



EMPATHY AND ENCOURAGEMENT ARE AT THE HEART OF PARENTING



by Mimi Hudson

February has always been heart month. With February comes Valentine's Day with hearts on cards and candy boxes. For years heart health has been the focus of fundraising and prevention awareness during February. It's a great time to talk about parenting with heart.

Empathy is the key to parenting with heart. It is essential to discipline, mutual respect and encouragement, the basic tenets of a positive parenting philosophy. Empathy is "to see with the eyes of another, to hear with ears of another, to feel with the heart of another," wrote Alfred Adler, a pioneer of parent education.

It is the basic feeling in the Golden Rule: Treat others the way you want to be treated. Empathic parents remember what it was like to be a kid, and this can help them to have realistic expectations at each of their children's developmental stages. When we put ourselves in our children's shoes we are less likely to be judgmental or critical and more likely to approach our parenting in a compassionate and heartfelt way.

When we parent with heart we offer our children encouragement not praise. Encouragement is a process. It emphasizes participation, effort and improvement. It accentuates the positive - catching children being good, rather than reprimanding them for being bad.

We encourage our children by taking an interest in what interests them – by being curious but not intrusive. We spend special time with each child to show that they are special to us, that we enjoy their company. Praise, on the other hand, is results-oriented, it judges and

evaluates – "that's good," or "you're a good child." Encouragement uses words that notice and appreciate. "You seem to like reading," or "thank you, that helped me a lot." Praise teaches children to be other-focused, believing that what others think is most important, while encouragement lets children believe in themselves.

Discipline means to teach, not punish, and the goal is teaching our children self-discipline. We allow our children to make mistakes (didn't we!) and experience the consequences of their own actions. We want our children to know intrinsically the right thing to do – not because we are running along behind them, shouting orders and telling them what to do. We discipline by keeping expectations of our children realistic, providing routine and structure at home, not over-programming children, offering choices, using natural and logical consequences, setting limits as well as limiting "no's and don'ts." When we control the situation, we can give children opportunities to learn control for themselves – self discipline.

When offering choices, both choices must be acceptable to the parent. "Would you like to do your homework before dinner or after dinner?" The child does not have a choice about the homework – it needs to be done – but they get to choose the time.

Natural consequences teach children, without parental interference, what happens when you go against the laws of nature. If a child doesn't eat, or forgets to take her lunch to school, she will be hungry or learns to negotiate with her classmates for some of their lunch. If your child doesn't wear a jacket, he gets cold. Logical

consequences are set up by the parent but may have input from the child. Logical consequences imply choice and must be reasonable, respectful and related to the behaviour. It is not the severity of the consequence that is important but the certainty.

Modelling the behaviour we expect from our children and treating them the way we would like to be treated – this is mutual respect. If we want them to tell the truth, we need to model and value telling the truth. If we want our children to be polite, we are polite to them, saying, "please" and "thank you" and "pardon me?" What we do is far more powerful than what we say.

Respect means recognizing the importance of our children's wishes but it doesn't mean we accommodate them all. It is respectful to involve children in decision making when appropriate, possibly around family outings and choosing a movie or restaurant. They want to be heard and have their opinions valued.

Parenting with heart recognizes that our children are separate from us. They are entitled to have relationships with others – their siblings, the other parent or partner, their friends, their teachers, grandparents – free from our judgment, interference and control. The only time we intervene is if the situation concerns a health, safety or moral issue.

Whatever you know about parenting with heart, practice it... February is heart month.

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