

Hold Them Close, Then Let Them Go

By Jack Petrash

I learn my parenting lessons in the oddest ways, but even so, this last lesson took me by surprise. I was trying to engage my fifteen-year-old daughter in cheerful dinner conversation, refraining from serious questions about homework or music practice. And I thought I had succeeded when my jokes elicited a chuckle. But the joy was short lived. She looked up from her plate, lowered her fork and said, “*Dad, you are so bi-polar.*”

My smile froze and she left me wondering if this parenting roller coaster we were on had left a permanent mark on my psyche with its dramatic ups and downs. How could it not? Parenting is awash in bi-polar opposites – highs and lows, joys and sorrows, work and play, responsibility and freedom. The list is endless and that’s what makes parenting such an emotional stretch. I wanted to reply, “Of course I’m bi-polar. I’m a parent.”

Parenting is an art and like all of the arts it exists between opposites. Artists always work with polarities: light and dark, space and counter-space, foreground and background, piano and forte. The only difference with parenting is that we don’t get to practice our art in solitude. We’re not at a piano in the quiet confines of a studio or in a lovely pastoral setting with watercolors and an easel. Instead, we get to fashion our artwork in the carpool or in the kitchen, and always at the dinner table. Our creative endeavors take place seven days a week, at all hours of the day, and over long stretches of time. And because parenting is a most demanding art, it requires even more conscious awareness to reconcile and mediate opposites. That is what makes it so complicated.

The Parenting Essentials

Parenting doesn’t seem complicated when we start out on the journey. Aside from loving our children, there are essentially two basic assignments: to provide for our children and to protect them. These are the primary parenting responsibilities that we take up selflessly in order to build a foundation of trust, safety, and dependability. It is the important work that we do on a number of levels. We provide nourishing food and clean clothes for our

children, but more than this we establish a consistent routine of caring. We hold our children when they cry, change them when they're wet, talk to them, sing to them, wash them, and comfort them continually. Amidst the confusion of the first weeks of a child's life, we establish a dependable rhythm of consistent care. This protective environment enables our children to rest assured and to begin their lives in a healthy way. In their book, The Irreducible Needs of Childhood, T. Berry Brazelton and Alan Greenspan, note that having a safe, predictable environment is one of childhood's irreducible needs because it influences the way that children's nervous systems develop. Calm, dependable environments give rise to calm, dependable children.

A protected physical environment must also be accompanied by a protected emotional environment. The softness of our words, the gentleness of our touch, our patient attention, all convey to our children another level of safety. In the home, feelings are safeguarded as well.

But the confusing part of the parenting paradox is that protection as a parenting goal is inherently flawed. Years ago a friend of mine went to a marriage counselor. He was told that in relationships, the very characteristic that draws us to an individual, will in the end repel us. Find a reliable, dependable spouse and their predictability will eventually disappoint us. Become involved with a carefree, free-spirited person and sooner or later we will long for steadiness and responsibility. Ralph Waldo Emerson's words probably express this best: "Every excess causes a defect... Every sweet hath its sour."

The same is true with parenting. Provide the important protective environment for our children and over time the need to provide a markedly different environment will make itself known. The pendulum invariably swings the other way.

Overprotecting Our Children

Currently, in our society, we are much better at protecting our children than we are at allowing them to develop independence and a little daring. With all of the best intentions we have sequestered our children in our homes. Fear of automobiles, pedophiles, injuries,

and lawsuits has denied our children the opportunities we had growing up. We roller-skated without knee pads and helmets, walked to school, to our friends' houses, and to stores without supervision. We played in the schoolyard, climbed trees and fences, and stayed out after dark. So few children do the same today.

In her book, The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Traditions to Raise Self-Reliant Children, Wendy Mogel notes that it is also a parent's job to teach children to manage risks. Mogel contends that if young people today were faced with the opportunity to do something dramatic and life-changing, like the Exodus from Egypt, most would decline, enslaved more by fear than by Pharaoh.

During the second half of childhood, parents need to help children manage risks as a counter balance to the protective home environment we have developed during their early years.

For ten years my wife and I worked at a summer institute in Maine. This was a fine arrangement for our family as it allowed us to leave the heat and humidity of Washington in the summer and to spend six weeks in northern New England. From the time our daughter was four, we all headed north in July and our daughter took part in the program that was provided for the children. In many ways the environment there was ideal. The Steiner Institute was housed on a small college campus and my daughter and her summer friends could walk anywhere without restriction.

