Self-Esteem: A Family Affair

by Jean Illsley Clarke

Does the self-esteem of the adults play a role in child battering? One woman reported that she hit her child only when she was feeling bad about herself. What is the self-esteem level of a man while he is beating a woman? Or of the woman who allows herself to be beaten repeatedly?

Self-Esteem: A Family Affair

Self-esteem is a family affair. Because the family is the first place we decide who we are and observe and practice how to be that way. To the extent that we decide we are lovable and capable, we build positive self-esteem. Therefore, the parenting or nurturing that we give and receive in the family is important. During the formative years of a child's life, the parenting or nurturing and the offering of values are done by the original mother or father, by the new parent in a remarriage, by an adoptive or a foster parent, a day-care person, a grandparent, an older sibling and/or that ubiquitous new parent, the television set. Whatever the sources, parenting or nurturing is important. It is important for young children because it allows them to live, whether poorly or well. It is important for adults because it impacts not only the most obvious parts of their life styles, but also the very core of their beings—their own self-esteem.

Some aspects of society are not supportive to esteem building and give more prestige, power, and status to people for making money than for nurturing and sustaining families. And this is done without a lot of regard for how the making or spending or investing of that money impacts the quality of family life.

Currently, in many parts of the country, people are segregated by age. Some apartment houses don't allow children. Some nursery schools won't combine three and four year olds. Mixing kids of different ages in elementary classrooms is considered experimental and, therefore, suspect. Young couples from four different states find houses on a street lined with families the same ages as theirs. Grandma and Grandpa are moving to Retirement City and Great-Grandma is in a nursing home with sixty-four other geriatric cases. Mobility has a lot of advantages, excitements, and interests; but it is difficult to raise children in anonymous communities where people call the police instead of the parents when kids misbehave and where the constant interaction with people of all ages is limited or missing. This lack of cross-generational contact leaves gaps in our knowledge of how life is for people of different ages and of how to cope with the next set of problems in our own lives.

So we make do without the valuable cross-generational contact, or we fall back on the uneven teachings of television, that ever-present source of cultural information and living-color-video-values. For those of us who do not have an extended group of people living near us who care about our family in a committed, ongoing manner, the task of helping family members discover who they are and how to be that way is flung back onto the family unit with a force that can be perplexing or even overwhelming.

So this is where we are, and however we live, we can find better ways to build strong, functioning families. No matter who we are, while we do whatever we can to make our institutions more supportive and humane and to find new networks to replace extended family ties, we can each start, right now, to assess and improve the quality of living experiences we offer to ourselves and the other people in our immediate families.

What Contributes to Positive Self-Esteem?

We build our own brands of self-esteem from four ingredients: fate, the positive things life offers, the negative things life offers, and our own decisions about how to respond to fate, the positives, and the negatives.

Fate determines some very important items in our lives. That Marie was born female, Black, in Rochester, Minnesota, to her particular family on her particular birthday is not something she can change. Nor can she control the fact that she is firstborn in her family, that her mother is extremely beautiful, that her parents surround her with books, or that an airplane crashed into her house. What Marie can do with her fate is to make decisions about it and attempt to make sense out of it.

Neither fate nor decisions can be determined by other people in her life. No one can change fate, and although parents may tell their children what decisions to make, children have a way of thinking their own thoughts and making their own decisions. These decisions may be stated openly or may be revealed through repeated behavior. "I want my son to be a professional ball player. He was outstanding in Little League! But for the past three years he's been sick on the day for the high school baseball tryouts and didn't make the team." Many of us have experienced the difference between decisions we tell our children to make and decisions they actually make.

How Can We Offer Positive Self-Esteem to Children?

Since we can't control fate or force decisions, what about the other two ingredients of self-esteem: life's positive and life's negative offerings? These are the areas in which adults have great power and opportunity to impact self-esteem. All of the time that children are with us, we set a rich buffet of positive and negative messages or rewards from which children may choose building blocks for their own self-image.

Positive Offerings for Doing

Positive offerings for being capable and for doing well *are self-esteem building blocks that each of us needs every day of our lives. They come in great variety. The "You did that well!" message[2] is important, whether it is praise for a baby grasping a block, a comment on the height of the block tower built by an older child, or a remark on how fast the child can knock the tower down again. Telling an older child what a high jumper he is or telling the baby he can yell louder than anybody else can be a self-esteem building message if the message is delivered in an admiring tone.*

"You are capable!" is an important message to offer children at every age. Telling the baby he is clever for learning to call you by crying when he needs dry pants, complimenting a seven year old for figuring out what to take with her to play with in the car, commending the sixteen year old for passing his driver's test are "You are capable" messages. The offerings change as the child grows, but the message remains the same—"You can do well."

If you count, you will probably find that you give dozens of "You did well!" messages in a day. I avoid using the word good in the compliments because it has a special moral and religious meaning for many people. When Mr. Williams told Heidi to "be a good girl," she didn't know what he meant until she had been bad; then he told her what she should have done. Give children guidelines by telling them what you want them to do instead of telling them to "be good." And tell them what you like about their behavior instead of calling them "good children."

Positive Offerings for Being

The positive offering that is equally important to the "You are capable" message that children need to hear is "You are important

and lovable just because you exist."[3] *This self-esteem building block is a gift that the child does not have to earn. We give this gift when we say, "Hi! I'm glad to see you! . . . I love you! . . . How are you? . . . I'm glad you come to my house!" These and all of the other ways–through words, looks, or touch–that we let children know we are glad they were born are very important because these messages reinforce the belief that they are lovable.*

Negative Messages Can Build Esteem

Sometimes adults have to send negative messages to children. Children deserve clear negative messages that tell them how to improve their behavior. If negative messages attack the child's being or define the child as incapable, they are destructive to self-esteem. "You dummy! You'll never make it!" invites the child to fail. Properly delivered, negative messages say to the child, "I care about you. You are a worthwhile person, and you can learn how to do things better." Saying "Stop that!" or "Don't do that!" or "Not that way!" does not invite a child to have positive self-esteem. However, a negative message given in a three-step manner can. Tell a child specifically what not to do and why and then give an alternative: 1. Don't do that . . . 2. because. . . . 3. Do this instead. . . .[4] *This three-step process lets a child know that he is an important person capable of thinking and of taking care of himself. For example, say to a three year old, "Don't pull the kitty's tail because he may scratch you. I'll show you how to pet him gently. If you don't, I'll ask you to leave the kitty alone." This is more apt to produce a self-assured, gentle kitty-petter than is a screamed "Keep your hands off that cat!" Older children can be invited to think of their own alternatives. For example: "Don't throw that ball in the living room; it might break a window. You can find a safe toy to play with until we go outside." With both children and adults it is important not to tell them what you don't want unless you also tell them what you want them to do instead.*

There are two kinds of messages that do not help build positive self-esteem: ***plastic*** *compliments and* ***"don't be" messages.*** *A plastic compliment is a compliment that starts out feeling good but ends up feeling bad. "You sound good for a kid who can't carry a tune," "That looks good considering you made it," or "I like you no matter what anybody says" are examples.*[5] *Some people call these plastic compliments "left-handed compliments." I think that is insulting to left-handed people, and I hope that we all give up using plastic compliments soon. A straight one feels better, and children deserve straight compliments.*

The most destructive message we can put on the buffet of life for children to choose from is a "don't be!" message. Who would deliberately say to a child, "Don't be!"? That is an invitation to suicide! But sometimes we carelessly say things that could be interpreted as "don't be!" messages by children, such as "Are you here again today?" or "If it weren't for you, I could be in Florida!" or "We planned on having three children, and now here is our little mistake!"[6] We might say these things without meaning them, but children often interpret our words literally.[7] It is not difficult to remember to say "I'm tired today" or "I need some time alone" instead of "I wish you kids were all somewhere else." We can be careful about the words we choose.[8]

Since children determine their self-worth from the decisions they make about their fate and the decisions they make about the positive and the negative messages they hear about who they are and what they do, adults can learn to offer a rich buffet of esteem building messages.

One way adults can improve the quality of positive and negative messages they offer is to practice the ***Four Ways of Parenting*** *exercise. This is done by identifying one problem and responding to it in four different parenting styles: nurturing, structuring and protecting, marshmallowing, and criticizing.[9] The first two parenting styles build positive self-esteem. The latter two invite negative feelings about self.*

Let us say that a child who was roller-skating broke a strap on his skate and skinned his knee. He comes crying to his parent. How will the four different parenting styles respond?

The soft, warm manner of parenting named ***nurturing*** *in this exercise offers help and offers positive rewards for being. It affirms both the importance of the person, just for* being, *and the person's capacity to grow. For example: In the above situation, the nurturing parent might put a gentle hand on the child's shoulder and say words like "Oh, I'm sorry you hurt yourself."*

The firm manner of parenting called ***structuring and protecting*** *in this exercise offers support, protection, and ethical teaching. It also offers* ***positive rewards for doing well and for doing poorly,*** *and it expects the person to be capable and suggests ways to behave capably. Example: "We'll get new straps for your skates. Want me to help you clean your knee?"*

The sweet but gooey manner of parenting called ***marshmallowing*** *in this exercise may sound comfortable or seductive, but it is plastic or patronizing. It invites the person to be dependent, to stay stuck, or to assume that outside forces or other people are responsible for his life. Example: "Oh, dear, I was afraid that concrete was too rough for you to skate on."*

The harsh manner of parenting called ***criticizing*** *in this exercise offers negative rewards in a way that attacks the person, suggests ways to fail, and offers "don't be" messages. Example: "Clumsy! No more skates for you if you're going to break the straps! You're always falling and breaking things!"*

There are a variety of other examples included at the end of each chapter in this book. Each situation is usually followed by four messages. If the problem situation is stated as if by a child, the four responses are given as an adult might give them. If the problem is stated by an adult, the responses are given as the adult might hear them in his or her own head.

To learn to recognize the responses of the four ways of parenting, one person can read all four messages or several people can role play the four different manners of parenting. Practicing all four types of responses allows people to hear and feel and decide which words and phrases to continue giving or to stop giving or to improve. Messages that are nurturing at one age may be marshmallowing at another age, so examples are given for different age groups. These role plays are not to be said to a child but are to be said, listened to, and thought through by adults for adult consideration.

The examples listed at the end of each chapter reflect the values of the author or other people who teach parenting classes based on this book. Every statement is only one example of the many different ways that a response can be given by the four different parenting types. You may not agree with the values reflected in the examples but you can learn to recognize and practice the four methods of parenting and substitute your own values and words. Since we adults respond in these ways not only to children but to other adults and to ourselves, each example has a description of the age or person with the problem so that the reader will know whether the messages were intended to be said to a six-year-old child, said to another adult, or said by the parent to himself in his own mind.

