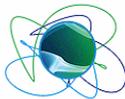


Parenting In Perspective

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Some Final Thoughts...

Are you looking forward to the day when you swap your hectic schedule for more personal quality time and a far more peaceful life-style?

Are you stressed-out and taken for granted by unappreciative kids or teenagers, who:
Drop things but don't pick them up,
Dirty things but don't wash them,
Turn things on but don't turn them off,
Remove remote controls and phones but never put them back in the right place,
Hear the phone ringing but completely ignore it unless it's their own personal mobile?
Are willing to sit beside you for a lift in the car, but desperate to keep a healthy distance from you when they're walking up town with their mates.

Well you're not alone in experiencing this behaviour - but you will be alone one day... when those self-centred, unappreciative little brats have fled the nest – then things are going to be different, so different!

Your car will get its home back – the garage will no longer be cluttered with bats, balls, skates, skate-boards and bikes. The kitchen will look like a new showroom – no sticky dishes piling up in the sink, no marmalade jars with lids off and saturated with butter. The phone will be amazingly quiet and always in its place. The sofa will be absolutely crumb-free, and there'll be no more funerals for mice, gerbils or hamsters!

One day in the future – instead of looking forward to a peaceful life, you'll be looking back and yearning for those frantic days of clutter and inconvenience, which is so much part of a family home.

Don't focus so much on the future, that you miss out on the here and now!

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We have to laugh or we'd cry. Let's also remember that in this publication we have purposely highlighted the *problems* and not the *pleasures* of parenting. There are, of course, innumerable pleasures but it was the problems that parents wanted to focus on through this publication.

My own antidote to stress is to put pen to paper. Below is a poem based on my own experience of being a parent! This is dedicated to those of you who have watched at the window, seemingly for hours, in the hope that the next set of car headlights will be the ones that pull up outside your house with your daughter safely inside.

**Midnight at the latest
I'll be back dad, that's true
So why the heck am I still up?
It's almost five past two!
She promised that she'd ring me
If plans were modified
And this is not the first time
She's eye-balled me and lied
I cannot watch the TV
I cannot settle down
There's no way I can stand outside
In my wife's dressing gown!
The police, perhaps I'll phone them
Or one of her good mates
But they all switch their mobiles off
When they're on red-hot dates
Oh blow it, boy I'm angry
I really am brassed off
So when she comes in through the door
She'll really meet my wrath
My mumbles get much louder
My wife comes down to see
Whatever's all that noise, she asked?
You've gone and woken me
And then the boyfriend's wagon
Pulls up at our address
She comes inside
Hi Mum, Hi Dad
Gosh you're both looking stressed!**

Feelings: Be honest about feelings, underlying anger can often be present. For reasons given above allow the youngster to express frustrations/anger in an open and uninterrupted way. This will result in him/her releasing themselves from their pent up anger as well as making them feel listened to and valued. The result will be a more clear-headed, calm and rationale youngster who is able to engage with constructive dialogue.

Facts: Now it will be easier to separate fact from hot air. It may be that issues emerge which are totally unrelated to the cause of the original conflict.

Fears: Next, tentatively try to uncover the real fears/concerns of your youngster. This will give you a real insight into their perceptions which in turn will enhance your understanding of their behaviour and enable your relationship to develop further. The safer they feel, the more they will share.

Forward: Now you're both ready to explore ways forward. Listen to where your youngster wants to be/get to before they get bogged down in detail about how to get there. Once they can clearly visualise where they want to be, only then you gently might steer them into ways of getting there. Remember, the journey belongs to them, they must own it. You may not always be there when the going gets tough, so they alone should be in control of their own destiny.

Finalise: This is where you dot the I's and cross the T's. It's about times, dates, specific support strategies and managing the process. Whereas this is the *how* factor, the above category is the *wow* (you can do it) factor.

(You will find more strategies and techniques in '*The Core Essentials of Effective Parenting*'.)

If issues relate to a form of habit, the booklet entitled: '*I Don't Care About Tomorrow... Let Me Get Through Today First*' may be useful.

If issues relate to emotional/social perceptions, worry/guilt or lack of optimism, self-esteem or assertiveness, key aspects of the *Perspective Probing Programme* may be helpful. Aspects of the above programme may also be useful for gaining insights into both child/adult attitude towards life, school and relationships in general.

