



Don't Let The Fear of Screwing Up Your Kids Screw You Up As A Parent

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Let's face it, we all want to avoid making the same mistakes raising our kids we believe our parents or surrogate parents made raising us. This is especially the case when we still hold grudges toward parents for what has or has not become of us. Under this historical cloud, we know yet may not admit to the old adage: "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." What this adage speaks to is the IMPOSSIBILITY of NEVER being like the parents we recall as having "screwed us up." As much as we swear that we will never treat our kids the way we were treated, the moments inevitably arise when we sound and act like our parents. This is human nature. We will on occasion, identify and repeat the most noxious and self-defeating parenting practices employed by our parents.

I am excluding from this discussion all parenting practices that are criminal and traumatic if they occurred even once. I am referring only, to behaviors we are all guilty of from time to time and, that are only damaging if they persist unchecked over the course of many years. Such behaviors are not an immediate cause for concern. Some examples are: Yelling at our kids, being overly critical of them, and disciplining them in ways that are unfair and unreasonable. An occasional instance of poor judgment on our parts will not damage our children's psyches. Our children will survive the inevitable physical bumps and bruises in exploring their worlds. Likewise, "good enough" parenting is imperfect and fraught with painful yet, invaluable learning experiences. As parents and children work out their differences emotional bumps and bruises will be looked upon in retrospect as developmental markers.

The real yet, too often overlooked potential for us to do harm to our kids may stem from the unintentional consequences of our obsessive and compulsive dread that we have been hopelessly "screwed up" by our parents and now these scars will render us helpless but, to "screw up" our own kids. Our horror at our own actions whether admitted or not, is not an accurate barometer of our parental abuses of power. More accurately, it is a barometer of ill will we still harbor toward parents we still behave like from time to time.

The problems we create for ourselves originate with the labels attached to these grudges. We tend to generalize offensive and perhaps, injurious traits into blanket characterizations that are believed to be as amenable to change as spots on a leopard. Therefore, when faced with painful likenesses to our parents we are apt to judge ourselves as “bad,” “inadequate,” “unlovable,” etc., in the most unforgiving manner imaginable. Although, we are responsible for turning against ourselves we often deny responsibility for, and try to divorce ourselves from these negative identifications with parental figures we have not forgiven. We all do this to varying degrees by blaming our children for triggering the feelings we associate with these negative labels when “they push our buttons.” In these moments when we get lost in self centered, emotional time warps, we stop thinking about how our actions may affect our children. In fact, the more years we wear a lament across our chest that reads: “Oh, I could’ve been ___or done___ by now if my childhood had been different,” the more we tend to blame our children each and every time they push our buttons and remind us which tree we haven’t fallen too far from. These are expectable, normal and correctable bumps along the parenting trail.

If we can accept what has happened to us and who we are today, we are in a position to work on and change those qualities we find distasteful. If not, we are likely to make our children miserable for what our parents made us miserable over. For example, if we confuse even healthy self interest with a parent who was hated for being self centered, distant and uninvolved during our formative years, we may get in touch with self hatred and guilt and wind up resenting our children, when they loudly protest our requests for quiet time for ourselves. If however, we are able to take a step back, own, accept, and reflect on our reactions, we may within a minute or two calmly communicate to our children that our needs count too and that they must learn to respect them as important.

If after reading this article you are not even a glimmer more hopeful of changing ineffective parenting practices that need to be changed perhaps, you will delve deeper into the specific challenges you face raising your children. If you have already read the latest parenting primers, attended parenting classes, consulted your pediatrician, and still feel uneasy about what is happening at home you may benefit from a consult with a psychotherapist.