Four Ways of Parenting Description

Nurturing

Invites a person to get needs met. Offers to help. Gives *permission to do things well*, to change, *to win*. AFFIRMS!

Recognizes and validates the personhood of the other as being important, having strength(s), having the capacity to grow, practicing self-control, being self-determining, having goals, being not intentionally hurtful or destructive, being loving and lovable.

Gives "I" messages about personal reactions to the other's behavior. Uses touch to say "I'm glad you're here. . . . I care about you. . . . I'm with you." Encourages others to get their needs met.

Descriptive words: *gentle, caring, supportive.*

Structuring

Shows or tells *how to do things well*, to change, *to win*. AFFIRMS!

Supports the other as a growing person who is capable and is building on strengths by offering choices, exploring alternatives and consequences, advocating traditions and ethics, demanding that preferred behavior be substituted for undesired behavior, setting conditions so others can be successful, removing obstacles, offering appropriate incentives, telling or showing ways to build skills and providing for practice and feedback, negotiating contracts and goals. Asks people to state what they want or need in a problem situation.

Descriptive words: *assertive, sets limits, demands performance, offers tools.*

Marshmallowing

Sounds supportive but invites dependence. Gives *permission to fail*. NEGATES!

Judges the other as weak and inadequate—lacking strengths, the ability to grow and learn, self-control, self-determination.

Blames other people, situations, or fate. Uses "You" messages: "You poor thing. . . . I'll do it for you. . . . You must have had a lucky/bad break. . . . There's nothing you can do."

Enables self-destructive behavior and leads the other person to wish for magic. Carries the other person's burden or invites a person to be responsible for other people's feelings.

Descriptive words: *smothers, subtly destroys, sticky, patronizing, seductive.*

Criticizing

Ridicules, tears down, shows or tells *how to fail*. NEGATES!

Judges the other as unacceptable by blaming and fault finding, comparing the person with others, using global words: "You always. . . . You never. . . ." labeling or name-calling, using "why" questions to accuse or trap the other, offering no solutions.

Encourages a person to do poorly or to do self-destructive acts. Assumes a person is responsible for other people's feelings. Uses touch in hurtful or punishing ways. Uses caustic, sarcastic, or cruel humor.

Descriptive words: *harsh, hurtful, blaming, shaming, discouraging.*

Four Ways of Parenting*

For any situation that requires parenting—advising and supporting—there are four possible ways of responding. Nurturing and structuring and protecting ways encourage positive self-esteem. Marshmallowing and criticizing ways tear down self-esteem. Below are situations. Each situation has a response given by a nurturing, a structuring and protecting, a marshmallowing, and a criticizing parent.

Read each of the four responses to each situation. Allow yourself to hear the positive and the negative implications of each. Rewrite each answer to fit your own value system where needed.

Parent Messages

Nurturing

This message is gentle, supportive, caring. It invites the person to get his or her needs met. It offers to help. It gives permission to succeed and affirms.

Marshmallowing

This message sounds supportive, but it invites dependence, suggests person will fail, and negates.

Structuring and Protecting

This message sets limits, protects, asserts, demands advocates ethics and traditions. It tells ways to succeed and affirms.

Criticizing

This message ridicules, tears down, tells ways to fail, and negates.

Situation: Adult says, "I'm going to read a book called *Self-Esteem: A Family Affair*, and I don't really know if I'll find it helpful."

Nurturing

I hope it will be helpful, interesting, and fun.

Marshmallowing

Do you have to? I'm sure you know all that stuff already. Books can't teach you anything.

Structuring and Protecting

I trust you to think things through and to decide what will be helpful for you.

Criticizing

You shouldn't have to read a book. You should just automatically know how to run a family.

*See Glossary, pages 269-270, for further information.

Situation: Adult says, "I often get lost when I'm driving."

Nurturing

Getting lost doesn't sound very good.

Structuring and Protecting

Learn to read a road map and use one. Pay attention to street signs. Stop getting lost.

Marshmallowing

Well, lots of people get lost.

Criticizing

You never pay attention. You shouldn't be allowed to drive.

Situation: Eleven-year-old girl says, "I want to stay overnight with my girl friend. Her parents are out of town, but her sixteen-year-old brother will be there."

Nurturing

I know you want to have fun with your friend. She can come here for the night.

Structuring and Protecting

No, you can't stay overnight with your friend unless her parents are home.

Marshmallowing

Well, I don't think you should, but I suppose that just this one time would be okay.

Criticizing

Of course you can't go! What kind of parents would people think we are? Do you know what sixteen-year-old boys want?

Rewards for Doing Well

Statements

Neat work.
Nice job.
I like the way you did that.
Much better, keep it up.
I like the way you wear your hair.
You have a good eye for color.
Thank you for picking up the papers.
You're a good cook.
You're one great carpenter.
Wow, do you read fast!
Your work is impressive.
Fantastic painting!
I'm amazed at your improvement.
You're the fastest runner I know.
You make beautiful music.
Nice job of planning.
Great carry through.

You're a super (mom, dad, son, daughter, teacher, worker, entertainer, problem solver . . .).
I love the way you use your voice.
You think well.
You certainly are clever.
Thanks for the gift.
I like the way you listen.
I hear you did a great job. Congratulations!
What you said is very interesting.
I appreciate your support.
You're a good team member.
You encourage me to think.
You take great pictures.
You do know how to survive.
You put things together in an amazing way.
Thank you for being so patient.
I'm proud of the way you did that.
Excellent results!

Rewards for doing start at six months and encourage people of all ages to do things well.

Rewards for Being

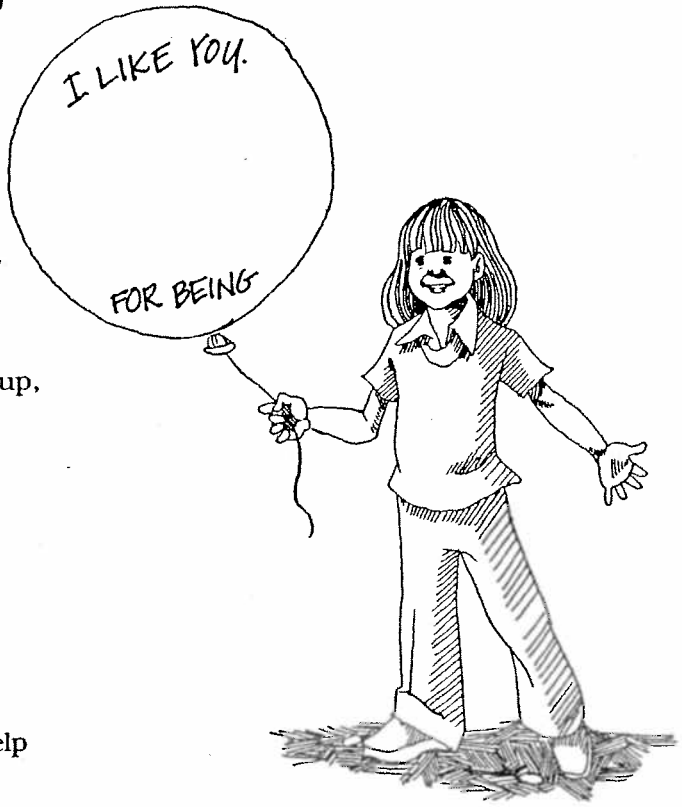
On this and the following pages are examples of the five ways of rewarding or stroking or communicating with other people. You may look at the examples and use the Five-Balloon Strokes worksheet to record ways in which you are offering self-esteem building messages in your family. You can celebrate the ways in which you are doing well and make any changes that you want to make.

Statements

I'm lucky to know you!
You're a pleasure!
You are important.
You are unique.
I like to (see, hug, hold, rock, kiss) you.
I love you.
It's good to see you.
Good morning!
I'm glad I'm getting to know you.
I'm glad to share this (day, time, lunch) with you.
I'm glad you're here.
I'm glad you live in our house.
Glad you came today.
I enjoy you.
I enjoy being with you.
I like to sit by you.
I'm glad we're (riding, walking, playing, working) together.
I thought about you during the week.
I like you.
I'm glad you're in my (house, class, group, life).
I think you're a neat kid.
I'm glad you're my friend.
Will you play with me?
Thanks for being you.

Actions

smile
hugs, pats, kisses (if acceptable to the person)
handshake
listening to a person
sharing something important
spending time with the person
initiating contact
using a person's name



Rewards for being start at birth and help people of all ages live!

Messages About Doing Poorly

Or, you are an important person
—here are ways you can improve!

Messages about doing poorly often sound like accusations or blaming. Examples: You forgot to shut the door. . . . You're late again. . . . You look sloppy. . . . You tracked mud on the floor. . . . You forgot my birthday. . . . Another F! . . . You don't make enough money. . . . You spend too much money. . . . Stop butting your nose into my affairs. . . . Clumsy! . . . NO SELF-ESTEEM BUILDING HERE!

Messages about doing poorly can build self-esteem when they honor the other person, show that you care enough to set limits, and invite the person to be a winner. Messages about behavior that you want changed can be given in a loving way. (Example: Don't do this . . . because you are important.) Or they can be given in a respectful way. (Example: Don't do this . . . because it may hurt you or someone else; you can figure out a better way to do it.) Or these messages can be given in a way that owns feelings. (Example: Don't do this . . . because I don't like it; do this instead.) The tone of voice must be respectful or loving, not sarcastic.

Statements

I resent your being late. You're an important member of this group. Do you want us to delay our meeting time?

Don't wear those pants to school; they're dirty. Put on clean ones.

Don't track mud on the floor. I just cleaned the floor, and I get mad when you track. Clean it up.

When you forget my birthday, I feel sad. Will you give me a present on my birthday?

Stop failing math—you can't go to summer school because we are all going on a long trip. Study an hour every night and turn this grade around!

When you interfere I get mixed up. Let me do this my way.

That's the third dish you've broken this week—you must be in another growth spurt. Will you carry the dishes extra carefully while you get used to your new size?

Messages about doing things incorrectly should start at eighteen months and should encourage people of all ages to do better. These messages should continue all the rest of our lives.

Plastics

Statements

No matter what anybody says, I like you.

You're pretty good-looking for a bunch of librarians.

You are really good at math for a girl.

You run really fast for an old man.

You certainly look good considering your age.

You look nice. That has always been my favorite dress.

You cook well for a man.

How come you're so smart?

How come you *always* know the answer?

Oh you, you *never* make a mistake.

