

A Teachable Moment

Being a parent is easy and intuitive, correct? Well, no—it's just customary to pretend that that's the case.

Anna Quindlen

NEWSWEEK

From the magazine issue dated Apr 27, 2009

Several years ago a psychologist named Laurie Miller Brotman spearheaded a study of young children that yielded stunning results. The kids were from poor and troubled families, the preschool-age siblings of older children who were already acquainted with the criminal-justice system. Brotman's team tested levels of cortisol, a hormone that usually spikes when human beings are under stress. On average, these kids had flattened cortisol in stressful situations; so do many who have been maltreated or have behavior problems.

So far, so bad. But here's what happened to half the children in this study: their parents were enrolled in a program that helped them learn the kind of child rearing that Dr. Spock made popular. Consistent discipline without corporal punishment. Positive reinforcement for good behavior. Even how to get down on the floor and play.

And their kids' cortisol levels changed. Or, as the study itself says in science-speak, "family-based intervention affects the stress response in preschoolers at high risk." By the time those same kids were 11, both boys and girls were less aggressive, and the girls less obese, than the kids in a control group. Having their parents learn the basics of good child rearing had actually shifted the biology of these kids, so that it became similar to that of "normally developing, low-risk children."

Connect the dots here, and the picture you have is mind-boggling—even in tough neighborhoods, with boys and girls whose background and circumstances would argue for a negative future, a little parent training can go a long, long way.

So why is raising kids the most important job we ignore from a preparation point of view? Oh, there are more parenting classes and books than in the days when tutelage was mainly your mother saying, "You'll spoil that child if you pick him up every time he cries." A few high schools give their students a baby doll to carry around and tend, but that seems largely an attempt at libido suppression.

"Parenting is a much more separate, solitary activity than it used to be," says Harold S. Koplewicz, the director of the NYU Child Study Center, where Brotman also works. It used to take a village to raise a child, but there isn't a village anymore. Instead of extended family, there's a playground where everyone pretends everything's fine, and a computer screen behind which women can say, under cover of mommy blogs, "How come this is so hard for me?"

The prevailing ethos about being a parent is that it's mostly intuitive and uniformly joyful, even though the news, and our own lives, are full of those who found it so conspicuously otherwise that they made an utter mess of actual human beings. This mythology has two effects. One is that parents who don't feel happy or competent are made to feel like freaks—and to just keep quiet about the fact. The other is that this makes everyone believe not only that anyone can be a parent, but also that everyone ought to do it, even those who seem by character or inclination to be ill equipped. When I was in college I read a book by Ellen Peck called "The Baby Trap" about the virtues of choosing childlessness. It seemed completely insurrectionary. It still does.

We've so bought into the mass delusion, the nutty propaganda, that now the ideal American family is one that's on steroids, or at least Clomid. If raising children is not really so difficult or demanding, the only way to make it tougher is to amp up the numbers, right? So instead of smart, helpful television shows about how to set limits and manage sibling rivalry, the constant cable fare is about the supersize family, with quads, sextuplets or a kid a year until the house looks like an army barracks.

A corollary of Brotman's research is a program sponsored by the NYU Child Study Center that takes the long, and the sane, view of all this. It's embedded in the preschool programs of a small group of public schools in New York City, and it's called ParentCorps. The parents get together with school staff and the ParentCorps counselors and discuss strategies like making star charts for good behavior and ignoring whining and tantrums. They go home to try out what they've learned with their kids, some of whom already have difficult behavior issues, and then come back and discuss what worked.

And here's how it turns out: there are markedly lower rates of aggression among kindergartners whose parents have been in ParentCorps than among a control group of students at similar schools. The kids also score higher on standardized achievement tests. It's not even necessary to enumerate the ways in which these results could change the future. "We do lots of happy dances around here," Brotman says.

Many poor parents know that if their children falter and fail, they may wind up in prison, or in lifelong poverty. But it would be a mistake to think that instruction and support are required only among the needy. One of the most useful parts of ParentCorps is the dialogue among the parents about how hard raising kids can be. It's almost like AA for moms: "Hi, I'm Anna, and I repeatedly ignored demands for juice and then snapped because the whining was driving me insane." It can be a great job, motherhood, but it would be nice if everyone could be more honest about how overwhelming the job can be, and more willing to find ways to support and inform the people who are trying to do it.

URL: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/194576>

© 2009