Lighter Reflections

On a lighter note, let's remember that humour can be a great release when we need to rise above the drudgery of day-to-day parenting.

I was informed by one mum that she'd spent the first two years of her son's life teaching him to walk and talk. Then spent the next sixteen years telling him to sit down and shut up. Another mum once made a flippant remark that since she'd had teenagers, she now knows why some animals eat their young. A couple in their thirties told me that the main purpose they allowed their kids to have birthday parties was to be reminded that there are kids out there even more awful than their own.

Introduction

This short book may not change the challenges that you face, but it will change the way you face those challenges.

Whereas, '*The Core Essentials of Effective Parenting*' focuses on some basic strategies and techniques related to effective parenting; '*Parenting in Perspective*' gives an insight into why parenting seems to be such an uphill struggle in our modern chaotic society. By appreciating and gaining an insight into how the larger picture can influence our youngsters, we can regain a sense of proportion, meaning and perhaps also control.

Communicating With Your Youngster/Dealing With Anger And The Five 'F's

There has been a dramatic increase in parents informing me about angry youngsters. For one reason or another it appears to be on the increase. This is why I have included the final section below: **Dealing with Anger**. It does not aim at analysing why anger is on the increase so much as an effective way to deal with it (see below).

Communication in its simplest form might be described as *Listen and Respond*. This may well be sufficient in contexts where basic information is simply shared. However, effective communication within a highly-charged emotional context should consist of ***Listening, Responding and then Speaking***.

The Responding category is about active listening regarding eye-contact, facial expression/body language that indicate an interested listener. If the speaker feels he/she is really being listened to through such a response and therefore taken seriously, he/she in turn will be more likely to listen when the listener replies.

Dealing with Anger

Anger tends to block intellectual pathways and inhibits your ability to reason.

Think about the last time you were cut across by another car on the motorway and had to break sharply. That's bad enough, but when the driver sneers and puts his fingers up at you too, you've gone from Mr/Mrs Reasonable to Mr/Mrs Rage in a millisecond and want revenge.

You'd probably put your own and others' lives at risk pursuing this maniac to get even. In doing so, you cause other drivers to take evasive action against you – now who's the maniac?

Can you think of examples in your parenting role where anger has also caused over-the-top reactions? If you're like me, I'm sure you can. Remember, even the most intelligent and respectful person can look really wild and stupid when they get angry!

Therefore, when your youngster displays anger, remember they won't be thinking straight and meeting it head-on only intensifies it. Instead, try adopting some of these approaches and you will actually witness the anger diminish as it is allowed to blow itself out from the youngster in question.

When having a discussion about an emotive subject it may be wise to remember the *five 'F's*.

There is a section for youngsters whose parents have split up and some very useful support contacts, coupled with guidance on some useful reading. Also included is an Agony Aunt's email contact details so you can interact and receive your own personalised advice/guidance.

How To Assist Your Child In Becoming A Drug User

In a past Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Health/Education newsletter entitled 'Well Connected' the parent was reminded of 12 ways **to encourage** their child to be a problematic drug user. They were:

- Never eat as a family
- Never have family outings together
- Talk at, not to, your children and never listen to them
- Always solve their problems, make their decisions for them
- Never praise them or reinforce good behaviour
- Never let your children experience cold, fatigue, adventure, injury, risk, challenge, failure or experimentation
- Discourage your child from talking about his/her feelings
- Don't encourage them to take responsibility
- Make your child feel that their mistakes are sins
- Never tell them how much you love them
- Always expect the worst and never give them the benefit of the doubt
- Don't ever trust them

Reflect on the above and be truthful with yourself; can you see your own attitude in any of the above behaviours? If so, think about how you might change your approach in the future. However, don't be hard on yourself, it really is understandable to want to protect your child in person from everything the world throws at him/her. But in reality, they must learn to spot the potential hazards for themselves and discover their own ways of coping with them. Remember, the first time they feel pressurised into taking drugs you're unlikely to be around and they'll have to manage the situation themselves.

Setting The Context

The text below has been adapted from
'The Paradox of Our Time'
attributed to George Carlin.

In this modern age we have far taller buildings but far shorter tempers; wider roads but narrower viewpoints. We buy more but enjoy it less. We have bigger houses but smaller families; more convenience but less time; we have more degrees but less sense; more experts but more problems; more medicine but less well-being.

