

The Challenge of Being a Parent

By: Bonnie-Jo Westendorf, Extension Educator

Of all the jobs in the world, being a parent may be the trickiest and the one for which we receive the least amount of training. There are times when it seems that we will never understand our children, or they us, and no matter what we do it isn't the right thing. Parenting will never be easy, but by learning more about our children and their needs, and by talking to other parents, we can learn many things to help us be more effective parents.

What are the most important things parents can do for their children? How can you tell when you are a successful parent? What are the qualities you most want your children to develop? Some child psychologists suggest that there are two qualities that are most important for children – and all people – to develop. The first quality is to be strong. Children need to learn to make decisions, to be responsible and to be trustworthy. They need to learn how to deal with difficult situations. The second quality is to be caring. Children need to learn to love and be loved, to care about people, to show respect, to be close with their families and others they care about.

Developing both strength and caring is important, but it is not easy. H. Wallace Goddard, Extension Family and Child Development Specialist from the Dept. Of Family and Child Development at Auburn University, has the following suggestions as to how to accomplish this.

How can we develop strong children? What experiences do you think will help children become strong? If a child is to become a strong, capable person, he needs to see his world as a safe and predictable place. In order to learn that his world is safe, he should not be hurt or frightened. He needs to explore and experiment within safe limits. The important people in his life need to be consistent and treat him with respect.

Imagine you are a child – your child. Do you think that you would see your home as a safe and predictable place? Close your eyes and imagine a day at your house as a child. Are you given many opportunities to explore? Are reasonable rules made? Are the rules enforced firmly and consistently, as well as kindly?

If the answers to these questions were such that your child doesn't see his home as safe and predictable, then you may want to make some changes. Think about what things you can move to make the house safe. Identify some fun and safe things you can provide for your child to play with. And finally, think about how you can kindly re-direct your child to another toy or activity if you find her playing with something unsafe.

How can we develop caring children? What experiences do you think will help children become caring, loving people? If a child is to become a caring, loving person, she needs to see her world as a loving and sensitive place. When parents take time to be helpful and understand a child's needs, they are helping the child to feel loved.

Once again, try to imagine that you are your own child. From that point of view, do you see your home as a safe and caring place? Do people take time to understand your feelings and do they

express their love to you? When they make mistakes, do they try to find better ways to help?

If people are often unloving or unkind at your home, you may want to think about making some changes. A good first step is to think about some methods for dealing with stresses in your life that may be contributing to your unkind and uncaring ways. You may also want to give some thought to how you can send messages of love to your child so that she knows you care about and love her.

Now you might be asking yourself, how am I going to do this? It sounds like a lot of work! The fact is, good parenting is easier in the long run. It's like good car repair. When car repair is done by someone with good tools who understands the job, the car will run well. Good and effective parenting develops children who are more likely to be happy, capable, responsible and enjoyable.

Reading about parenting, taking classes in parenting and visiting with other good parents will help you be more effective. It takes effort and time to learn about children and how to best work with them. It is important to remember that each parent has different strengths and weaknesses. Identifying these is critical – use your strengths to the max and learn ways to strengthen and work on the weaknesses. And, just as with parents, each child has differences which make them special and unique. We must work at understanding each child and her unique abilities and needs.

Yes, parenting is hard! But as you develop confidence and competence in you're your parenting skills and watch your children develop into caring, confident people, you will know that it was all worth it!