

# Like parents, like children

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July 28, 2012

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No job is more challenging or more rewarding than parenting. However, with the dynamics of the family system undergoing a serious makeover, parents are increasingly 'giving up', turning a blind eye to signs of undesirable behaviour in their children. Where is this leading us, wonders Shefali Tripathi Mehta



A 16-year-old committed suicide because she couldn't get the TV remote from her brother; another nine-year-old hanged herself after her siblings refused to let her watch her favourite television show — just two of the countless number of news stories about children taking the extreme step over trifles — upset over being scolded in school, doing poorly in exams, being stopped from seeing a sweetheart, squabbles with siblings.

Parenting has never been more difficult, parents moan. Has it ever been less careless, more ad-hoc is what we need to introspect.

The dynamics of the family system has undergone a serious makeover with urban, closed-door living, nuclear families and our newfound fixation with the notion of 'my time, my space'. Parents are increasingly and unhesitatingly 'giving up', turning a blind eye to signs of undesirable behaviour to avoid conflict situations during the little time they get to spend with their children.

When a fourteen-year-old runs his car over pavement dwellers, it is parenting that fails. When teenagers rag and drive a fresher to suicide, it is parenting that fails. When a kid stabs his teacher, it is parenting that fails. Parenting is a full-time, regular job. Frequent leaves of absence lead to such dire consequences. When parents relinquish their responsibility of proper upbringing, they put their kids as well as those around them at increased risk of harm. The very basis of family is that children need to be brought up under the guidance, supervision, care and protection of mature and wise elders till they understand action and consequence.

We can't make guest appearances in our kids' lives. When we do that, they in turn put on their best behaviour till our backs are turned again. The problems begin to crop up when, like an outsider, we peep into their lives now and then.

My friend and I entered her home late one evening to find her teenager watching TV. The friend lashed out at him for forever being glued to TV and not studying hard enough. The kid tried to explain that he'd finished studying and was taking a break. The mother gave in to an impulse. She was anxious, wondering 'what if he is doing this all the time I'm not watching?' In such cases, the child may try to defend himself the first couple of times and then may just stop bothering. He may even end up watching TV all the time, confirming all her worst fears. Communication and mutual trust are both done with.

Who's the victim?

It is natural for parents to sometimes feel overwhelmed by parenting responsibilities. The child's demands on them may weigh them down sometimes. Parents suffer when their toddlers throw tantrums and misbehave in public, making outings extremely traumatic. They feel embarrassed, angry and hopeless.

A young mother broke down because her five-year-old creates a big scene while getting dressed. Another, whose nine-year-old does everything she asks him not to, says she's given up. A parent cannot feel victimised or give up on their child because if children grow up with these attitudes that lead them to bully others, demand constant attention, be unduly anxious or angry, they continue to spawn distress for themselves and others.

Earlier this year, a class 9 student stabbed his teacher to death for complaining to his parents about his poor academic performance. He was struggling to cope with his studies and when failure seemed imminent, the confused child did something that not only cut short an innocent life, but also ruined his own. How did the parents miss the signs of his distress? Why could the helpless kid not share his problem with anyone? The crime may have been committed in a moment of mad fury, but his despair must have grown over time.

Bringing in the 'IF'

It is the responsibility of us parents to bring the 'if' into their children's thinking; to make them understand when fun, adventure or peer pressure can turn into tragedy and ruin lives. It has become fashionable for parents to brag, 'My kid doesn't listen'. If parents have given the child enough reason to trust their decisions; shared their reasoning with the child; explained the consequence of undesirable behaviour; and the child is completely assured that the parents always have their welfare in mind, there is no reason for them to not listen.

A mother who said she did not allow her 12-year-old to join a social networking site was asked derisively, 'But did she listen?' The mother had shared her reasoning with the daughter, encouraged her to talk and discuss. If parents make half-hearted attempts at discipline and punishment, they will never win the child's trust and face only rebellion.

How can we expect children who do not listen to their own parents to conform to any kind of policing in the world outside? Parents who have not tried to instil the importance of regular bedtime; sharing of toys or tiffin; being courteous to visitors, cannot one day start

a sermon on underage drinking, driving, drugs and expect kids to conform. Likewise, it will be foolhardy to expect that the system in place will check accidents and crimes by young adults and protect them. If your kid is drag racing, you are responsible, not the State, the police, the school or the passersby.

### Flawed investment

We may engage tutors to teach, house-help to fulfil all their daily needs and drivers to take kids for sports and dance classes. But is that all? Who will talk, discuss, understand; draw out the children's views, fears and disappointments; and reinforce the notion of action and consequence? A simple example is how a child brings home a great report card and how a not-so-good one is kept away to be shown later. This is how difficult it is to talk of tough issues and feelings. It needs gentle drawing out. It needs time.

