

## PARENT E-NEWSLETTER GETTING IT RIGHT FROM THE START (0-5 YEARS)

# What Does It Mean to be a Parent?



**DEFINING** the word parenting would seem pretty easy: Parenting means raising a child or children from babyhood to adulthood, in an environment of nurturance, support, encouragement, direction, guidance and love.

Defining the job of parenting is heaps harder. Parenting is diverse, broad, complex, complicated, confusing, difficult, confrontational and at times just plain tiring. Some of us are better equipped than others to take on the job of parenting. For the most part, parents fall back on what they intuitively know, or decide to self-educate on what they don't.

Depending on their upbringing, our kids will either mature into flourishing, insightful, responsible and competent adults, or they'll struggle to understand their world and themselves not achieving their maximum potential and not being as that happy with themselves.

Kids vary a lot. Some may have a high IQ, but low EQ; some who are creative and outgoing yet can't organise themselves to get out of a paper bag; still kids who are big on ethics and values but are all over the shop when it comes to practicalities. And then there are the kids with a hundred friends, but not much idea about anything else.

The universal truth about parenting is that the hours are long, the pay lousy and there's no instruction manual.

Parenting is not a competition. Every child is unique, every child develops at their own individual rate. There can't be a one-size-fits-all approach to parenting.

Parenting can't possibly take place in a vacuum. As much as we may want to keep our kids nurtured, sheltered and germ free, we live in diverse communities and much of what our kids will be exposed to, is independent of our family environment.

As parents we are unique. Our life circumstances, culture, beliefs, attitudes and role modelling will differ to those of parents next door. As parents we all begin the journey from a different place. Mistakes are inevitable – we're not robots after all – so it's probably best to get used to this idea early in the parenting stakes. The positive thing about making mistakes is that we develop skills to pass on to our kids.

If we parent with heart and at the end of the day our kids are still our friends, then we've done a lot that's right!

#### What does parenting encompass?

For every family, the job of parenting will inevitably differ. However, research tells us that there are a few core features of what parenting encompasses, that seem more or less universal.

- It includes the care provided for a child's physical, emotional and social needs;
- the deep desire of parents to do a good job of parenting;
- that women are assumed to be the primary caregivers with the role of fathers is less clear, investigated and acknowledged; and
- that most parenting takes place in the context of family groups.

There seems to be consensus that parenting is one of the most difficult jobs that exists (and is getting harder).

Research also shows that supportive relationships have a tangible, long-term influence on children's healthy development, contributing to optimal cognitive and social emotional development for infants and toddlers.



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### How do parents feel about their parenting skills?

**Invest in Kids\*** commissioned a national survey of Canadian parents to better understand the context in which young children are being raised.

Some of the key findings of that survey make for interesting reading:

- 92% of parents think parenting is the most important thing they can do.
- 94% enjoy being a parent most of the time.
- The vast majority of parents also recognise the importance of the early years and the vital role they play.
- 79% of parents strongly agreed that, the years from birth through age five are absolutely critical to the way a child turns out as an adult.
- 84% strongly agreed that the influence of parents during a child's early years (birth through age five) is absolutely critical to the way a child turns out as an adult.
- Three robust parenting dimensions were derived: positive/warm interactions; angry and punitive parenting; and ineffective child management.
- When presented with 12 knowledge-testing statements about how children grow and develop, parents knew little about providing a stimulating, sensitive environment. Correct responses to this subset of statements averaged only 48%.

- Only 23% responded correctly to children's age-related milestones and capabilities.
- Before their first baby was born, on 44% of parents felt confidently prepared for parenthood.
- Stay at home mums did not know more than full time working mums, and stay at home mums did not feel more confident in their role.
- Parents feel they are under great stress. 48% of parents agreed with the statement "I feel that I'm constantly under stress trying to accomplish more than I can handle" and 63% agreed that "I don't have enough time for me anymore".
- 68% of parents agreed that "I do not spend as much quality time with my child as I'd like to".

\*Source: Raising the next generation: a survey of parenting skills, (A National Survey) Oldershaw, Russell & Carol, Education Canada; Fall 2004

## How positive attitudes help in the parenting stakes

You may feel that your parenting skills could do with some improvement, or you have a lot to learn about the parent/child relationship. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that you can't feel confident about yourself and your ability to raise your child. If you're just beginning the parenting journey, these positive tips might be of help:

- Look after your own self esteem by being self-accepting meaning don't judge yourself too harshly – be proud of who you are and what you have accomplished. If you feel good about yourself, your children pick up on this role modelling.
- Live for the moment. Children have a habit of growing up quickly, so enjoy and appreciate each moment, each day.

- Take regular time out for the things you want to do.
- Nurture and encourage your relationship with a partner, or if you're a sole parent, a supportive network of friends and family.
- Work on developing strategies for optimism and resilience to meet the challenges of parenting.
- See yourself as being successful and confident in your parenting. Everyone parents differently, so even if your friends' parenting is at odds with yours, it doesn't mean you're not getting it right.
- Share the load and share the strengths. As adults, we all
  have different strengths, gifts and abilities, so if yours isn't
  coaching the under 6 soccer team or helping with maths
  homework, then leave this job to a partner or significant
  adult who does have inclination and is able to help.



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#### Will we parent how we were parented?

For most of us, our parenting skills were learned through our own early life experiences with our parents and caregivers. As they role modelled, we paid atwention and learned specific ways of doing things and ways that an adult interacted with a child.

For some of us these ways were unhealthy, for others they were appropriate and encouraging. Depending on the level of function or dysfunction in our childhood, we may find parenting less or more of a challenge.

Most parents have concerns about parenting. Many parents don't want to parent as their parents did, especially if their childhood experiences were less than happy. However, we are all able to choose how we want to parent. For some of us this will mean revisiting the skills of our parents or learning new parenting skills.

Some of us may need more support than others, we may need the encouragement and mentorship of a new role model – one other than our parent. There may be someone in our extended family whom we admired for their parenting skills and their ability to nurture healthy relationships with their children.

Regardless of how we were parented, handing down (consciously or otherwise) the things that may have made our childhood happy, difficult, stressful, unhealthy, loving, nurturing or encouraging, is up to us.

For the most part, we as parents can choose to create a loving, safe and supportive environment for our children to thrive and flourish.

