

How to Grow a Child

by

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The week before Halloween I was at the River Hills Mall looking at a cheerleader costume when a father caught my attention. He had his little boy, who looked about the age of three, by the shoulders, and was shaking him back and forth while yelling at him not to touch the store merchandise. When the little boy would not stop bawling, the father yanked him from the front of the cart so hard it knocked one of his shoes off. The father then proceeded to slap the boy across the mouth and said, "If you can't shut up, you can go bawl by your mom." With that, he slapped him on the behind and pushed his cart out of the store. He left his shoeless, crying son to fend for himself in a store full of strangers with no mother in sight.

Naturally, I was deeply disturbed by this scene. After I realized the father was not coming back to the store, I helped the child find his mother. That night I had trouble sleeping as I thought of that family and of all the duties I was going to have as a parent. Since that night, I have become very interested in parenting and how to raise a child.

Giving care to a child is not an easy task. For me, becoming a parent in today's society is one of the most daunting assignments I believe I will face. Many questions race through my mind, such as how I will set limits for my children, but still let them make their own decisions. Or, how I am going to teach them to follow the rules, yet, be sure each one grows up to be an independent person. And, what can I do to teach them to be assertive and goal oriented, but still practice kindness and compassion.

After all this pondering, I have come to the conclusion that raising a child is much like growing a flower garden. At this point I would like to clarify that I am not saying that bringing up a child is nearly as easy as growing a flower. However, certain principles apply to both raising a child and growing a flower garden.

I recall a moment last summer when I had to discipline a boy named Andrew, who played on my T-ball team. He would get up to the plate with his hands gripped tightly around the bat and his butt swaying side to side. When that pitch came, he swung with all this might, and most of the time he hit the ball. However, if he missed, he would beat the ground with the bat and utter a four letter word that even took my breath away. The first time this happened he got off with a warning. The second, he lost his turn at bat. Yet, his behavior persisted, and as a coach I did not think I could continue to let an eight year-old talk like that. So, I decided to mention it to his father, who religiously stood next to the stands at every practice. After talking with him for only two minutes I realized where Andrew had learned all his four letter words. As Andrew joined us, his father ruffled his hair saying, "Boy you sure smacked the hell outta' that ball today, didn't cha'?"

Bamboo, instead of growing straight up and down, can be grown in spirals. Vines can be guided to grow up a post or weave in and out of a fence. If a flower is left to grow in a dark corner, it will grow sideways toward a light source. Parents, just like gardeners, have the power to mold their children (Blume). Children learn from their parents, consciously and subconsciously, which behaviors are acceptable and which are not (Blume). Therefore, parents can lead their children to act in a certain manner. Eventually, children may accept their parent's behaviors as their own and use them to make decisions

for themselves (Ryder 19). In little Andrew's case, he grew up with a father who carelessly swore around his son. Therefore, Andrew has grown up to swear as well. I think both gardeners and parents would agree that flowers and children need a certain amount of attention, but the kind of attention each requires is different. Neither, however, will do well if they are neglected. The night before the first big freeze, gardeners cover up their beautiful plants so they do not shrivel up and die in the cold. Without warmth and a little tender loving care, the flowers will not grow back the following spring so the gardener can enjoy them again. In comparison, children too need warmth and nurtur in order to grow up and develop properly (Ryder 180). As children are growing up they need consistent care and attention. This is especially important from birth to eighteen months, because this period sets the stage for later emotional growth. During this time, trust is gained by consistently attending to baby's needs. Giving children consistent attention lets them know that the world is a warm and safe place. Therefore, they are able to grow up trusting the world and develop a positive self-concept (Hildebrand 322). On the other hand, children who have been neglected will feel that the world is a frightening place, and they may have emotional or behavioral problems later in life (Hildebrand 322).

I have a friend who gets up every morning at 6:00, drops her three year-old son off at daycare at 7:30 and arrives at work at 8:00. After a full day of work she picks her son up and sometimes will do a few loads of laundry before making supper at home. Then, she gets her son ready for bed before finally sitting down for an hour or so with her fiancé. She is a 22 year-old, unwed mother, and was not always as responsible as she is now.

I look at myself, knowing that I am just three years younger than she is, and wonder what the difference between the two of us was and why we are leading two different lives now. I cannot imagine working full-time, taking care of a house, and paying all my own bills now, much less adding a child into the mix of responsibilities. As I examine our family lives they are not so different. Both of our parents are happily married with good jobs; we come from the same sized families; and we grew up in similar communities. However, our parents' disciplinary style and involvement in our lives as we grew up differs. For example, my friend got a smoking ticket when she was in high school. Her parents punished her by yelling at her. My parents, on the contrary, made it very clear that they expected me to make healthy and law-abiding decisions, and if I was caught smoking I would be grounded for two weekends.

While growing up, I was given choices by my parents; however, I still had to stay within the limits that were set for me. For example, as a teenager I was given a curfew according to my age. I had to be home by the designated time. If I was late, I had to come home an hour earlier the next time I went out. On the other hand, my friend did not have any clear boundaries. She would come and go as she pleased and was able to do and say what she wanted. If a garden is not weeded, or the bushes framing it are not trimmed, soon the plants will be growing wildly in all directions. If children do not have boundaries, or if they are not disciplined, soon they will be growing wildly in all directions. I believe that our parents' different disciplinary styles played a role in the different lives we are leading now. That was just one example of how parents can guide their children's behavior. Children need to know they have restrictions so they can grow

up to make healthy decisions as adults. Offering choices and setting rules and limits help a child gain self-control (Hildebrand 473).

If a gardener forgets to weed a garden one week, the next week it will be overrun with unwanted and unattractive weeds. If a gardener forgets to cover the plants during just one freeze, the flowers will not grow back the following spring. Likewise, if a parent decides that for just one week they do not want to be a parent, the results can have long-lasting consequences. Parenting, just like gardening, requires dedication. If one step is skipped, for even a short period of time, all that one has worked so hard for can quickly wither away. I don't have a very green thumb; however, when I am ready to be a parent I hope to use my metaphor to raise happy and healthy children.

Works Cited

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