We drink too much, eat too much, spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, get too angry too quickly, stay up too late and get up too tired.

We have multiplied our possessions but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom and hate too often. We've learnt how to make a living but not a life; we've added years to life but not life to our years. We've been all the way to the moon and back but have trouble crossing the street to meet our new neighbour.

We're cleaning up the air but polluting our souls. We've split the atom but not our prejudice. We learnt to rush through our days but not to wait on those closest to us. We build more computers to hold more data to provide more information than we will ever need.

We find it easier to interact with a computer screen than a human face. We are more aware about the worries of our favourite TV soap characters than our own off-spring's.

These are the days of collectively striving for world peace whilst individually decaying in domestic warfare. There's more leisure but less fun; more kinds of food but less nutrition. These are the days of two incomes but more divorce; of fancier houses but broken homes.

These are the days of quick fixes, fast trips and one-night stands producing a society cursed with impatience, self-indulgence and a throwaway morality, where pills are available for everything from enhancing lifestyles extinguishing life itself.



Our families do not function in a vacuum but are swamped by the culture and values of the society in which we live. Is it any wonder that we're producing more cynical, angry, confused and discontented youngsters who seek different ways of escaping from an uncaring and impersonal society? A society where deceit, lies and cheating seem to be common place at all levels and where morality has become outmoded in favour of making a fast buck, decency displaced in favour of pursuing all forms of pleasures and commitment disregarded in favour of disposable short-term relationships.

In a recent UNICEF survey of 21 countries (Feb 07) British children came one from bottom regarding happiness and bottom for family and friendships, despite at the time being the 5th richest country in the world.

You say, you can't make sense of this society anymore...How on earth do you think your child feels? If we're honest, it's we adults who have largely **produced** the environment in which we now live and our off-spring have simply become the unwitting **bi-products** of such a self-centred society.

After reading the above is it any wonder that we find many of our youngsters binge-drinking, drug taking, stealing, being violent, aggressive, greedy, lazy, complacent or indulging in under-aged sex?

It is said that a society produces the citizens it deserves as we are often a mirror image of the culture in which we are placed. In our past care-free, prosperous life-styles we have produced a generation, drunk on greed, pleasure and cursed with an 'I want it now' mentality. However, youngsters who always get what they want not only have their motivation curtailed but their sense of gratitude and contentment also severely dulled. It follows when motivation, gratitude and contentment are diminished, a sense of emptiness and discontentment emerge, resulting in negative attitudes and behaviour. Thus parents have a finely balanced role; on the one hand they should encourage their youngster to acknowledge that they are simply part of a wider entity that has been responsible for shaping their attitude, whilst care should be taken not to excuse their behaviour completely. The bottom line is to make it clear to our youngsters that they are not simply a victim to a particular state of mind that will stay with them forever.

No One's Perfect: You Are Not Alone!

Despite the above or even because of it, we need to hone our skills as parents as never before. In short, we're not just up against the negative influences of their peer group, but very often the decaying values of society at large.

So, in these difficult times, where can we turn for guidance in dealing with challenging teenagers? Many of the so-called experts may be good at *giving* advice but in *reality* have often experienced similar frustrations and failures as the rest of us. Even the Bible, which you would expect to be full of virtuous examples of effective parenting, is littered with family break-downs, betrayal and violence. It may reassure you a little to know that **you are not alone** in your struggles; those parents who haven't experienced our frustrations and fears have either been remarkably blessed with good fortune, or have it all still to come.

I will never forget the wealthy, well-educated parent who came to see me many years ago because she was burdened with guilt. Her daughter, who everyone else viewed as a very polite and respectable girl had yelled at her mum to F... Off. After a short pause I shared with her how my own daughter had said similar things to my wife the previous month. My confession not only released the tension in my office, it also lifted the burden from the poor mum who, up until then, had seen herself as a complete failure.

I am simply the messenger for hundreds of children who have trusted and confided in me, along with their peers, about these very personal issues. Although it may be politically incorrect to highlight, but through my experience, I have no hesitation in suggesting that kids are adversely affected by the break-up of their natural parents.

I am not judging the many adults who have experienced the painful process of a failing relationship and am not suggesting adults should stay together regardless of the circumstances. I also agree with the argument that if a couple are constantly fighting, parting company may be better in the long-run for their children. But however we justify and sanitise family breakdown, it should be acknowledged that through it, children often experience a great deal of emotional turmoil/suffering that can last for years.

