

Children and their pace of change

Last month we talked about how important it is to fade the prompt, to gradually help our children less and less as they begin to develop their own areas of competence and mastery. To continue to help too much for too long interferes with their growth and development. Here is another factor to consider.

Rarely do our children change as fast as we wish they would. It is universally true: Children's pace of change is glacial. This is as it must be but it crashes into our impatience.

Parents understand this on a philosophical level. It is our responsibility as parents to honor our children's uniqueness, and that includes their age and circumstances, and accepts that they change as fast as they can. And, when that pace of change is not as fast as we wish, it is our work to become comfortable with their actual pace of change.

Think about pre-schoolers who start their day whining, fourth graders who are disorganized with their school work, sixth graders who talk to their parents disrespectfully, and siblings fighting with each other day and night. These are certainly stressful moments of parenting. However, we do not really have anything particularly big to be worried about yet. These are normal, predictable, age-appropriate mistakes that children make at these ages.

However, if we introduce an impatient parent, that adds a layer of stress to an already challenging situation. Imagine a parent with a plate too full, just barely getting through the day if only his or her children would cooperate, take care of their chores, quit bothering each other in the backseat of the car, and stop using that tone of voice with me right this minute, young man. Who exactly do you think you are?

Can you sense how our impatience can take a temporary challenge of parenting and by our actions risk contributing to a longer-lasting problem? Yes, children should be held accountable for their behavior problems, and need to learn that consequences will follow. But if it is hard for us to see the teaching opportunity right in front of us, and if we simply want them to change faster than they can, right now, this instant, they might pick up from our tone or our words that we are not satisfied with them and they are being completely unacceptable.

Better to take a moment, breathe in and breathe out, remember that children are allowed to make mistakes and that it is those times that are usually richest for teaching life's lessons. One of which is that our love for our children is unconditional, and that they can feel it even at the times of their mistakes and even when their pace of change is slower than we would wish.

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