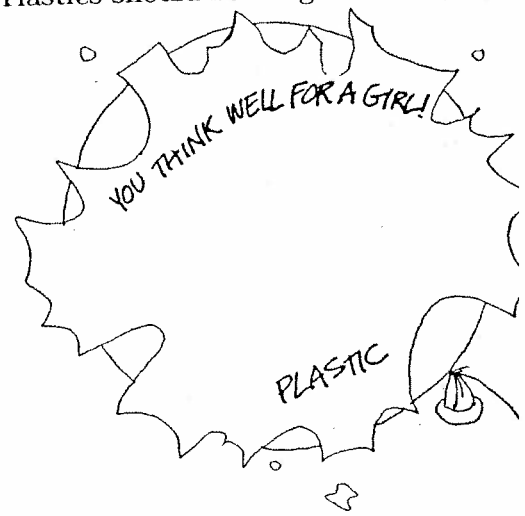
You always do *everything* so *perfectly*!

Everything you touch turns out to be beautiful!

I know you must be happy about being pregnant even though you walk like an awkward goose.

Positive rewards for being or rewards for doing can be turned into plastics by being said or done in a sarcastic way, by being insincere, by being patronizing, by being grandiose. (Example: Our little Millie is *the most marvelous* little cook.) Or, they can be changed by adding negative riders. (Examples: considering it's you . . . for a change . . . finally . . . but when will you . . . but you should have . . . if only.)

Plastics should not be given at any age.



Quirky discipline rules that work

- Clarity, enforceability make quirky parenting rules work
- Successful rules usually give kids some measure of control
- Parents have to be consistent for any rule to work

By Barbara Rowley
Parenting.com

I've made a lot of bad rules in the decade I've been a mom, from irrational threats ("No graham crackers in the house ever again if you eat them in the living room even one more time") to forbidding human nature ("You may not fight with your sister"). But occasionally I've come up with rules that work better than I'd ever contemplated. These made-up rules have an internal logic that defies easy categorization, but their clarity and enforceability make them work. Several of them are not, technically, rules at all, but declarations of policy or fact. And they're all easy to remember. A few personal favorites, plus those of other moms:

You can't be in the room when I'm working unless you work, too

Goal: Get your child to help, or stop bugging you, while you do chores

It might seem odd, but I don't mind doing laundry, cleaning floors, or really any kind of housework. But I do mind my kids, oblivious to the fact that my arms are full of their underwear, asking me to find their missing doll shoe or do a puzzle with them. Until recently, this was a source of great frustration, especially when our household grew to five kids when my husband, Taylor, and I became temporary foster parents for two months. I tried to explain to my expanded brood that if they helped me fold laundry, we could do something together sooner. But they knew I'd be available anyway if I finished folding myself, so the argument wasn't compelling. And then one day, as my oldest foster daughter sat and watched me work, asking me favors and waiting for me to be done, I came up with a rule that takes into account two important facts about kids:

- They actually want to be with you as much as possible.

- You can't force them to help you in any way that is truly helpful.

I played fact one against fact two and told her that she didn't have to help me but couldn't just sit and watch. She had to go elsewhere. Given a choice between being with me and folding laundry or not being with me at all, she took option one. (Parenting.com: You can't always be evenhanded)

Why it works: I didn't care which she chose. And it was her choice, so it gave her control even as it took it away.

I don't work past 8 p.m.

Goal: Regular bedtimes and time off for you

You can't just announce a rule to your husband and kids that says, "Bedtime has to go really smoothly so I can get a break at the end of the

day." It won't happen. But if you flip the problem and make a rule about you instead of telling everyone what they have to do, it all falls neatly -- and miraculously -- into place. When this occurred to me, back when my oldest was 6 and my youngest was nearly 2, I announced to Anna and Taylor that the U.S. Department of Labor had just created a new rule and I was no longer allowed to do any kind of mom jobs past 8 in the evening. I would gladly read books, play games, listen to stories of everyone's day, give baths -- the whole mother package -- before then. Then I held firm -- I acted as if it were out of my hands. Sort of like Cinderella and midnight. Suddenly, my 6-year-old (and my husband) developed a new consciousness of time. My daughter actually rushed to get ready for bed just after dinner so that we could have lots of books and time together before I was "off." My husband, realizing that if things dragged past 8 he'd have to face putting both girls to sleep himself, became more helpful. Anna's now 11, and my hours have been extended, but the idea that I'm not endlessly available has been preserved and integrated into our family routine.

Why it works: You're not telling anyone else what to do. The rule is for you, so you have only yourself to blame if it's not enforced. (Parenting.com: TLC for you)

You get what you get, and you don't throw a fit

Goal: No more haggling -- over which pretzel has more salt or who gets their milk in the prized red cup and who in the cursed green, or which cast member of "Blue's Clues" adorns whose paper plate

My friend Joyce, director of our town's preschool, told us about this terrific rule, now repeated by everyone I know on playgrounds and at home. Not only does it have a boppy rhythm that makes it fun to say, but it does good old "Life isn't fair" one better by spelling out both the essential truth of life's arbitrary inequities and the only acceptable response to the world's unfairness: You don't throw a fit. When I first heard this, I was skeptical. It seemed too simple. But to my utter surprise, not only did it do the trick but kids seemed to rally around it almost with relief. They must have seen that if it applied to them today it might apply to someone else tomorrow.

Why it works: It's irrefutable -- it almost has the ring of runic or prehistoric truth to it -- and rather than focusing on an abstract notion like "fairness," it speaks directly to the situation at hand.

Take that show on the road

Goal: Peace and quiet.

Is it just me or does someone saying "one-strawberry, two-strawberry, three-strawberry" over and over in a squeaky voice make you want to smash some strawberries into a pulpy mess? I want my kids to be gleefully noisy when they need and want to be. But I don't feel it's necessary that I be their audience/victim past a few minutes or so, or that I should have to talk (shout?) over their, um, joyous clamor when I'm on the phone. So once I've shown attention adequate to their display, I tell them that they're free to sing, bang, chant, or caterwaul to their hearts' content, just not here. The same goes for whining, tantrums, and generic pouting. For the irrational and long-winded whining jags sometimes used by her 4-year-old son, my friend Denise has turned this rule to a pithy declaration: "I'm ready to listen when you're ready to talk." She then leaves the room.

Why it works: It gives children a choice rather than a prohibition and does so without rejecting them.

We don't argue about money

Goal: Short-circuit begging and pleading for stuff

This rule has to be enforced consistently to work, but the basic deal is that you can tell your child yes or no on any requested purchase, but you don't discuss it. If your child protests, simply repeat, calmly, like a mantra, that you won't argue about money. The key to success is that you have to have the courage of your convictions and not argue. Thus the calm repetition. It cuts both ways, though: When your kids want to spend their "own" money, point out potential mistakes and give advice on the purchase if you'd like, but at the end of the day, don't overrule them unless it's a matter of health or safety. After all, you don't argue about money. They may make some bad choices, but they'll learn. And you'll all enjoy shopping together a lot more. (Parenting.com: I waaant it!)

Why it works: It shifts the focus from the whined-for treat to financial policy. You're almost changing the topic on them, no longer debating why they should or shouldn't have gum or some plastic plaything and, instead, invoking a reasonable-sounding family value.

I can't understand you when you speak like that

Goal: Stopping whining, screaming, general rudeness

This one requires almost religious consistency of application to work effectively. But, essentially, you simply proclaim incomprehension when your child orders (rather than asks) you to do something, whines, or otherwise speaks to you in a way you don't like. Whispering this helps; it takes the whole thing down a notch on the carrying-on scale. This is a de-escalation tool, so calmly repeat the rule a few times and don't get lured into raising your voice. A child who's whining or being rude is clearly seeking attention and drama, so use this as a way to provide neither. (Parenting.com: Dealing with defiance)

Why it works: It empowers your child by suggesting he has something valuable to say (if he says it nicely) and allows you to completely invalidate (i.e., ignore) the rude presentation.

There's no such thing as boredom

Goal: Prevent your child from saying "I'm bored"; teach her to entertain herself

A friend of mine says this is one of the few things he got right with his kids. The first time his older daughter claimed she was bored he simply denied that the thing existed. Now he sometimes adds: "There's no such thing as boredom, only failure of the imagination" or "...only mental laziness." Surprisingly he's never gotten the "There is too boredom!" argument, only an exasperated "Da-ad." Regardless of the phrasing, the result is the same: The burden of amusement lands directly on your child, which is precisely where you want it.

Why it works: By the time your kids have figured out the puzzle of how something that exists can also not exist, they won't be bored. Also, it changes the terms of debate, from a challenge for you (list all my toys, then cave in and let me watch TV) to one for them. Besides – if your child learns how to entertain herself, there truly is no such thing as boredom. And that's a gift that will last all her life.

Contributing editor Barbara Rowley is searching for rules that will work with Smokey, the family dog.

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FAMILY MATTERS

How Schools Can Cope with the Crisis in Childrearing

ROBERT EVANS

2

The Building Blocks of Healthy Growth

To grow up healthy and successful, to become people of competence, caring, and character, what do children need from their parents and caregivers? By the time they graduate from high school they have spent, as I have said, barely a tenth of their lives in school. As important as schooling is, almost all students learn their most essential life-shaping lessons outside the formal curriculum-and-instruction context. If they are to become first good learners, then good earners, and ultimately good citizens, spouses, and parents, what must the adults who raise them know and do? A comprehensive answer would take volumes.

It is hard to imagine a subject that has stimulated more theory and research, or been more vulnerable to speculation and fads, than the raising of the young and the role of parents. Written advice on the matter dates back several thousand years. It multiplied exponentially in the second half of the twentieth century, when the field of child development saw remarkable growth: literally thousands of scholarly studies have now been published, and these have in turn spawned several thousand advice manuals for parents and been factored into teacher preparation courses nationwide.

Although in recent years research has taught us much about how children's growth unfolds in the family, we still have far to go. For one thing, even a casual review of the history of the research itself and especially of its distillation into advice books suggests that

both have often reflected the prevailing prejudices and priorities of the period. For another, child development professionals remain sharply divided about how to interpret some of the facts that are widely accepted. Caution, then, is always in order in any generalization about parenting. But if one doesn't seek to be comprehensive, if one asks instead what are the core essentials that have so far stood the test of time and that recur over and over in the research, these themes immediately emerge:

- All children need roots and wings.
- These are significantly influenced by three dimensions of their parents' behavior—nurture, structure, and latitude.
- These in turn are successfully provided in a wide variety of ways in the normal course of childrearing.
- One particular pattern of nurture, structure, and latitude seems to lead to the most successful outcomes for children growing up in America.

This chapter takes up the first three, and I turn to the fourth in the next chapter.

