

Parents Are People, Too

Michele Beach

Have you ever had one of those moments where you were attempting to be the most reasonable, democratic parent possible, but your mind was just screaming "...because I said so, that's why!" I had one of those recently when my five-year-old son and I were disagreeing about where he should build his fort. He wanted to put blankets on the kitchen table, but I thought the basement would be a better location. I told him that I thought it would be in the way for dinner; he replied that we could just eat in the living room on the coffee table. I said that no, we didn't use the living room for that; he countered by reminding me that we did, in fact, eat in the living room for a party just a few weeks prior. And that's when I started to feel impatient. Why are his arguments so well thought out? Why doesn't he just follow the rules? Why does he think he should have a right to stand here and argue with me about this? Why is he so good at questioning the status quo? Oh... right. This is what I *wanted* him to do. I have actually encouraged him to think for himself, and to be his own person, and to question authority. So, I concede that he does have a good point, and after much more discussion we finally decide that building a fort in the kitchen and then moving it before dinner is acceptable to both of us.

Interactions such as these constantly remind me that trying to parent in a democratic way, just like trying to teach at a democratic school, can be very hard. It is very time-consuming, it can be emotionally draining, and society is probably not going to pat you on the back for raising an activist. In fact, you'll probably get many questions along the way such as: "How will he ever get a job if he can't obey the rules?" or "How will he ever learn math if no one makes him?" You may at times even ask yourself some of these same questions. And as far as I can tell, there is no one handbook that will give you all of the answers. Many parents, especially those that have sought out democratic education for their children, are determined to parent in a very intentional way. This is extremely noble, but at times can cause parents to forget about themselves. You are an important part of your child's world, and for the *whole* family to be happy, *you* must be happy, too.

We sometimes need to be reminded that parents also have ideas, and even rights! When playing with your children, you shouldn't feel obligated to play exclusively by your child's rules, or to always let them win, or to play only their games. When parents allow play to be too child-directed, the child doesn't get a realistic picture of how the world works. I have heard so many parents say, "I just don't think I can stand to play princess one more time!" Well, you don't have to. If you give your child the impression that someone will always be interested in

their game and will always follow their lead, they will be quite disappointed when they encounter peers who are also accustomed to getting their own way. It is much healthier for you *and* your child if you voice your honest opinion at least part of the time, whether it is, “I just don’t want to play princess today, but I’ll play something else with you” or “I am happy to play princess, but I want to have a turn being the queen” or even just “I’d really like to get the dishes done and then I’ll play in five minutes.” Besides ensuring that you are not powerless in the relationship, you are modeling ways to negotiate and compromise that children will pick up on and be able to use in their own social world. It is amazing to hear your four-year-old say to her friend, “okay you can be the queen this time and I’ll be the queen next time” rather than running off screaming, “no one wants to play with me!” Learning to adapt their play to include others’ ideas is well worth the momentary irritation your child may show when you don’t play by their rules. Plus, the playtime experience may prove to be more fun for both of you.

Parents also make mistakes. We are human, too. It is okay, and can even be beneficial, for your child to see you mess up. I was so proud of my son the other day when his teacher told me that he said to her, after she sang the wrong words to the song in morning meeting, that “mistakes are okay because it takes a lot of practice to get something right, and adults make mistakes, too.” Being able to see that an adult has made a mistake and then even comfort them is such a wonderful confidence builder for a child. Knowing that he isn’t the only one who forgets words to a song or spills a drink all over the table at dinner helps him to realize that becoming a “big kid” doesn’t mean that he has to know everything or do everything perfectly. Growing up can be a very stressful endeavor, as children slowly wean themselves away from you towards independence. Just as expressing your own emotions can help your child express his or hers, admitting your mistakes will allow your child to come to you with theirs. This can also help decrease lying, as a child will not be afraid of admitting a mistake. Additionally, it allows you to model behavior for rectifying the situation, whether that is saying “oops” and cleaning up, or even apologizing to someone else. In the long run, seeing mishaps occur and knowing that everything will still be okay is much more comforting than believing that parents are infallible, only to feel betrayed at some later date when they discover that this is not actually the case.