Just prior to her fourteenth birthday, our daughter began voicing reservations about returning to Maine. She complained that there was nothing to do. We reminded her that there were art classes, kayaking trips, beach excursions, swimming, innumerable opportunities provided by the program, but she was adamant. So we began to explore other options. My wife did some research to find alternatives and discovered a wilderness canoe trip solely for teenage girls led by young women guides. This trip would be vigorous and rugged. The group would head off for a ten-day adventure with extensive paddling and extended portages. They would have to camp out, cook their own food,

make do without the comforts of home (no showers, no toilets), and be at the mercy of the bugs and the weather. We thought for sure that our daughter would express no interest whatsoever. We were wrong. She wanted to go.

Sending her on this trip was a huge step for us. We had to leave her with her brother in Boston and know that she was getting on a plane for Canada and that when she got off one of the tour leaders, whom we had never met, would be there to meet her and a few other girls and take them six hours north of Toronto to the base camp where they would join the group to begin their trip. The only communication that we would have during the two weeks that she was away was a phone message that she had arrived in Toronto safely and two e mail messages – one when they left the base-camp for their canoe trip and one when they returned.

At the end of the two weeks, my wife and I drove back to Boston eager to pick her up at the airport. When she came through customs with the stewardess, she flew as an unaccompanied minor, we were there waiting. She looked so pleased with herself, self confident and mature. She was strong from the canoeing and portaging, healthy from the days outdoors, and different, not just because of the hair rinse that the girls had shared on their adventure, but because she had been through a rite of passage and was so pleased with herself.

This year she was eager to return. She saved her babysitting money and spent nineteen days in the wilderness braving mosquitoes, whitewater, and the SARS epidemic. Protecting our children is essential, but not protecting them can be just as important.

Parents as Providers

Providing for our children is another of parenting's paradoxes. Because our children start out in life depending on us for everything, it is vital that we live fully into our role as providers. Food, clothing, and meaningful experiences are all a part of what parents work hard to provide. The more thought and care we put into providing for our children at an early age, the more they benefit. Providing healthy food, warm clothing, and good

medical care are just the kind of assignments that good parents take seriously. It is our job to provide the very best for our children and over time these decisions will involve schools, camps, after school lessons, and all sorts of teams. But here too, Emerson's words apply: "Every excess has its defect... Every sweet hath its sour."

In his book, Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age, Dan Kindlon points out that providing too much for our children for too long, impedes character development. When Kindlon did a survey on "too good to be true teenagers", the kinds of healthy children parents hope to raise, he found that there were certain characteristics that these young people had in common. They cleaned their own rooms. They did not have a phone in their room (I assume that also means a cell phone). And they did some kind of community service. What the parents provided was very simple; these children ate dinner regularly as a family.

What is clear from this study is that we should always provide our children with opportunities to give as well as receive. This can mean different things in different families. It can mean that children make their own beds or do the dishes. It can mean that adolescents do their own laundry or clean the bathroom. And with teenagers it can mean that they work outside of the home on weekends or in the summer to earn their own spending money, keeping in mind that independence fosters responsibility and that leads to self-esteem.

A number of years ago, the state of California offered a work program for young people modeled after the Civilian Conservation Corps, the federally funded program during the Depression. The California program promised "hard work, long hours, and low pay." It had a waiting list, mostly with young people from well-to-do families who wanted to find out what they were really worth.

In the end children must provide for themselves. How many kids today pay for their own car insurance, their gasoline, their cell phones, or their credit card bills in college? What message do we send our children when we give them so much, other than the message of privilege or entitlement?

Parenting has to be a bi-polar undertaking. We are called on to protect our children, but not over-protect them, to provide for them, but not indulge them. These are the challenges that parenting sets before us; and as with any art form, there are no easy answers. We simply have to be present in the moment and move between the opposites to achieve the right balance. Sometimes this work seems overwhelming and I must say there are nights when I get down. It is then that I look for a little help with this work and this quotation by E.F. Schumacher from Small is Beautiful, helps.

“Through all our lives we are faced with the task of reconciling opposites which, in logical thought, cannot be reconciled... How can one reconcile the demands of freedom and discipline in education? Countless mothers and teachers, in fact, do it, but no one can write down a solution. They do it by bringing into the situation a force that belongs to a higher level where opposites are transcended – the power of love”

These words remind me that I am just a struggling artist who really loves his work.

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