Roots and Wings

Every theory of child development must, like every parent, come to grips with two fundamental tendencies that lie at the source of behavior, indeed of life itself: the impulse to be connected to others and the impulse to master the world separately on one's own. Variously called attachment and agency, affiliation and autonomy, dependence and independence, the two are seen in different theories as needs that must be met or as drives that assert themselves. Almost every living organism needs to connect to others—for sustenance at first, for procreation later, and for protection throughout. And almost every living organism also needs to master its

environment enough to achieve self-sufficiency—to be able to feed itself, fend for itself, find a mate, and so on.[1]

Among humans these twin drives exist not just at the biological level but at the psychological level. Born much earlier in embryonic development than many other creatures, we need an extended period of dependence on our primary caregivers if we are even to survive, let alone thrive. As infants we arrive preadapted for lengthy dependence. The obvious aspects of this dependence are physical and behavioral, but the psychological dimensions begin early and last long. We remain connected to, engaged with, and psychologically dependent upon our parents far beyond childhood and adolescence. And when we move out of our family and into the world we take with us predispositions and ways of treating others that we learned at home, often dealing with coworkers as we did with siblings, and with bosses as we did with parents. Then we start families of our own, on whom we also come to depend. From birth to death, in myriad ways both direct and indirect, we remain linked to a nexus of relationships with kin at its core.

At the same time, all infants are also born as exploring, learning, constructing beings. We do not enter the world as mere passive recipients, even if we are at first nearly helpless. From our earliest hours outside the womb we begin sensing, looking, touching, testing, tasting, holding, feeling. We have a primary tendency to reach out, to try out, to experience and master objects and events. It is now known that the most basic biological processes, including our senses—sight, smell, hearing, touch—are not just fixtures that appear fully formed at birth; they develop in the course of experience. This propensity, too, has a psychological corollary: an impulse to be self-sufficient, to separate from others and to control our world. In endeavors of all kinds—schooling, business, art, athletics—we show a will to impose ourselves on the world, to order it, organize it, shape it, and master it.

Attachment and agency are lifelong and reciprocal. Both kinds of behavior begin at birth and last throughout life. Although infants

are more attached than adolescents, they are not purely dependent; and although adults are more autonomous than infants, they never outgrow their dependent needs, which are fulfilled in romantic relationships, family kinship, friendships, and workplace colleagueship. And although affiliation and autonomy point in opposite directions, they are in fact complementary tendencies; each enables the other. Most toddlers, for example, venture and explore more confidently when they feel sure of the whereabouts and availability of a parent or other familiar caregiver. And most adults feel freer to assert their true opinions when they are in the presence of those they trust.

Children differ, of course, in their dependent and independent tendencies. Temperament plays a role here. Just as some infants are more reactive to intrusion from birth and others much less so, some are more placid and pliant, and some are more inclined to cuddle, while others start and stay more active right from birth, or are harder to hold and contain, or seem to need less in the way of human contact and interaction. These general tendencies usually endure throughout life. Gender, too, plays a role. Females tend to show stronger affiliative and expressive tendencies; males, stronger independent and instrumental inclinations. These are visible quite early on and constitute much of what we see as the typical differences between men and women. They are the stuff of both high tragedy and low comedy.

Though these predispositions toward and needs for affiliation and autonomy are innate in humans, their actual expression and fulfillment are affected by all sorts of factors in the environment in which the child lives and grows up, most notably by family and society. For example, it has long been axiomatic among American psychiatrists and psychologists that healthy development requires individuation, a clear psychic separation from parents and family of origin, that full independence is crucial to true mental health as an adult. This reflects in part our nation's longstanding norms of independence and individualism and a way of life that has promoted high mobility. In many cultures around the world this kind of individuation seems odd, even bizarre, because the accepted way of life keeps adults far more directly linked to their families of origin or to extended kinship groups. In most of these cultures the collective group, not the individual member, is accorded primacy and the individual is expected to submerge personal interests and priorities to those of the group. Nonetheless, in close-kinship societies people still need to achieve significant levels of individual competence, and in individualistic societies people still depend on each other. Human infants cannot survive and grow to successful adulthood without both the security that is engendered by strong social ties and a push away from the group to be able to fend for themselves.[2] Children need to grow up in an environment that offers them care, connection, and protection, yet also urges them to explore, strive, and become self-sufficient.

So what fosters the growth of roots and wings? A complete catalogue would be very long, but at its core lie three quintessential necessities—nurture, structure, and latitude: love and acceptance, expectations and limits, support for autonomy and the freedom to learn from experience. Over the past fifty years a substantial body of research on parent-child interaction has repeatedly confirmed the importance of these dimensions.[3] Other factors are also important to children, but these three are absolutely indispensable.

Nurture

We all know what nurture is. Most of us associate it immediately with the mothering of infants. It is the earliest and most obvious component of child development. It begins as the affection and attention, the holding and ministering, the care and comfort an infant receives. It is acceptance, not reward; given, not earned. It flows like mother's milk not because a child achieves a goal or demonstrates a skill, but because we share flesh and blood and we belong to each other. It provides what psychologists used to call "unconditional positive regard" and what a veteran preschool teacher I know calls "your basic warmth."

When I think of nurture I think not first of mothers but of Mr. Rogers. As a generation of small children watching *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* on public television heard Fred Rogers tell them, "I like you just the way you are." He is dead now, present, as I write this, only in reruns, but he still likes you just the way you are. You never had to be smart for Mr. Rogers to like you, nor did you have to be good-looking, athletic, or even nice. You could be unintelligent, unattractive, uncoordinated, and unpleasant; it could be 5:30 in the afternoon when even your mother couldn't stand you; you were still fine to him. This is nurture, the primary building block of healthy growth. Every child needs to start life with a good dose of it. In fact, we never outgrow our need for it, although as we get older we come to receive it in less overt and direct ways. But any adult who has cared for a dying parent knows how important the fundamentals of caring, comforting, and ministering are. And when adults express love and affection to each other, their behavior often involves nurturance and dependence.

Nurture is initially the vehicle through which we survive, but it is also the vehicle through which we become uniquely human. It is crucial not only to the development of a positive sense of self but to the ability to function as a member of a community. Through nurture we first begin to be aware of others, first learn about give-and-take, and eventually come to appreciate that others are separate beings with powers and intentions of their own. Gradually, our experience with caregivers teaches us how fully we can trust the world and how confidently we can count on other people to meet our needs—when to be open and when to be cautious. Over time, it helps us learn how safely we can express our feelings and how fairly we can expect others to behave. In all these ways it fosters an essential confidence: the basic belief that we are lovable and can expect our relationships to be governed by reciprocity, that if we moderate our own needs to meet the needs of others, they will do so for us. This confidence is fundamental to psychosocial development.

This much may be obvious. Not always so obvious is that the lessons about reciprocity taught through nurture are important not only to self-esteem but to socialization and the development of conscience and character. In families with close social bonds, where parents foster reciprocity as a behavioral norm, their children typically show greater compliance and adherence to their values.[4] Children who become securely attached to their parents are reluctant to lose parental support and approval and are more likely to adopt their parents' standards for conduct and to control their own behavior accordingly. This will, in turn, earn them more praise and positive response from those outside the family, further buttressing self-esteem.[5] It will make them easier to teach and to manage in school. And it will make them better participants in the communities to which they belong, first at school and later in the larger world. Nurture, in short, is "the seedbed of trusting and socially responsible personal relationships [and] civic virtues."[6]

Nurture begins in early parent-child interaction, especially early mother-infant interaction. The establishment of a close, nurturing mother-child relationship, a critical first task of growth, typically unfolds quite naturally. It is a task for which infant and mother are both preadapted. The infant begins life largely under the control of built-in instinctual mechanisms that both trigger basic physical needs (crying when hungry) and that provide an almost immediate inclination to relate to others. As these automatic behaviors express themselves, they trigger reactions in the mother, some of which are also basic physical "built-in's" (milk letting down in response to the infant's cry), others of which are purely social. As she begins to respond to the child's emerging behaviors in certain repeated ways (during feeding, for example), the infant begins to expect these responses, anticipate them, and to behave in ways designed to produce or avoid them.[7] In addition, growing evidence from animal studies suggests that, as Michael Meaney, a leading researcher in the field, puts it, "maternal behavior regulates the

activity of certain genes in certain areas of the brain, which in turn influences an animal's response to stress, which in turn regulates [its] vulnerability to stress-related disease." Good early nurturing, it seems, improves an animal's ability to respond to stress without elevated levels of so-called stress hormones. It also appears to increase nerve cell growth in the hippocampus, which is vital to memory and learning.

Infants, in other words, arrive already wired to relate. They have biologically based start-up software that enables them to form primitive internal representations of the world around them—representations then modified by experience (with parents at first, then with others), which in turn lead to new representations, and so on. In the first few hours after birth, infants lock in on the eyes of adults who hold them, and turn toward their mother's voice. Very quickly, they can imitate adults' facial expression and reciprocate their emotions. Mothers, too, are wired to relate. When they look at their children, register an expression, and the children reciprocate, the same areas of the brain are stimulated in both.[8] The preadapted-ness of parent and child are vital both to early nurturance and to creating the ability to relate to others, which is what truly makes us human.[9]

This preadapted system depends on and fosters what Daniel Stern, a psychiatrist who studies infant development, calls "attunement": an empathic connectedness of parent and child that is rooted in biology and built up during the recurring events of daily life, events that establish for children the fundamentals of social and emotional growth and development.[10] It is in the empathic mother-child connection in the course of ordinary living that nurture happens, not only in the feeding, comforting, and other obvious nurturing activities. From this matching of mother's reaction to child, repeated naturally and unthinkingly scores of times per day, infants develop an expectation of parental response, of having their feelings shared and reciprocated. Here, as in so much of childrearing, it is the song that matters, not just the notes that compose it. The exact way a parent feeds an infant or cautions an adolescent is

not as crucial, observes developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan, as the melody those actions, repeated over time, construct.[11] Here, as also in so much of childrearing, influences are bidirectional. It is not just a matter of an adult imposing a melody that the child must learn; the parental melody itself begins partly as a response to the child's behavior and cues, and just as the child responds to the parent, the parent responds to the child. The very notion of attunement involves reading and matching a child's impulses and temperament even as one's responses in turn help to shape and structure the child's expectations and behavior. Here is where we can see biology and environment interacting. The capacity to connect, cooperate, and share emotions, which is present and operating at birth, is "the route by which interactions with caregivers regulate the child's brain development" and also on which later sophisticated social learning depends.[12]

There is an alternative view about nurture. Developmental psychologists, who study children in laboratory settings and in formal experiments, often argue that the importance of infant experience is exaggerated. Taking a broad, comparative perspective, looking at development not just in the context of early parent-child patterns and not just in our culture, they acknowledge the value of a nurturant relationship between child and caretaker, but dispute the direct, linear linking of early mothering to later adult behavior and the notion that the first years largely determine a child's eventual psychological makeup. For one thing, they point to strong evidence that children do not require a particular kind of attachment childrearing to develop healthily. Rather, "all children have built-in capacities to attain developmental goals in multiple ways and under varying conditions."[13] Thus, developmentalists agree that early experiences may create expectations of nurture or neglect for a child, but not that these are decisive. To be sure, says Kagan, "infants who are tickled, played with, talked to, and smiled at are more alert, more vocal, and laugh more fully and frequently than infants who missed these pleasurable experiences," but their

brains, especially the frontal lobes, which process information about the environment, are too immature to form the sorts of perceptions and memories assumed by attachment theory.[14] And later experiences can transform or overcome their early expectations, as shown by studies of children orphaned during World War II and the Korean War whose early lives were marked by trauma but who, in the care of good foster parents, went on to develop well.[15] In this view, it is not just the beginning years of life that matter in forming character, values, and behavior patterns, but a whole childhood.