Perhaps our children's suffering is the elephant in the room that no-one really wants to fully acknowledge. Perhaps that's why when estranged parents have their off-spring for the week-end they over indulge them in order to block their own guilt. Perhaps that's why I have so many Head teachers inform me that when some pupils return on the Monday after their week-end visit to an estranged parent they are completely off-the-wall. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps! One thing is for sure however, youngsters are past masters at playing one parent off against the other, and that's in a united household! How much easier it is for them to play off one against the other when they're separated. Kids will be kids, whether experiencing emotional turmoil or otherwise.

Therefore, after a separation, if you really want to do the best for your children:

- **Keep the communication channels open with your ex and share the gist of conversations you have with the children**
- **Agree that you're not going to compete for their affection and alleviate your guilt by over-indulging the children**
- **Accept how your children feel and resist the temptation to continually justify the situation**
- **Don't be tempted to apportion blame in front of the children**
- **Simply focus on the needs of your children, not your need to earn Brownie points**
- **Whilst it is important for parents living together to be consistent for the sake of the children, it is vital for those who are separated**

A recent publication entitled, 'Kids In The Middle' (Sanders D) and published by The Department for Children, Schools and Families is an excellent guide and resource regarding family breakdown. It contains simple down-to-earth advice and insights into the latter and points the way forward to some excellent support agencies and contact numbers.

They didn't say they wanted a parent who was a laugh-a-minute...

They didn't want an all singing, dancing and laughing parent, however, they did want a parent who was fun. In their eyes a fun parent was someone who giggled with them when they told of a funny thing that happened at school, or crept up behind them and scared the living daylights out of them. They saw fun as more an attitude of mind than a behaviour.

They didn't say they wanted a friend...

In reality they have plenty of friends who provide an important function in their lives. Although it's understandable, parents who are preoccupied with attempting to be their child's friend can be distracted from the more important parenting roles. Don't get confused between being a parent who's friendly and a parent who's simply a friend.

Remember, you didn't become a parent a minute before your child became your child; the parent/child relationship is a learning curve for both of you and neither one is more experienced in the role than the other.

Family Breakdown

I will never forget the day I taught a class of eleven year olds, which included the themes of hopes, dreams, fears and regrets. We started by sharing the things that made us laugh and made us happy. However, before long the mood changed. One of the most macho boys in the class tentatively raised his hand and without any coaxing from myself expressed his deep sorrow regarding the recent split-up between his mum and dad. Then, to my astonishment, one, two, five, eight and finally twelve children in total slowly raised their hands and expressed similar sentiments about their own situation. I really was shocked at the emotional turmoil and heart-felt regret these, otherwise level-headed children, were experiencing, and according to them, will never really get over. I couldn't fully empathise with them on that day because their experiences were beyond my own; but I do know the day in question changed my views on the amount of hurt children experience when their parents part company.

Since that day I have facilitated a variety of personal/social/health topics with junior-aged pupils and if the themes lead on to issues relating to family breakdown, the pupils responses are often similar to those above.

Years after a divorce, many youngsters desperately cling to the hope that their natural parents will one day get back together, but they have learnt to shield such desperation from their parents. Children who eventually accept that their parents may never get back together, live in hope and have a great desire that their parents will at least be friends.

Some of you might have read the above and thought, thank goodness my *child isn't like that*. All I can say is that I've worked in a support-role with scores of families in recent years with parents who had once thought that their *child wasn't like that*. Thus a sensible starting point for anyone appraising their parental role is to be realistic and accept that both they and their off-spring are far from perfect.

Over the years I have witnessed the physical damage inflicted on youngsters by bullying parents, yet, before the self-righteous 'non-smacking brigade' wave their banners in support, I would also add that I have also witnessed the psychological damage inflicted by those who have over-intellectualised the parenting role. The single truth is that in any parenting context there is no such thing as *one strategy fits all*, moreover, even in the same family, different situations will call on different responses at different times.

The bottom line is not about how effective you are in the parent role so much as how effective you are in your role as a human being.

At this point, I want to remind us all of what it's like to be human. We try so often to rationalise our own and our off-spring's behaviour in an intellectual way. However, much of our off-spring's behaviour and responses come from the way they *feel*, not the way they *think*. It therefore follows that we need to heighten our awareness of human nature in order to become more effective parents of human beings.

