

WHAT EVERY PARENT NEEDS TO KNOW

by Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph.D.

Every parent wants to know how to raise an emotionally healthy child. When it comes to giving advice to parents, three areas stand out as important: how each parent relates to parenting, how children develop psychosocially, and the process that I call *diagnostic child rearing*.

First, each of us as adults must look at ourselves and learn about our relationship to parenting. By that, I mean we need to look at our own upbringing, at how we were raised by our parents, and see how this influences our parenting style now. We need to discover and become aware of the mistakes made by our parents, as well as the mistakes made by the society that influenced our parents. After all, our parents didn't just make up their parenting practices. For the most part, they followed the social norms of the day. In light of what we now know about child development and child rearing, we can see that many of today's parents encountered some rather big mistakes while growing up.

One of those mistakes has to do with how a child's needs are met. In recent decades, research in child rearing has made it clear that the normal, developmentally appropriate needs that all young children and adolescents have should be met. It is the responsibility of parents to make sure a child's needs are met appropriately and consistently. Those needs can be volcanic in intensity when they are felt by a child or adolescent. And when a youth's needs are repeatedly frustrated, the results can be explosive.

What kind of needs am I talking about? One prime example is the need to make our own choices, even at a very young age. Learning to become more independent is critically important for all young children. So it is valuable for parents to recall if and how this happened when they were growing up. When you were between the ages of, say, two and six (or, for that matter, when you were a teen), did your parents let you make any choices or did they direct your life and tell you what to do in every situation? What you experienced at that time can determine how you will react as a parent when your children seek to become autonomous.

When a child expresses the need to become who he or she is, to start making choices about what he or she wants, parents can react from a very deep emotional level. They can feel furious, sometime for no apparent reason. But what is happening is that they see their young child acting in ways they themselves were not allowed to act on a regular basis when they were little. Suppose a four-year-old chooses to wear her sneakers to preschool every day. The mother knows there is nothing wrong with this, yet it makes her angry. Why? When this mother was little, she wanted to wear sneakers to school, but her own mother made her wear a pair of ugly brown leather shoes instead. At that time, her mother said it was because leather shoes were "better for her feet," even though all the other kids wore sneakers to school. Now this mother knows her child's behavior is normal, yet she cannot accept it because of mistakes that were made a generation earlier by her own mother.

This kind of situation can cause a great deal of anger. To complicate matters, we learn to hide our anger. If it remains hidden for years, it can fester within us and lead to chronic depression. On the other hand, anger that has been within us for decades can suddenly rise to the surface when our child begins to express his or her appropriate, normal developmental needs—the same needs we had to hide so we wouldn't get punished by our parents. Our long-hidden anger against our parents finally bursts forth against our child.

In this situation, the results of our upbringing can do very real damage to a child. Because the subconscious of the parent is saying something like this to the child: “Listen, kid, I wasn’t allowed to do anything I wanted to do, I couldn’t choose the shoes I wanted to wear. I had to do what my mum and dad said, when and how they said it. And I’m still furious about it. Now you’re four years old and you think you can become a little bit autonomous and wear those sneakers because you like them. But I’m going to punish the hell out of you because that’s not fair!” The parent may have read a few books or articles and knows what the research says about letting children make choices. But in that moment, deep emotions win over cognitive knowledge about child-rearing practices. The anger that has been kept locked up for two or three decades bursts forth. The most important thing a parent can learn, therefore, is that good parenting begins with the parent.

The second thing parents need to do in order to raise an emotionally healthy child is to learn about the psychosocial development of young children. I recommend studying the work of Eric Erikson, who was one of the first psychologists to put together a developmental model that explains how individuals mature emotionally and socially, from infancy to adulthood. He created what he called stages. There are eight stages in all; each has a theme and builds on the one before it. For example, the first stage (up to eighteen months) focuses on the need for trust building, and the second (from eighteen months to three years) on the need for autonomy and independence. Although the stages are in an order, if we do not reach emotional maturity at any given stage, we will continue to encounter its immature emotional qualities during later stages. This gives us the opportunity to mature those aspects throughout life, and the opportunity as parents to help our children develop.

We can’t just say, “My child will grow out of this. Just wait a few years.” No. If your child’s need for autonomy or choice making is frustrated at ages two or three or four or five, then those needs still will be there at age six. And if they aren’t dealt with then, they will reemerge in adolescence. The only difference is that the anger that was submerged when the child was young will explode in a much bigger way when the child is older. That can be the cause of delinquency or drug use; it can lead to chronic depression or resistance to authority. So you need to be familiar with the characteristics and needs associated with each of these various stages and how one affects the other. With this knowledge, you have the ongoing opportunity to correct some of the child-rearing errors that unwittingly created pain for your child.

The third thing parents need to know when rearing children and adolescents is how to use the basic process I call diagnostic child rearing. Unfortunately, many parents think they can stop or prevent misbehavior and develop emotionally healthy children simply by punishing inappropriate behaviors. But the problem inherent in this approach is that it will backfire. When we punish a child’s behavior, we also are modeling behavior for that child. What we model is what the child is going to learn; in other words, to punish.

At the same time, by punishing children, we create angry children who may behave for a short while, but who will become increasingly angry over time and begin to act defiantly. When we punish a child, we fail to solve whatever problem is causing the behavior in the first place. That is the key word: *causing*. As parents, we can’t accomplish anything unless we understand the cause(s) of our child’s misbehavior. For this reason, I speak about and encourage a *diagnostic* approach to child rearing.

This may seem like a radical approach to many parents. They have to learn to stop when they encounter misbehavior and realize that punishing it is not the answer. Instead, they have to remind themselves that their child is misbehaving for a reason, or for reasons. If they want to be

constructive parents, and to raise an emotionally healthy child, they need to start looking underneath the child's behavior for the cause or causes of it. They need to look beneath the behavior for the specific needs that are normal at that developmental stage and are being frustrated in that particular instance and causing the child to act out. Then, if the parent is able to meet the child's needs in an appropriate manner, the misbehavior will cease.

This article was adapted from an interview conducted by Ashley Ann Ryan.