It is possible to embrace the best of both approaches. Development requires both stability and flexibility; it is not an either-or contest that pits the early years against the later years. The key issue is not which matters more, but how the early years influence the later years. They are vitally important not because they determine adult well-being, but because they set a foundation—sturdy or fragile—for later development. What children learn in their youngest years "establishes a set of capabilities, orientations to the world, and expectations about how things and people will behave," and this in turn affects how they process new experiences—beginning with school.[16] Although we want our schools, especially our elementary schools, to be nurturing places that will contribute positively to children's capabilities, orientations, and expectations, there is no way a school can ever overcome fundamental deficits in nurture. The laboratory for nurture and reciprocity lies at home in, as we say, the bosom of the family.

Structure

The second essential developmental ingredient is structure, by which I mean a framework for conduct, expectations for behavior and performance. There is virtually no controversy among experts about the importance to children of growing up in a setting that provides clear norms for how one should behave, treat others, and achieve. Nearly every school of thought in child development sees

structure as both normal (in the sense that it has been ubiquitous in all human societies) and necessary to healthy growth.

I think of structure as a box. Inside the box is what we do and what is expected of us; outside is what we don't do and what is not expected. Every culture has a box. Within this broad framework each subculture may have its own modified version and within this version each family may have its own variant. Around the world, boxes differ in their contents—growing up is quite different in Kenya, Finland, and Japan—but each box prescribes and proscribes. Each encourages and rewards certain achievements and behaviors, forbids and punishes others.

In most families and cultures the box expands and contracts. It starts out large, gradually grows more restrictive, and then enlarges again. As infants and toddlers, children are often allowed considerable freedom and not held accountable for their actions. As they reach school age, they become subject to greater expectations and limitations, and then, as they approach adulthood, they begin to acquire more prerogatives. Throughout, structure involves a dynamic between freedom and responsibility. Children and adolescents typically focus on the former, parents and teachers on the latter. Much of the friction between adults and teenagers constitutes a kind of extended negotiation about this trade-off: teens want more freedom (money, the car, no curfew); adults want greater proof that teens can behave responsibly.

Like nurture, structure is a key contributor to social competence and confidence. Its importance is most easily illustrated by remembering when you last found yourself in a social setting where you didn't know what was expected of you or how you were supposed to act. These situations make most of us acutely uncomfortable and self-conscious. Knowing where we stand, how to behave, what goes and what doesn't go, is a great comfort. Behavioral guidelines and expectations make life and alternatives clearer. In addition, they give continuity and predictability to relationships, which makes it

easier to be trusting of others—we know that we share basic assumptions in common. Growing up in a clear framework with boundaries also helps children learn to become more considerate of others; it makes them less likely to act out, to be inappropriately aggressive. Consequently, they tend to receive more positive, esteem-enhancing responses from others. Over time, they come to internalize their parents' regulations and thus develop their own ability to self-regulate.

This internalized structure is vital to the ability to resist external pressures, such as the temptations of dangerous peer influences in adolescence. And as children come to grasp and fulfill parental, social, and cultural expectations, their sense of competence is enhanced. Perhaps more important, children who grow up in families with clear boxes tend to take clear boxes into their own adulthood and childrearing. The exact content of their boxes is not necessarily the same as their parents', but what is repeated is the presence of a clear box, a defined set of standards and expectations for children.

Another benefit of structure, implicit in the very notion of boundaries and limits, guidelines and expectations, is the delay of gratification, the learning to defer, at least temporarily, one's own impulses. In *Emotional Intelligence* Daniel Goleman emphasizes how vital this capacity is to success in life. Considerable evidence confirms that children who don't develop this ability end up performing much worse academically and socially than those who do.[17] Some researchers would argue that the ability to delay gratification is genetically influenced, at least in those children who are, almost literally from birth, truly uninhibited, spontaneous, and fearless (research by Kagan and his colleagues at Harvard suggests that this group comprises roughly 15 percent of children). Even if this were conclusively proved, however, it would only argue for parents to provide firmer structure for these children. There is certainly no doubt that parents who provide too little structure help children grow up

more self-centered and "entitled," less considerate of others, and more impulsive and prone to seeking instant gratification.

Structure is also, to the surprise of many parents and teachers, a key contributor to self-esteem. Since the 1970s, the importance of self-esteem to healthy growth has been an article of faith among many writers in child development, education, mental health—especially among those who offer advice to parents. Conventional wisdom sees it as crucial to personal, social, and intellectual maturation. Strong self-esteem, it is said, not only makes children feel good about themselves but strengthens their perseverance and resilience and improves their performance. When a student, especially an elementary student, falls into academic or social difficulty at school, low self-esteem is almost sure to be on the list of potential causes to be considered by the staff. For their part, parents now routinely worry to teachers that getting a low grade on a test will hurt their child's self-esteem. All told, an astonishing amount of energy has gone into promoting self-esteem, including a commission once created by the state of California to raise citizens' self-esteem statewide!

The case for the conventional view of self-esteem may be summarized simply: first, successful people have lots of it, so it must be a foundation, a beginning precondition of good development; second, it can be fostered by the right kind of upbringing. Assertions like this have long been common in the parent guidance literature. But little hard evidence of any kind suggests a causal link between a child's overall sense of self-worth and the development of important social, emotional, or intellectual skills. Indeed, self-esteem can easily correlate with undesirable traits. Boys with conduct disorders, for example, who regularly misbehave and disobey, who do poorly in school and in peer relationships, and whose behavior is characterized by macho excess, tend to score quite high on tests of self-esteem.[18]

The assumption that self-esteem is a foundation, a beginning precondition of healthy growth that ultimately leads to success, is

accompanied by the parallel assumption that it can be fostered by the right kind of upbringing—one that does not emphasize structure. The parent advice industry has advised liberal doses of praise, frequent assurances of love, and a steady diet of successful experiences. Parents and teachers are encouraged to seek out opportunities of all kinds, no matter how small, to congratulate and reward the child. Whether undertaken by a parent or a teacher, this kind of effort, though well-meaning, is at best ineffectual. Self-esteem cannot be artificially implanted or boosted. It results primarily from trying one's best to address a challenge or achieve a meaningful goal. Meeting regular, appropriate demands that one work hard, be responsible, and follow through is the chief source of a sense of self-confidence and self-esteem.[19]

Self-esteem, in fact, is like happiness—pursuing it directly is impossible and self-defeating. Neither can be artificially manufactured or given to someone else; both can be earned and emerge in the course of living with others and fulfilling the responsibilities of doing so. Parents who have appropriate expectations for their children and hold them accountable for meeting these expectations will not only have natural reasons to praise their children, they will give their children the chance to earn a sense of accomplishment.

They will also confirm for their children that they love them. Contrary to what many parents think, raising children with a structure, even when it involves discipline, sends a positive message, as Fred Rogers confirmed. Although most people associate his television message with nurture, as I have, his show was full of messages about structure, too, because, as he told an interviewer, "Discipline is a kind of love. If children didn't have limits from those who cared about them they would never feel that they were loved. If a child ran out into the street, for instance, and nobody screamed and says [sic] come back or nobody ran after that child, that child would think that nobody loved him. So, healthy limits, which children understand, are a marvelous way of saying, 'I care about you.'"[20]

Latitude

The third key building block of healthy growth is latitude, by which I mean support for a child's autonomy—support that expresses itself in the freedom to learn from experience and to express oneself. From infancy onward, as noted earlier, children constantly explore the world around them and test their influence upon things and people. Some are more adventuresome than others, but all explore. Each culture has its own guidelines, implicit and explicit, about exploration: how much, what kind, when, and so on. (Again, within each society communities and families will have their own variants of these understandings.) The key to this aspect of development for a child is having enough latitude to learn the lessons necessary to each stage of life. Not so much as to become lost or to be allowed to get into serious danger, not so little that autonomy, curiosity, and mastery are stunted.

The learning this kind of latitude produces is vast and vital, and though much of it involves drawing upon the success of one's actions, some of the most important learning stems from disappointment and loss. To thrive in the world of work, first at school and later in a career (and, for that matter, to thrive in the world of interpersonal relations), everyone must become a problem solver. Everyone must be able to act on the world, draw conclusions and inferences from the results, and then apply this knowledge. This includes learning from accomplishments, but it also means facing up to errors and misjudgments, failures and shortcomings, trying to overcome these and, where this proves impossible, learning to compensate for—or accept—them.

Think for a minute about the most important lessons you have learned in your life. If you are like most people, you experienced these in a context of disappointment and loss. They are the roots of maturity. It is not whether we encounter such setbacks but how we cope with them that defines what we're made of and that determines

our own well-being. Self-esteem is too often misunderstood as being produced by the outcome of an activity—whether the child wins the game—rather than by the effort the child puts into it. But it is when we confront issues and respond to challenges, regardless of their outcome, that we experience positive, self-affirming thoughts and feelings.[21] Over the course of a lifetime, what builds a feeling of self-worth is choosing to face meaningful problems rather than avoiding them.

Sometimes coping involves acceptance. There may be no remedy for losing a championship game or failing a crucial exam. Losing is, in this respect, a great builder of character. Though no parent I've ever known wants a child to encounter a particular disappointment, most of us know that disappointments are a necessary part of growing up and that, as an adult, a child will be stronger for being able to face them. Disappointment has another benefit: it is a great leveler, a teacher of humility and respect, an opportunity to walk in the shoes of others, and hence an important contributor to the capacity for empathy and to the skills of community membership and democracy. "Every society," as Kagan points out, "needs a small number of chiefs but a great many warriors."[22] Most of us will be warriors and we must learn how to accept this status and to get along with our competitors.

