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Parenting

What does a child need?

by Dr. Dale J. Ross, M.D.

One of my joys in medicine has been being able to be a part of the process of pregnancy and childbirth. Coupled with that is the close connection continuing on for the first couple of years of that child's life. I have had a fantastic time talking through what becoming a parent was going to be and working with many young first time mothers as they approached the point of transition – when they became a parent. A common theme for the patients that came to ask me to be their doctor was that they wanted some things to be a bit different, a bit better, than what they knew. One area for this was evident in a statement from an apprehensive mother-to-be, "I just don't want my kids to be like those screaming monsters that I see throwing fits in the grocery store." I thought, now here is a good place for a young mother to be thinking. The root of her sentiment was that she wanted good children. She wanted happy, obedient, well-mannered monsters. This was someone that I could work with.

Good children are no accident. "You were so lucky to have such nice children." is a disservice to every parent that worked and strove and fought to raise up their child and were instrumental in the results. Now this is not to say that children will not develop and grow out by their own choices, and even the best efforts can come to naught by choice. What I am saying is that children that were raised consistently with respect, manners, and responsibility were loved enough that the parents did not take the easy way out and tell the child, while they are in the store, "just take the candy bar (pop/cookie. . .) and eat it. I'll pay for the wrapper when we get to the counter."

Now I brought in the word consistently. This is important. Inconsistency breeds persistence. Children are incredibly intelligent. They learn everything that we teach them. Harangue on mommy 5 times, 8 times, or 3 times and she will cave. Not every time though. Sometimes they get a consequence, but for their little thinking the chance is worth the risk. Children are not concrete thinkers. They have not mastered the science involved, they do not fully grasp action and reaction. They do know that sometimes they have to ask a lot more than other times before they get what they wanted. "Boy, I have to really ask a lot before mommy hears me." is a child's view on this process. So why do some parents reward those outbursts, kicks, screams, and fits by giving the child exactly the material thing that they asked for? They have just trained the child to do exactly what was ultimately successful; and the child only remembers it took a lot of work that time.

Giving into a child in these circumstances is not loving them. Loving a child enough to give them the things they need is love. Loving them enough to tell them "no" when they need to hear "no" is loving them enough. Loving them enough to want them to learn that kicking, screaming, biting, or "hating" is not going to get them a reward. All of these actions, on the part of the child, come around for selfish things and that should be understood. Sugar tastes good, kid wants sugary thing. I have yet to see one

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of these attacks underway in the produce section with the child hanging from one arm in his mother's grasp kicking and wailing about "I want my broccoli!"

Whether the object is a toy, candy, pop, clothes, a DVD, or the place to sit where their sibling was already sitting, the root is about an opportunity to teach a child. The reality is that there are a bunch of rules waiting for these children as they grow up and become adult members of society. Murder is illegal, driving over the speed limit is illegal, taking a candy bar and eating before you buy it is illegal. Society has a bunch of "no's" that must be followed. Why then did society in its collective wisdom decide that parents and teachers should work around teaching children "no."

Children are identified by a lack of maturity, understanding, responsibility. I know most parents are quite proud of how mature and responsible their child is, but that is relative to their age, not part of finite development. If 3 and 8 year olds knew more than the parents, held down better paying jobs than the parents, and made wiser health, personal, philosophical, and political decisions than their parents, the parent would not need to be a parent. Guess what, they are children and need, emphasizing true need here, a parent to raise, teach, love, and guide them so that one day they can be a positively contributing member of/in society. The converse of this is what is becoming more apparent in society – the too frequent evidence of more 25-40 year olds that could not be identified as child versus adult by the foregoing definitions.

Teaching children "yes" and many other words and concepts are just as important, but let us start with just the premise behind directing a child with "no;" in truth it equally applies to "yes" but let's take one step at a time. This one two-letter word can have great impact. The personal fortitude and discipline in loving a child well enough to consistently provide teaching and direction of control and boundaries is the basis for all teaching in raising a happy, pleasant, well-adjusted child.

Parents, and for this I will make inclusion for any adult in a teaching capacity or adult figure which may by purpose or circumstance be construed in any way by a child as someone they can learn better from: is a young one worth enough, loved enough, that we can offer to them by example, word, or deed, that which will enable them to be better. Would anybody else like to see less monsters in the grocery store aisle?

Future article on childrearing/childhood: Society's child