

## A Parent's Legacy

At a recent half-day workshop on parenting, participants were asked about their parents' legacy. Now that they were full-grown adults and dealing with the day-to-day joys and challenges of family life, how would they describe the gifts they were given by their parents during their childhood? Perhaps surprisingly, no one said anything about homework or chores, sticking with things you signed up for even if you aren't enjoying it, or sibling rivalry.

Some of the comments were very touching and included references to painful memories. These pain-filled legacies seemed to revolve around inattentive or short-tempered parenting. Parents who remembered their parents as being too busy with careers or hobbies to be present for them during their childhood clearly had been given a hurtful legacy. Similarly, memories of being yelled at or talked down to still carried a sting after so many years.

But there was also much joy. The joy-filled legacies seemed to include memories of parents who were kind (even when they, as children, were being obnoxious), patient (even when they were being challenging) and forgiving (even when they were being absolutely impossible). It was striking to hear parents, in the midst of all the stress of daily parenting, reminisce about their own childhood and how their parents carried themselves twenty-five or so years ago. The legacies were all, without exception about *tone rather than content*. That is, parents tend not to be remembered (for example) for helping children learn the importance of an education but rather for the tone of voice and the look in their eye when the homework is not done.

So, how are the parents? Perhaps the parents who are not calling psychologists are pulling this off (presenting themselves as kind, patient and forgiving no matter what their child just did) but the parents I meet with are struggling with this day in and day out. At the risk of trying to simplify something very complicated, it seems as if parents are putting so much pressure on themselves to have perfect (or at least fantastic) children that they are blind to the legacy they are in the process of giving to their children.

Think about this past week and ask yourself: Based on how things have been going how might my children answer the presenter's question at some hypothetical workshop in twenty-five years? Do you think your children are more likely to remember kind, patient and forgiving, or inattentive and short-tempered?

Depending on your answer, either pat yourself on the back, give yourself a "way to go," or commit yourself to working even harder on this.

Here are a few starting points that may be helpful if you think there is some work to do:

- Expect children to make mistakes and expect them to repeat the same kind of mistake hundreds of times.
- Have a behavior plan that is true to your values and includes privileges being pulled and consequences being given. Just don't expect it to work nearly as quickly as you wish.
- Think of the repeated mistakes in a calm and accepting way. Perhaps you will decide that they are repeating the same kind of mistake because they have not yet learned all they need to learn from this mistake.
- The phrase "you know the drill" may help. The second, third and fifty-fifth time they make the same kind of mistake they get the same tone of voice and the same consequence they got the first time. "You know the drill, sweetheart, all electronics are mine until you get your chores done without reminders."
- Take full responsibility for the tone of your relationship with your children. Imagine a mirror behind them at all times. Keep your eye on you.
- Remember it is not what they do that predicts how they will be in years to come. It is what we do next.

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