Reflecting on Human Nature

Perhaps the first step is to reflect on our own attitude as a parent in an open and honest manner. Let's remind ourselves how many times we've failed miserably in trying to change our own behaviour for the better. Let's reflect on all those New Year's Resolutions we've been determined to keep, yet failed at the first hurdle. If we therefore, with all *our* experience, find it so difficult to change our habits and lifestyles; how difficult must it be for youngsters? Likewise, think how irritated you get when someone close to you makes a snide remark about something you've failed to achieve. Doesn't it get under your skin? What's more, far from motivating you it leaves you with a deep sense of failure. There is a saying: 'convince a man against his will, he's of the same opinion still'. Thus it's very difficult to change people from the outside, change almost always comes from within.

A key way of changing people from within is simply to give them time to reflect on their current predicament. How do you get them to reflect? By asking them questions and **not** by making statements. If a person is asked a question, (especially in a calm manner) they are not only forced to make a more measured response but are also led to believe that the questioner is ready to listen to them. This is easier said than done because you as a parent may have possibly been wronged, hurt or insulted and welling up with red mist. The chances are, you're possibly 100% in the right anyway! However, your need to explode is unlikely to give you the outcome you want.

Remember:

- Stay calm and use questions to control the situation
- Relationships are seldom conflict-free but try to ensure they're also conflict-solving
- Learn to fight less for personal short-term victories and more for mutual long-term benefits
- Confront issues, not the individual.
- Don't skirt over/avoid the key issues, they'll only fester and re-emerge at a later date even more destructive than before

The above approach will take a lot of practice. Sometimes you'll get so far and then the situation, or you, will blow up anyway. But stick at it and you'll notice small steps of success. What's more, we can influence our offspring more by modelling the behaviour traits we want them to adopt than by simply telling them. Consistency between what a parent says and their own behaviour is one of the most potent strategies to deploy. You may notice that your youngster begins to adopt a more measured and less confrontational approach themselves.

What Youngsters Really Want In A Parent

We have all had the common experience of going to school when we were younger. Take a moment and think back about the teachers and other adults that influenced you the most. It was probably much less to do with their intellect or knowledge than the way they engaged with you and how they made you feel on an emotional level. Over the years hundreds of youngsters have told me that they have been more engaged and motivated when teachers/adults have demonstrated some of the following attributes: **trust; fairness; integrity; sensitivity and a genuine interest in the pupil/student on a personal level.** Moreover, all these attributes related to students' feelings/emotions as opposed to their intellect or rationale.

Therefore a key question we must ask ourselves is; How do we really make our children feel about themselves? Should we be aiming to produce insecure children with low self esteem or secure, confident individuals? Then ask yourself; What category of child is most likely to display the most positive behaviour?

There was a similar outcome to the above in a recent survey when I asked 120 youngsters to highlight the most important qualities/attitudes for effective parents. The following similar responses emerged:

- To be Caring
- To be trusting/honest
- To be loving
- To be fair
- To guide
- To be fun

Interestingly, the above mirrored the themes highlighted as the most effective for engaging with and motivating youngsters in an educational setting and once again they focus on emotion as opposed to the intellect.

What Youngsters Don't Need In A Parent

As a parent and the primary educator for our children, we must remember it's not so much about simply exchanging **information** on an intellectual level as **communicating** and **engaging** with them at an **emotional level** in a caring and sensitive manner.

At this point we also need to remind ourselves of what they didn't say!

They didn't say they wanted a parent who was perfect. Even the youngest child would have little problem listing their parents' shortcomings. It's far easier to be honest from the outset. Admit it when you make mistakes and more importantly, learn from them. It has been said that the longer we live the more we remember how perfect we were as kids. Try giving yourself a healthy shot of humility and reflect honestly on what kind of youngster you really were. The only way your child will learn to be open and truthful is by seeing it modelled by a parent. **Be patient**, because although consistently modelling a desired behaviour is the most effective way for your youngster to learn it, it may take some time before you see tangible results.

They didn't say they wanted a parent that was cool...

Sorry, but it's true. Youngsters just want parents to be parents. There are occasions when they feel proud of mum or dad when they display the latest fashion and look the part or when they're centre of attention for good reasons, but on the whole they just want you to be their mum or dad.