Latitude is not all about resignation, however; it can help foster resilience. Often, the lesson to be learned from acting upon the world is that we can do better, that we need to develop a new skill, or persist patiently, or try harder. Perseverance can be one of the most powerful outcomes of falling short. If you are like most people, the chances are that your proudest moments occurred when you mastered something that was difficult, something that had previously troubled or frustrated you or made you feel inadequate in some way. Without the freedom to fail, to struggle against difficulties, those moments wouldn't have been possible. Latitude, in short, helps make possible the development of resilience and persistence, which are vital to children's achievement.

What distinguishes top performers from peers who have similar abilities is often, as Goleman notes, "the degree to which, beginning early in life, they can pursue an arduous practice routine for years and years. And that doggedness depends on emotional traits—enthusiasm and persistence in the face of setbacks—above all else."[23] Here again, some children may seem to have more innate enthusiasm or persistence than others, but parents can make a real difference by giving children support for their autonomy.

Imagine four eleven-year-old girls who want larger allowances. They are becoming more interested in clothes and are spending more time at the local shopping mall. None of their parents like this growing interest; if asked, all would say they wish the girls would not grow up so fast, would spend their time more fruitfully, and would be less materialistic. The first girl's parents, however, despite their views, simply agree to their daughter's request. The second girl's parents criticize her harshly for even asking and threaten to ground her for a week if she asks again. The parents of the third and fourth girls engage their daughters in conversation. They acknowledge the girls' interests, ask how much they want and what they want to spend it on. They also express their own reservations. Ultimately, the parents of the third girl agree to an increase, but the parents of the fourth do not. They promise to revisit the matter in four months at her upcoming birthday. Although the last two couples reach different decisions, both do so in a way that offers a kind of psychological autonomy, that doesn't disengage from their daughter or dampen her sense that she can advocate for herself.

Managing latitude, letting and helping children learn from experience, requires us to respect children's different strengths and styles and to let them do their own problem solving where possible in developmentally appropriate ways. We need to balance our intervention so that it is neither too limiting nor too lax, neither too much too soon nor too little too late. The problems that develop in the area of latitude stem from overcontrol, overprotection, and underinvolvement. Parents who are overcontrolling value obedience over

independence. They tend to be arbitrary and absolutist and to stifle the child's risk taking, autonomy, and expressiveness. Parents who are overprotective also don't give children sufficient room to grow. Instead of being punitive they hover, intrude, fix, correct, warn, and, often, do for the child tasks the child could manage independently. The child's life may be smoother, but the sense of competence, the confidence that success is possible through effort, simply won't develop.

Ironically, what overprotective parents often say they want most is for children to be confident and have strong self-esteem; they intervene because they want the child to succeed. Of course, when they do this to excess, their intervention itself helps teach children to doubt their own competence.

Meanwhile, parents who are underinvolved give their children lots of leeway but not lots of support for their autonomy. These are the parents who are often otherwise engaged or unavailable when their child is having trouble of a kind that does need adult help, or who don't attend the child's plays or performances at school even though their work schedule would permit them to, or who go off on weekends or vacations leaving their adolescent children at home unsupervised. Their children may occasionally revel in the freedom they are given, but they know they are not being supported in a caring way. This is not latitude but disengagement.

Enough Is Enough

There is a crucial truth about nurture, structure, and latitude: they occur in the course of ordinary parenting naturally and sufficiently and with tremendous variety. This truth runs directly counter to the perfectionistic fallacy that pervades the popular advice books for parents and early childhood educators. These volumes, full of watered-down, jazzed-up oversimplifications of the research, have seeded a steady succession of childrearing fads and a mistaken belief that successful development requires earlier and earlier applications of ever more complex patterns of stimulation. They share the assumption that if we can identify factors that compromise children's development, parents can avoid these factors, and if we can identify factors that foster development, parents can maximize those factors. It is astonishing how many parents, especially in middle-class and upper-middle-class homes, now see the task of raising happy, productive children as "walking a tightrope and passing through the eye of a needle—yet never mixing a metaphor," as a psychologist colleague of mine says.

Later I will address the rising tide of parental anxiety the advice industry fuels, along with its exaggeration of the importance of early stimulation. For now, I want to emphasize that, vital as they are, nurture, structure, and latitude need not be maximized and are not rarified features of childrearing that require exceptional skill.

It is not true that if nurture is good for children, extreme nurture is extremely good for them. Adequate nurture is all that is required for the normal human competencies to emerge. This point has been made repeatedly by the most authoritative students of development, beginning with Donald Winnicott, the British pediatrician and child psychiatrist who coined the phrase "good-enough mother,"[24] only to be obscured by waves of raise-perfect-children books. And adequate nurture—along with adequate structure and adequate latitude—have, for most of human history, occurred naturally among parents, without advice manuals or professional training. They have also occurred—and continue to do so—with enormous variety. No single, universal pattern of nurture, structure, and latitude is ideal for all children around the world. Even a cursory reading of anthropology confirms that, while the vast majority of the world's children are raised by "moderately predictable and reasonably nurturant adults," there is an enormous diversity "in the duration, continuity, and affective quality of the interaction between parents and infants."[25] Any number of dramatic examples from around the world describe practices we would find bizarre, sexist, and cruel that are nevertheless meaningful parts of the local

culture and do not result in psychological scarring or stunted adulthood. Through all these variations of nurture, structure, and latitude, children not only survive, they thrive.

To developmental psychologists this confirms a key fact about children: their remarkable adaptability. They flourish in all sorts of childrearing contexts. And just as young Kenyans, Finns, and Japanese readily acquire their local language, they as readily adopt their local customs and practices. They are born preadapted for an average expectable environment, and so long as their caretakers' parenting practices fall within the broad limits of this framework, they prosper. Even when this is not the case, when challenges in early childhood exceed the limits of what children can manage, they can show a remarkable resilience; they are often able to use the experience of later childhood and adolescence to rebound from early deficits.

What makes children so adaptable is that the impact of any particular event is not fixed but contextual: it depends, as noted, on its meaningfulness to the child, that is, on the child's interpretation of the event. This interpretation in turn depends on the child's maturity, personality, beliefs, and feelings, and especially on the predictability and the social sanction of the parent's behavior. What matters is not so much a particular kind of caretaking or discipline but its consistency and cultural validation. Though the Puritans believed children needed strictness more than affection and punished in ways that might get them arrested for child abuse today, they produced generations of successful offspring. They surely had their special neuroses (as we have ours), but they were hardly dysfunctional, diminished people—indeed, they built the foundations of our nation. What some of us might see as deprivation may be unwelcome to children when it occurs, but if it is consistent enough to be expected and if it is generally accepted as appropriate in their social world, they can make sense out of it. They are neither being taken by surprise nor treated unfairly. In this view, it is the sense a child makes out of any particular event—even a punishment—that

truly influences psychological development, not the pure event by itself.

In sum, the evidence is that raising children calls for common sense, not rocket science; attunement, not acceleration; that it depends upon fundamentals that have occurred naturally among parents and children throughout history, and that what is best for a child depends in good part on what that child is to become and where. What is best for children growing up in contemporary America?[26] What will best prepare them to be successful students and, ultimately, successful people? Surprisingly, there is a straightforward answer. I turn to it next.

3

Back to Basics

A Parenting Primer

Theoretically, American parents might raise their children with many different combinations of nurture, structure, and latitude; in practice, they don't. Beginning in the late 1960s, scholars—led notably by Diana Baumrind, a research psychologist at Berkeley—began to study patterns of childrearing. Looking at the dimensions I have called nurture, structure, and latitude, they discovered that most American parents sort themselves into three predominant styles, typically called *authoritarian*, *permissive*, and *authoritative*. More than three decades and several hundred studies later, the evidence is clear that what is best for most American children is the third: children who turn out to be successful at school and later in their personal and professional lives tend to come from families led by authoritative parents. It is also clear that, *other things being equal*, this kind of childrearing is best provided by a mother and father.

In this chapter, I first review the concept of authoritative parenting, then turn to the respective contributions of mothers and fathers, with particular attention to the latter, then look briefly at social influences on childrearing and child development. Some of this does not bear immediately on what educators can do—except with their own offspring—but it provides a bedrock understanding of what children need to be able to bring to school and of deficiencies that can arise at home and then affect students' behavior and

performance in school. And its core concept, authoritative parenting, has very practical relevance for ways teachers and administrators can redesign their relationship with parents.

Authoritative Parents

Parenting styles are fairly easily differentiated along three continua: acceptance and rejection (in my terms, nurture), firmness and leniency (structure), and autonomy and control (latitude). As they raise their children, parents may be more accepting or rejecting, firmer or more lenient, and more supportive of autonomy or more insistent on control. Although the exact balance along each continuum varies from parent to parent, and although the particular customs and practices of those who share similar approaches can include substantial variety, parents generally divide into the authoritarian, authoritative, permissive styles illustrated in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Three Styles of Parenting

	Authoritarian	Authoritative	Permissive
Nurture	Low	High	High
Structure	High	High	Low
Latitude	Low	High	High

Source: Adapted from Baumrind.[1]

At one extreme, authoritarian parents are low on nurture and acceptance, high on structure and firmness, and low on latitude and support for autonomy. They are not just firm but controlling, often harsh. Their style tends toward the autocratic and simplistic: things are right or wrong. These parents may be consistent in their discipline, though in my experience they often are arbitrary and capricious, but they also tend to be very rigid, and to concentrate heavily on controlling both children's behavior and their expression of feeling. This cows more timid children; it also invites subterfuge and, in bolder children, outright sabotage and opposition. It is conceivable that this kind of parenting might prepare children for adult roles in societies that are themselves autocratic and emphasize obedience to authority. It is not nearly as good a fit in a diverse democracy that requires of adults both initiative and tolerance.

At the other extreme, permissive parents are, by contrast, easygoing. They tend to be high on acceptance and nurturance of their children and low on control, and to tolerate and encourage lots of autonomy. They are often seen as soft or indulgent, and are likely to concentrate on keeping children happy. They can permit their offspring considerable expressive freedom and may be quite accepting of idiosyncrasies. This kind of parenting can minimize friction, and in these families relationships between adults and children may be warm and almost peerlike. All this risks producing children who are self-centered and relatively unattuned to the needs and wishes of others, who often lack a sense of duty and conscience, and who expect things to go their way without having to work hard.