Besides just little mistakes, you can also let them in on your weaknesses. If you are a terrible juggler, but have always wanted to learn how (like my husband), then go for it. Let them see you drop the balls over and over and over again. Or if you have a particularly hard time with recipes, let them help you muddle through preparing a challenging meal. If you are interested, you could even take a cooking class to let them know that it isn’t just children who have things to learn. Seeing adults, and especially their own parents, struggle with something will help them feel less helpless as they work to tie their own shoes or ride a bike. It will also allow them to see that things do get easier with practice. They will be much more motivated to

practice piano or try out for a sports team if they are experiencing failure and success right alongside you. Understanding that parents have strengths and weaknesses, too, is much healthier than believing that they automatically know everything.

Another realm of worry for parents tends to be tone of voice. I have read many books and heard speakers talk about how you must remember to speak to your child as though he were an adult friend. This is supposed to keep you from raising your voice or saying something disrespectful. Well, I personally have never had an adult friend who pulled my hair. I really have no idea how I would react if that did happen. I am fairly certain, though, that I wouldn't respond in my nicest "inside voice." In trying to be constantly calm and compassionate, it is possible to go so far as to appear superhuman. You should not hold yourself to such a high standard that your children never get to know the real you. There should be times when your child hears you cry, and when you respond in an honestly "frustrated" tone of voice. How can our children feel safe enough to express their own emotions if you never show them any? How will they know that it is okay to have a strong reaction to something that bothers them? This is not to say that we should justify any outburst we have by claiming that it helps us to appear human, but we should not feel overwhelming guilt, either. If your child breaks your favorite plate, even though they were being careful, it would not be unreasonable to show some tears. If your adult friend did the same thing, you might hold your emotions in a bit more, but that friend would also probably have a very good idea of exactly how you felt anyway. Furthermore, why is it that we *don't* show our emotions to our good friends? How many times have you had a friend hurt you in some way, but then you never told them about it? I'm not so sure that striving to make my relationship with my child look like my relationships with my friends is the best goal. I hope to have a relationship with my children that is as open and honest as is reasonable. I want them to know the real me, I want them to feel safe to express themselves with me, and I want them to understand that I, too, have feelings, needs, and weaknesses.

Ultimately, we need to remember that respecting our child's rights, needs, and emotions does not mean that we need to sacrifice our own. Each person in the family, not just each child, should be treated as a human being. If a child is given too much power in the relationship they will not only come to expect their every desire to be catered to, but they will also not feel very safe. A teacher I work with, who is also a midwife, told us a story that reminds me of the importance of the balance of power in relationships with children. She explained that in her former line of work, she learned that newborns may have a less traumatic birth if they are transferred directly to a water environment to simulate the womb. However, a group of midwives decided to implement this technique in their own practice, but found that rather than comforting the babies, it instead appeared to upset them. At last they realized that they were missing an essential element of the water environment – the container was much too large. As important as the water itself, was the fact that the newborn wanted to feel the

sides, just as they had when they were inside their mother. This remains true as a child grows – their “container” is no longer physical, but the child needs to have limits in order to feel safe and secure. If the child is given too much control, there is nothing to push up against. They need the family “container” to push back when they have gone too far.

Thus, respecting a child is not the same as respecting an adult. The developmental age of the child must be taken into account in everything you do. Just as it would not be respectful of a newborn to leave them floundering without a physically confining embrace or swaddle, it would not be respectful of a two-year-old to expect them to determine when and where they should take a nap. Similarly, it would not be respectful of a six-year-old to ask them to choose which parent they would like to live with in a divorce case without taking a number of additional factors into consideration. However, it might be reasonable to ask the same question of a mature adolescent. Respect does not mean treating everyone equally. It means that we see each person, young or old, for who they are. And fortunately, this should be easier than trying to remember some set of parenting rules that you need to live by, or some formula that you should be following. Instead, you just need to be you. You will make mistakes, you will have emotional outbursts, and your child won't always agree with you. But, as long as you remember to respect and forgive your child *and* yourself, your child will be able to do the same.