure to do better. The child does well in athletic or cultural activities, and the parent can't wait to tell everyone how well little Billy or Jane did.

Each of these common parenting responses is an example of unhealthy parenting. When the child does well, the parent is happy. When the child performs unacceptably, the parent is

unhappy. The unconscious message to the child is that if they do not perform well enough, they will not be loved. Equally damaging is the message that comes from the parents self-related joy at the child's success. Love becomes a high jump bar that the child must earn.

When you “parent in the present,” you give your child the gift of a healthy self-esteem in two ways. The first is that they feel supported. The second way is that they feel validated. Most parents would readily agree that they should love their child unconditionally. However, the truth for most of us is that our ability to do so is quite limited. We react out of habits that are long engrained based on our own childhood experiences (the past), and our dreams of what our child should do (the future). Neither of these are the present, and both harm the child in unhealthy ways. Let's look at the two positive ways that come with *Parenting in the Present*.

A child feels supported by his or her parents when the parents are able to empathize with their child's situation, and then make wise choices that are helpful to the child, even if they are not what the parent would want if they were in the child's shoes. This ability begins when the parent is able to separate their own emotional experience from the behavior of the child. They must learn how to feel secure with their own sense of self-worth, in order to be fully present with their children. Tommy's second grade difficulties must not immediately trigger fears of him not getting into college. Susie's affectionate behavior towards other boys must not mean she will become the class slut. Instead, each child's behavior is taken for what it's worth – a boy who's struggling with Grade Two arithmetic, and a girl who craves attention.

You become capable of making supportive responses when you are able to see your child's behavior for what it is, without conjuring up fears of what it might lead to, and without dwelling on how you got into trouble when you

did what your child is doing. Instead of fearfully trying to control your child's behavior, you can see more clearly ways in which to help them from their perspective. You can deal with Tommy's math difficulties by hiring a tutor or tutoring him yourself. You can seek outside help to understand whether Susie has a self-esteem problem or whether this is just a passing phase. When you are fully present, you become open to making wiser, more helpful decisions that will help them overcome their present-day issue, because it's what *they* need, not what you need in order to feel better yourself!

The second benefit of being present as a parent, is that your child will feel loved. When a parent is physically in the presence of a child, but mentally and emotionally elsewhere, that child will experience the feeling of abandonment. I remember one time when I was nine years old, I was very excited about taking a long day trip with just my dad, leaving my mother and three sisters at home. My hopes for a great day with my dad were crushed when he spent the entire car trip in his head, buried in the worries of his life. I took his lack of interest in me as a personal rejection and a loud statement from him that I was not worthy of being paid attention to, not worthy of being loved. I felt crushed, and I never forgot that day, or that ego-centric lesson.

When you are not present with your child, you are telling them that they are unlovable. Does this mean that you should pay attention to your child all of the time? Not at all. It means that when you are deciding to interact with them, you bring all of your focus - your mind, your heart and your soul - with you. If your mind keeps flitting off in ten directions, be honest with your child. Tell them that you are busy thinking about other things, and that when your mind becomes free again, you will give them your undivided attention for a period of time.

The best way I know of to practice being present with your child is to change how you listen to them. I call this "*Listening in the Present.*" This is a powerful and immediate way to validate their experiences, affirm that the feelings they are having are okay, and still make a separate, independent decision as a parent, about what to do to resolve the issue of the day. You can read more about this amazing skill in my book, *What's Important Now*, and from my website at www.presentliving.com/books.htm

Being present with your child is the definition of quality parenting time. They feel *validated* as loveable persons because you are genuinely with them during those times when they are your focus of your attention. They also feel *supported* because you are making decisions designed to help them overcome their obstacles and challenges, rather than trying to do it for them, fix them or shaming them into doing things differently so that you'll feel better. Being fully present with them will leave them with a much healthier self-esteem, and leave you with children of whom you will definitely feel proud.

*John Kuypers writes, speaks and teaches on how to live in the present. He is the author of **What's Important Now: Shedding the Past So You Can Live in the Present.** He can be contacted through www.presentliving.com.*