A separate subset of permissive parents are lenient in a different way; they are disengaged. They are not just nontraditional, they are disconnected from their children's lives. These parents might superficially seem permissive in that they don't set firm limits, but they lack the warm connection that permissive parents seek with their children. They are low on both nurture and structure and high on uninvolvement—not on latitude, which consists of providing real support for children's autonomy. These parents' uninvolved posture does not represent a principled stance; it is a kind of default. They are fundamentally detached from their children. Some research estimates the proportion of these parents at around a quarter to a third of the population (in one study, 25 percent let their children choose their own school courses, 30 percent did not know how well their children were doing at school, and 33 percent did not know how the children spent their spare time). Adolescents from these homes were much more likely to show immaturity and adjustment difficulties, along with lower self-esteem, self-reliance, and social competence.[2]

Authoritative parents are centrists. They lie between the authoritarians and the permissives, but not because they are paler versions of either. What distinguishes them is that they are relatively high on all three dimensions: nurture, structure, and latitude. Their approach to their children is very accepting but also firm (though not narrowly rigid), and it also encourages the child's autonomy. These parents tend to emphasize both caring *and* responsibility, not one or the other. They want their children to be happy, but also to be considerate, hard working, and self-governing, and they will tolerate friction to foster these outcomes, but without stifling exploration and expressiveness. In this kind of childrearing the whole turns out to be greater than the sum of its parts: high levels of nurture, structure, and latitude amplify each other. Acceptance, as noted earlier, enhances firmness. When children are unhesitatingly sure of a parent's love, they can more readily stand being disciplined—indeed, accepting parental limits helps them feel valued and virtuous. At the same time, firmness supplements acceptance. For example, temperamentally shy infants are more likely to overcome their anxiety and avoidance if they grow up with nurturing mothers who set clear and direct limits and demand age-appropriate levels of conformity and responsibility than if they are raised by equally nurturing mothers who are very protective and less firm. The latter actually exacerbate their children's uncertainty and hesitancy—precisely the opposite of the result they intend.[3]

Over the past thirty years the hundreds of research studies that have examined, in one form or another, the impact of these dimensions of childrearing have shown, almost unanimously, that children develop in healthier ways (by American standards) and do better in school when their parents are authoritative. And no studies have ever found better results for American children when their parents are authoritarian or permissive. No kind of parenting is a panacea, of course, and parents (and educators) must now compete with an unprecedented array of external influences that affect children—challenges to be explored in later chapters. Here, it is

enough to emphasize that authoritative parenting fosters academic and social competence, empathy and considerateness toward others, self-esteem and the ability to self-regulate, and optimism and perseverance.[4]

Mothers and Fathers

Although authoritative parenting might potentially be offered by anyone, it is ideally provided by a child's mother and father, working together and fulfilling complementary but different roles. Without doubt, the behavior of parents includes large areas of actual and potential overlap. Apart from giving birth and breastfeeding, most of the child-related tasks they perform are technically interchangeable. Not every mother is highly nurturant and some fathers are. Many factors combine to shape one's childrearing role, including personality, identification with one's own parents, and values. Most people, for example, choose a partner whose personality differs from their own; these differences create a childrearing dynamic to which children must adapt. One parent may dominate the household while the other serves as a kind of assistant, or a couple may practice a division of labor in which each controls certain areas of parenting, or they may share leadership and tasks equally. Assumption of these roles often depends in good part on the example set in one's family of origin. We parent much as we were parented, and usually more in the manner of our same-sex parent, though not always and by no means exclusively. And our raising of children is also affected by our values and our beliefs about the nature of human nature.

These and other factors play out in each family in myriad complex ways that defy simple generalization. Since children can grow up healthily in a wide variety of settings, it is worth emphasizing that any childrearing arrangement that offers sufficient levels of nurture, structure, and latitude is good for children. But the norm throughout the world is sex-differentiated parenting. In all cultures, fathers and mothers engage with children differently; few parents

adopt, even for a short time, the behaviors and attitudes characteristic of the other sex—and virtually none do so with ease and effectiveness. And the evidence is very strong that these differences benefit children, that sex-typed parenting enhances their competence as they grow up. The distinct styles and strengths of men and women that lead a father and mother to be different as parents suit them wonderfully to provide jointly the nurture, structure, and latitude that help children develop strong roots and wings.

To the dismay of some, the differences between mothers and fathers conform, in the main, to traditional stereotypes. The characteristic differences in the natural way males and females think, feel, and act clearly express themselves in parenting. On key dimensions of childrearing men and women diverge in style—not hugely, but in important ways. The short form is that evolution prepared women to be nurturers and relaters, men to be hunters and aggressors. At the most fundamental level, biology predisposes women to be more parental than men through the hormones activated during pregnancy and childbirth, the physiology and psychology of lactation, and so on. Research into stress has shed new light on fundamental gender differences in neurobiology. When faced with a threat, both men and women experience the so-called fight-or-flight response, in which heartbeat, blood pressure, and levels of epinephrine and norepinephrine all rise and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical system kicks into gear. These responses all prepare us to flee danger or, if necessary, turn and resist it. However, testosterone and other male hormones seem to accelerate these biological reactions. For women, meanwhile, stress also stimulates production of the hormone oxytocin, which is primarily known for helping to induce labor in pregnant women, lactation in newly delivered mothers, and sexual receptivity. It typically induces a state of calm—and also stimulates nurturing and caretaking behavior. Oxytocin's effect is magnified by estrogen. Although men, too, produce oxytocin, its impact appears to be weakened by male hormones.[5]

Active participation in childrearing, especially of infants, is not a primary role for fathers around the world; providing for (and protecting) wives and children is. Men do have parental instincts, but they have no hormonal priming, and in most cultures active, direct paternal involvement is discretionary. Provisioning and protecting, however, are almost universally mandatory. Even in twenty-first-century America, these requirements apply. Fathers no longer need to hunt, but they are still the primary breadwinners in most families. Women have always shared the task of provisioning, and in America over the past fifty years they have entered the workforce en masse and made enormous breakthroughs in corporate, medical, legal, and other professional fields, enabling many to be highly successful wage-earners. Still, providing financially remains chiefly the man's role in families and both husbands and wives see a man's failure to do so (but not a woman's) as a serious, fundamental shortcoming.

As for protection, men are physically stronger than women, more likely to be aggressive and to take risks. Today the need for actual physical defense and safekeeping is nothing like what it was in past centuries, but it is not unimportant. It is still the man who is expected to go downstairs at night and investigate a strange noise. And mothers and children in families without fathers are at measurably greater risk of assault and abuse.[6] Cultures, it seems, "respond to the universal biological role of women [in birth and nursing] by setting up universal cultural arrangements that place women and children together, not just in infancy but beyond." In this way they supplement biological predisposition "with a heavy overlay of cultural expectations and demands."[7]

In those societies, including our own, where the father's role goes beyond providing and protecting and the norm is for both parents to participate in parenting, the evidence is that they do so differently, particularly with respect to communication, discipline, and play. For the most part, these differences are matters of degree or emphasis. Communication styles are a good example. In conversation,

fathers tend to be briefer, more directive and concrete; mothers, more discursive, less directive, more focussed on feelings. Fathers tend to use more imperatives and more assertion of power with children, to see them as potential adults and to focus on their progress toward productive maturity. Mothers tend to be much more attuned, receptive, and reciprocal, to read cues better, and to engage in conversation about feelings and ideas for its own sake rather than for instruction. However, the overall differences, though clear, are not large; most parents communicate in all these ways with their children.[8]

Similar but greater differences appear when it comes to play and discipline. Much research confirms that fathers and mothers play with their children differently. A mother generally does so in a more caretaking manner, often following the child's initiatives sensitively and adapting herself to the child's style. A father more typically adopts a rough-and-tumble, physical approach, one that moves from the lifting of infants to physical games and sports for older children, often with a teaching component. Fathers' play with children seems to be much more arousing than mothers'. In this kind of play, as in other ways they deal with children, they generally emphasize "competition, challenge, initiative, risk taking, and independence," whereas mothers are more likely to emphasize caretaking, safety, and emotional security.[9]

In matters of discipline both parents make important contributions. Mothers typically do much more of the daily training about the rights and wrongs of behavior, because they spend much more time with the children, but fathers also do lots of teaching, especially as children get older. Mothers are more likely to be responsive to a child's temperament and the situation, and to explain and negotiate; fathers, to be firmer, more matter-of-fact, and to emphasize rules and principles. Research studies have found that mothers are more hesitant to impose discipline and punishment and children are more willing to challenge them. Having to integrate firmness and direction with nurturance is by no means easy, and many mothers take

more readily to the role of confidante than that of disciplinarian. Fathers may be uncertain about whether and when to engage actively with children, but not in the content or style of what they do. Accustomed in their work lives to hierarchical relationships, they are ready for a paternal role that often calls for them to assume authority. They are more willing to confront and limit their children and to enforce punishment. Children everywhere naturally see them as the more powerful, stern, even threatening parent.[10]

It is important to add a note here about the special importance of fathers. A substantial body of data now links paternal involvement and nurturance with children's academic, psychological, and social competence. For example, children of involved fathers are more likely to show higher quantitative and verbal skills and better problem solving and overall school achievement than children of disengaged fathers. Daughters who have a father present are more likely to do well in mathematics; this is even more true for sons. Paternal nurturance appears also to contribute to boys' verbal intelligence.[11] In this regard, a key function for fathers is as a role model for sons—and, in a different way, for daughters, too.

Boys learn what it means to be a father primarily from the example set by their own. They learn about responsibility and achievement, about being assertive and independent, about self-control, and about dealing appropriately with females. During their teenage years especially, boys need a male presence that projects authority and discipline and models the control of impulses, or else they are much more likely to engage in risky and antisocial peer behavior.[12] Among boys who have infrequent contact with their fathers, whether resulting from divorce or other reasons, the likelihood of exaggerated macho behavior is notably greater. Much of the most negative teen behavior occurs among adolescents from fatherless, single-mother homes; these youth are especially prone to negative peer influences.[13]

Fathers are also important to daughters. They provide girls' earliest and primary learning about heterosexual difference and also

about heterosexual trust. They often treat daughters in ways that would once have been called chivalrous, and they are likely to express approval of a girl's femininity, even when she is young. A loving, respectful relationship between father and daughter helps teach a girl that she is worthy of love and also begins to introduce her to the complexities of getting along in a male-dominated world.[14] As a statistical matter, the active presence of a father is a significant factor in helping girls avoid premature sex and pregnancy and develop a sense of independence and self-assertion.[15]

Research that links good fathering to limit setting, safety, and children's instrumental accomplishments may not be surprising. However, evidence also shows that good fathering contributes to the development of empathy, something usually seen as a female preserve, and to adult happiness. A twenty-six-year longitudinal study of the relationship between parenting in early childhood and the capacity of children to experience sympathy and compassion for others as adults astonished the researchers. They found that the most important factor of all the ones they surveyed was paternal involvement in child care. Not maternal, *paternal*.[16] A fascinating study of young adults found that those who were emotionally close to their fathers lived, on the whole, happier and more satisfied lives, *regardless* of their feelings toward their mothers.[17]

As outlined here, mothers and fathers both play important—but generally different—roles in all three areas of nurture, structure, and latitude. Nurture is predominantly a mother's realm, rooted in the biological predispositions that come with pregnancy, birth, and nursing, and the attuned engagement, the sensitivity to feelings, and interest in emotionality that characterizes women much more than men. But if the father's role is secondary here, it is not unimportant. A mother's more empathic, reciprocal style is not the only way to develop parent-child intimacy; a father's playful style of interaction creates an important connection of its own. And as just noted, having an involved, engaged father contributes significantly to the capacity for empathy and compassion.

