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Change the Future Through Gentle Parenting

Parents have different ways of raising their child. Some strive for authoritarian parenting, where expectations are high, and strict limits are set. Several feel that when a negative action occurs, there should be punishment—however, also recognize that rewards can be a result of positive behavior, which is categorized as operational conditioning. Others prefer to set boundaries in understanding their child’s emotions and be direct in the rights and the wrongs. This type is known as gentle parenting. While there is no correct way to raise one’s child, embracing the principles of gentle parenting could develop in an individual that is attuned with his or her emotions, possess confidence in establishing boundaries, and foster positive parent-child relationships.

Gentle parenting, characterized by its emphasis on effective communication, stands in stark contrast to other ways of disciplinary action such as time-outs or physical punishment. While these actions may be an instinct for some parents who take on the authoritarian role when dealing with a child who is throwing a tantrum, the result causes the stress hormones in children’s bodies to increase, as well as levels of anxiety. Instead of removing a behavior and anticipating for it to be absent, gentle parenting strives to encourage dialogue. Finding the right words when talking to kids can be challenging–however, remembering that the priority is understanding and helping. In “Parenting in a Nutshell: Handle stubborn, defiant tot with gentle firmness,” the author provides examples of assertive yet respectful explanations to common problems (Nagle). As author Doreen Nagle suggests, “It's hard to go home when you are having so much fun with your friends. I don't like to do that either, but it is time for us to think about taking a bath and having dinner” (Nagle). In this statement, the parent is encouraging their child to end an activity and start a new one. It is important that when communicating with children, parents use clear and concise language, while also remaining attuned to their own emotional state.

As children mature into adults, they will learn to grow out of emotional dysregulation, a term to describe the inability to manage emotional reactions. This process of maturation holds the value of a gradual development in emotional intelligence–a skill that allows individuals to express their feelings in an acceptable manner. On the other hand, adults who are emotionally dysregulated in a challenging situation with their child may negatively impact the young individual. Sue Kranz, author of “Emotional dysregulation meets gentle parenting,” provides a thought provoking question of “How will children learn to regulate emotions when the parents use dysregulation as a tool to control the child - such as yelling, swearing, hitting, throwing things?” (Kranz). Therefore, in order to treat children in a loving approach, parents should remember to focus on controlling oneself and restoring their relationship with their child. As psychologist Gordon Neufeld says, “...we don't earn our children’s respect by bullying them…” (Kranz). Rather than tyranzing children, using the methods of a calm and empathic communication is the key to raising a child who grows up to also take on those approaches throughout their life.

Those who hesitate about the role of gentle parenting may argue that it ignores the adults’ feelings. In a parenting conference, a psychologist condemns a mother (who feels frustrated and annoyed that her children are not behaving well during dinner time), saying “Well, it’s not about *you*” (Carrig). A parent also notes, “Parents shouldn’t have to be silent martyrs, or pretend to be emotionless robots” (Weaver). While gentle parenting does prioritize the emotional needs of children, the feelings of parents are also important. When feeling frustrated or annoyed, a coping method one could try out is taking deep breaths and understanding that the parents’ emotions are valid. While it may seem daunting, the well being of a child is supported by the mental health of their parents. With communication, also comes connection with a parent and child.

According to Andrea Mara, “Most behavioral problems stem from the child feeling disconnected to their parents.” Whether a parent has to deal with excessive work demands, or navigating a new sibling, building strong emotional bonds is still possible. In an article written by Mara, a mother explains that even though she is exhausted after work, Triona still takes 10 minutes out of her day to play Lego with her son (Mara). In doing so, the tantrums reduced. Of course, tantrums will still occur, as children are learning to process their frustration and emotions. To further build connections and communication, parents can try setting a location in which children can speak about their emotions. For example, parents Kate Middleton (Princess of Wales) and Prince William have a “chat sofa” where their children are able to openly talk about their feelings (Harris). Moreover, holding high regards to a child’s opinion and feelings creates a foundation of trust and emotional security that individuals can rely on as they become older.

Along with communication on emotions, giving children their autonomy and setting boundaries also fosters a connection. Instead of demanding, parents can try to give options, when applicable. If the child wishes to jump in muddy puddles, their parents may allow that, while also helping by bringing rain gear. Lastly, emphasizing connection in gentle parenting is seen in positive affirming. According to psychiatrist Juliana Nieva, “We must focus on not always marking the negative in a child, but also being able to mark the positive” (“Gentle parenting or strict limits: what is the best way to raise children?”). In other words, when a child behaves and performs well, parents can try offering positive and constructive feedback. If they do something wrong, explain the consequences in a way that will help them learn from their mistakes. As a result of this method, children will build their self-esteem and develop a healthy perception of the world. Navigating the key factors of gentle parenting can be tough, but it is vital to be consistent.

In addition, breaking boundaries may lead to disorder and confusion for children, as pointed out by Mara, who emphasized that “...confusion almost always results in negative behavior” (Mara). When setting rules and applying it to the children’s life constantly, they can learn self-discipline. These rules do not need to be dictated, rather they can be explained to the child on why those limits have been set, fostering a deeper understanding. Another way to stay consistent is through routines. Setting bedtime, meal time, and playtime routines will ensure predictability for children, which ultimately alleviates anxiety. Contrary to common belief, gentle parenting not only stresses connection and communication, but also incorporates discipline. This discipline is specifically seen through explanation on consequences of certain behavior, as highlighted by Nagle, who said, “Your child should learn that every action has a consequence - whether it's good or bad” (“Parenting in a Nutshell: Handle stubborn, defiant tot with gentle firmness”). By frequently approaching discipline in small increments, children will again, develop self-control. For example, if a child takes another kid’s toy, the latter will most likely not want to play with them. So, with this learned consequence, the child may practice self-control and not snatch someone else's belongings. In “Why gentle parenting comes highly recommended,” the author reminds readers that “behavior takes time” (Mazibuko). Even when using strategies of communication and connection, children will still cry and scream. While it may seem like a failure at that moment, parents should see the long term picture. As Beverly Beukes of Child and Youth Care Center states, “as a vulnerable child’s fear lessens, they will not always have an immediate fight, flight or freeze reaction” (Mazibuko). Reflecting on the aspects of gentle parenting, it becomes evident that the use of communication, connection, and consistency positively affects the growth of a child.

In embracing the principles of gentle parenting, parents will learn to guide and nurture their children with compassion and patience. Unlike other methods, gentle parenting highly emphasizes the use of constant communication and appeal to emotions to connect with children. By fostering effective communication, acknowledging emotions, and incorporating positive discipline, gentle parenting ultimately builds emotional intelligence and encourages strong parent-child relationships. It is important to remember that this approach, as well as other methods, takes time to improve behavior. Through this, parents will learn to look at the long-term picture of an independent and confident individual who has learned to develop healthy boundaries.

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