Structure is more typically a father's domain than a mother's. Fathers' greater willingness to confront and limit children, their tendency to see things more in matter-of-fact terms, to emphasize responsibility, and to focus on children as future adults all tend to give them a primary role in structure, particularly with respect to limit setting and discipline, but also in terms of expectations for achievement. As noted, the presence of a father in a household typically exerts a significant influence against adolescent acting out, both for boys and girls. However, mothers are also important to the structuring of children's behavior. As noted earlier, they usually provide much of the daily education and guidelines about what is right and wrong and do much of the frontline limit setting. Their expectations for achievement are important to their children. And a strong nurturing connection, in which mothers play a key role, contributes to children's ability and willingness to accept structure.

Latitude may be the area with the most parity in the natural contributions of parents, and therefore the area that offers the most visible value of having both a father and a mother. In general, men are more likely to be bolder with children in physical ways, to give them more freedom, even to encourage them to explore, try, take a risk. Women are not insensitive to these initiatives—many encourage their children in similar ways—but on the whole they are more likely to emphasize safety, harmony, and mutuality. However, when it comes to the expression of feeling and the maintenance and improvement of relationships, mothers are often more likely to tolerate and foster greater autonomy and latitude for children to voice feelings, wishes, and needs, while fathers are, as a rule, less interested in and tolerant of this kind of expression. In this respect, mothers, too, help children learn to explore, try, and take a risk. The key point in all this is that children need what both fathers and mothers naturally tend to provide. No wonder an extensive review of studies of parenting found children raised by traditionally sex-typed parents to be more competent than others.[18]

To reflect back on the summary of nurture, structure, and latitude is to see that any parent alone would be hard-pressed to be a sufficient and continuous source of all three over time. I have already emphasized that the areas of overlap between mothers and fathers can be quite high, but the natural stylistic differences between them make a mother and father ideally suited to provide what children need. This definitely does *not* mean that single parents, stepparents, or adoptive parents can't do well by children, and it certainly doesn't mean that biological pairs always do so. It means that two caregivers are almost always likely to be better than one, and that however they are mated, it is ideal for them to combine the advantages that good natural mothering and good natural fathering provide.

The Social Context

Children aren't just raised by a family, of course, but by a family in a social context. We live in nested social spheres that begin in the home and extend out through the neighborhood to the larger society. Key to growing up, therefore, is the goodness of fit between a family and the community in which it is embedded. No matter how well parents nurture children, if they prepare them for a way of life that differs markedly from the society's prevailing norms, their children may encounter difficulty adapting as adults. For all but the last eyeblink of human history this was not an issue. Life was local. People lived in relatively small, homogeneous communities, sharing a common culture, language, religion, and outlook. Rates of change in norms and customs, in technology and communications, were generally low and incremental. If this left little room for choice, it also left little room for doubt; it maximized the likelihood that parents would hold their children to similar expectations and inculcate similar values, that other adults in the community would reinforce these expectations and values, and that children would reach adulthood well adapted for community membership.

In the twenty-first century we live amid accelerating change and unprecedented diversity. Life is no longer local. For all the richness and opportunity this creates it complicates the raising of children, both because of the range of varied influences that reach children directly, even at early ages, and because of the fragmentation of social norms and expectations, which decrease community cohesion and make it difficult to ensure a good fit between family and society. As children grow up and engage more with the world beyond the family, their individual identities are affected by the spheres in which they move and the groups (gender, kinship, peer, racial, ethnic, religious) to which they belong. Parents can influence these additions to a child's identity but cannot control them.

Even in our increasingly diverse and fragmented society, the evidence is impressive that children develop better when they grow up in families rooted in strong communities. The evidence comes primarily from scholars who have been studying the effects of "social capital," their term for what most of us would call "community." (Technically, *social capital* refers to the "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them."[19]) The functioning of families is enhanced in a neighborhood where people share similar values, trust each other, and can count on one another to keep an eye on children and to support public order. Urban neighborhoods with high levels of social capital have been shown to have significantly less violence and homicide than similar neighborhoods with lower levels of social capital.[20]

The effects of this kind of social capital are extensive. For example, schools in strong communities experience greater support from parents and less misbehavior and disruption by students. In an extensive review of the research on social capital, Robert Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard, shows that when it comes to minimizing student violence, two factors stand out as being most effective—two-parent families and community-based social capital—and together they stand way out, dwarfing the significance of

poverty, among other social conditions. Socioeconomic status clearly plays a significant role in children's overall health and well-being, but social capital ranks right behind—and ahead of racial composition. Poverty is a powerful contributor to premature pregnancy, mortality, and idleness, but community engagement has precisely the opposite effect. Moreover, other factors being equal, higher neighborhood cohesion is associated with lower rates of child abuse, and in similar communities with similar income levels and similar rates of working women and single-parent households, social capital is the chief characteristic making one safer for children than another.[21] Unhappily, social capital is declining. I will return to this important challenge to children and parents in later chapters.

For many parents, particularly those whose children are adolescent, the beyond-the-family influence of greatest concern is that of their children's friends—peer pressure, as we have come to call it. No doubt peers are important throughout life—civilization would be impossible without certain kinds of peer pressure—and particularly as children grow into adolescence. The rise of what is sometimes seen as a separate youth culture in America has left many parents feeling powerless to shape the social behavior and foster the school performance of their teenagers. The short form of this worry is, in essence, that other people's children will corrupt our own, undermining our impact as parents.[22] In fact, research suggests that peer influence is broader than it is deep; that it involves similarity much more than influence; that individuals shape peer response more than we think; and most important, that parents can affect peer selection and susceptibility, though not necessarily in direct ways.

Perhaps the first thing to emphasize about peer influence among teenagers and preteens is that although it seems omnipresent and omnipotent, it does not operate at fundamental levels of personality. It acts strongly upon everyday behavior—dress and language, tastes in music, fads and crazes, attitudes—but not nearly as strongly upon underlying character traits. For one thing, peers do not begin to have a significant effect on a child until the age of seven or eight,

by which time most basic traits, such as sociability, introversion, perseverance, and responsiveness to authority, have already been well established. Attitudes and tastes can have a significant influence on a person's life; I do not dismiss them lightly. But they change with time in ways that personality does not. For another, the evidence is that by the time they reach adolescence, if not before, children seek like-minded peers; we need to be careful not to mistake peer *similarity* for peer *influence*. Antisocially inclined children tend to link up with other antisocials; high-achieving students tend to connect with other high achievers. It is much less common for teenagers to be seduced by delinquents who change their personality than for teens to pick friends and gravitate toward certain peers *because of* their personality.

This selection effect may stem from the fact that children and adolescents, far from being just the product of peer influences, also act in ways that shape the responses of peers. This has been confirmed in fascinating studies of children who were aggressive and disruptive at school and rejected by classmates. Researchers had them participate in two kinds of playgroups, one consisting of peers from school, the other of strangers. When playing with school peers who already knew them, they were clearly rejected during the first session, as might be expected. However, in the groups where all the participants were initially strangers, these children, by only the third or fourth meeting, were also being rejected by the others. This offers a sharp challenge to the notion that rejected children are simply victims of negative perceptions by peers and strongly suggests that their own behavior helps provoke the rebuffs they receive.[23]

Although parents may feel helpless to influence a teenager's social contacts, they do, in fact, shape them. This can't be done directly by, say, trying to forbid one friendship and foster another—such efforts are generally futile. Instead, parents exert influence in part by the neighborhood they choose to live in. In communities characterized by high levels of social capital, teens not only encounter higher levels of parental oversight and structure in their

own homes, they also meet more peers who are raised by authoritative parents and are themselves better at self-regulation. Many poor families, of course, have few options about where they can live, and the only housing they can afford is often in areas that have low levels of social capital, which means that there will be less collective adult support and supervision of children.

None of this is to deny that peers affect each other, particularly in adolescence. During the teen years peers can have a great impact on one another's alcohol and drug use and sexual experimentation. They can also affect school performance. For example, the much-discussed lag in academic achievement by African American high school students appears to reflect in part an attitude that being smart and working hard constitutes a kind of sellout—being "too white." This attitude is by no means the only contributor to the problem, but where it prevails, it can discourage black students, even those whose parents are upper-middle-class, college-educated professionals, from enrolling in challenging courses and investing in their work. (By contrast, Asian American students, even those whose parents are disengaged and underinvolved, generally have a peer group that values effort and worries about the consequences of not doing well in school.)[24] On a broader scale, it is certainly true that America is more peer-oriented and age-stratified than most societies—often far more. As far back as the 1830s Alexis de Tocqueville, the great French observer of post-Revolutionary America, noted this, reporting that little remained of the traditional family in America except a few vestiges during early childhood.[25] Since the 1970s, psychologists and other observers have pointed to the amount of time American children spend with peers, suggesting America was becoming a society segregated by age.[26]

Despite all this, parents remain, as David Elkind, author of *The Hurried Child* and one of the nation's leading psychologists, says, "the single most powerful, nonbiological influence on their children's lives."[27] And the most significant thing that parents can do about peer pressure—it is truly significant—is to be authoritative

throughout childhood, to provide sufficient levels of nurture, structure, and latitude and so help children establish a strong internal compass. This does not make children immune to peer pressure, but it does affect their behavior with their friends and classmates in positive ways. Authoritative parents who are both responsive and demanding raise children who tend to be less susceptible to dangerous peer influence (drugs and alcohol, for example) and to perform better in school than the children of parents who are permissive or authoritarian. Their children internalize the box within which they have been raised. They are more inclined to pause, to think twice before engaging in risky behavior, to reflect on the consequences of their actions, to learn from their mistakes, and to connect with peers whose priorities include academic success. What this means is that much of what we call peer influence is in critical ways the outcome of earlier family influence, and that the best time to be influential with adolescents is well before adolescence.[28]

It also means that the spread of adolescent peer influence, which is just one aspect of the general deterioration in behavior, values, readiness, and performance that prompted this book, reflects a decline in authoritative parenting. In fact, it reflects an abandonment by many parents of fundamental developmental function. This abandonment is unplanned and often involves factors beyond their control, but it risks profound consequences for our children, our schools, and our nation. We need to understand it, its causes and context, as a basis for knowing how best to help schools respond.

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514.342.0000 poste 3846
carol.liverman@ometz.ca

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