A working parent may be 'all there, always' for the child and a parent at home may not have 'the listening ear'. The mother of a little girl, asked how her daughter is with other children, was clueless. She had never been around the child's friends. The ayah always took her to park. 'But surely you know when her friends come home?' 'No, no, I take them all out to a pizza place. I can't stand the racket in the house!' She threw up her hands showing exasperation.

We live for a social face. We encourage our kids to be competitive in school, among friends, neighbours; and get ahead in every way they can. But dealing with failure is life's important lesson. We teach kids to read, write, play cricket and swim. Why can't we talk about drugs, under-age drinking, under-age driving, peer-pressure, over-speeding, physical and sexual abuse? A parent tells how of the 20 children identified with various levels of dyslexia in school, only six joined the intervention programme. Parents' denial to accept and seek help will put these kids through an immensely trying life.

The sum of our wisdom that we pass on to them seems to be that the world is full of deceit and danger; and we need to fight our way through. Are we making them grow up overcautious? Overprotected? Kids no longer lay the table, water the plants, polish their own shoes or even get the door. We see their hands full — studies, games, tuitions, other activities that are so important for them to stay ahead. Involving them into the daily, household chores seems unfair.

### Discipline & responsibility

Parents lament that in school their children are so well behaved but not so at home. In school, the rules are clearly laid out and everyone conforms. Establishing a routine at home is not a priority in households anymore. Parents who cannot switch off their phones during PTAs and watch TV at dinner time are reluctant to impose 'rules' on their children. A UK study found 79 per cent of school kids sleep deprived. Insufficient sleep affects cognitive ability, physical and emotional well-being. Cellphones, TVs and computers keep children up late at night. Overindulgent parents who consider fixed bedtimes harsh are surprisingly okay with waking up and sending a cranky kid to school.

Children need discipline for their own good — to remain safe, to know their limits. Also, it is discipline which helps them get along with others. Disciplining a child cannot depend on parents' whims. When in good mood we allow every excess and when preoccupied with work or problems, we refuse perfectly legitimate demands. Kids soon begin to understand the pattern and learn how to manipulate situations to their own advantage.

In the incident where a teenager was killed when three of them were drag-racing their way to school, in Kolkata, no passersby stopped to help, to take him to hospital. A fellow racer also fled. Children see parents making their escape from difficult situations. The kid who panicked and fled did not understand right from wrong because it wasn't instilled definitively into him. He was scared, he could not face the consequences, he did what he may have seen his elders doing — run from the mess. He could have saved his friend. As could the others who drove past the injured child.

When children bring to parents their problems with others, if parents do not assess the situation objectively, but believe in only their child and proclaim biased judgements, the child gets acceptance for his conduct, validation for his action. Reinforced, this may lead him to have a lopsided, self-righteous attitude towards others. If we tend to bail out our children from trouble every time, they fail to understand the consequences. If we do not show compassion for the house-help or respect for one another at home, children cannot be courteous or genuinely kind in the world outside.

### Extreme parenting

American writer Sloan Wilson said, "The hardest part of raising a child is teaching them to ride bicycles. A shaky child on a bicycle for the first time needs both support and freedom.

The realisation that this is what the child will always need can hit hard."

While the fly-by parents pop in and out of their kids' lives, there are the helicopter parents who are always hovering over their children. These kids will be told what to wear and asked 'did you go to potty today' well into their teens. Their need and ability to make independent choices and decisions is irreparably stymied.

Also known as Velcro parents, these parents tend to be over-protective. A kid came home with a scraped knee, howling. The mother first shouted at the ayah for not keeping an eye on him and then at the child, 'How many times have I told you not to run!' No running, no jumping, no climbing trees. Cuts, scrapes, bruises and fractures used to be an integral part of growing up. When we went home with scuffed knees, crying, we were told how brave we had been or that we had killed ants! Something to console and cheer but never to condone or curtail childhood fun and learning.

At the other end of this spectrum are parents who are against overprotection of kids — and are bringing them up 'free-range'. Again, detractors of this style feel the world is not safe enough for such extreme parenting. The safety concern overrides everything else. So even though we understand the ills of letting our kids watch unlimited TV or play

computer games, it seems like a safer option always. The dangers of a sedentary lifestyle, of online bullying or abuse are minor as opposed to the harm that may befall them in the real world outside.

Granted that the world today is more indifferent and dangerous. Even parents look the other way if a matter does not concern their own child. Not many will caution a child leaning dangerously out of a window or parapet (even though they will scan other kids' exam sheets and question the teacher how they got half mark more than their own kid).

In Punjabi, the term sanjhe, meaning 'belonging to all', is used for children in the belief that children belong to everyone — the entire community they grow up in. Consequently, everyone is responsible for them and everyone cares for them. Now children get murdered inside their own homes in the presence of family; they are molested in the school bus; and killed in their own school. Gone are the days when the community watched over kids.

It is rightly said that 'there is no way to be a perfect parent and a million ways to be a good one'. While there can be no ready-made, rule-of-thumb, sweeping answers to parenting issues, there still are a few excellent, time-tested ways of avoiding most young-adult troubles — expressing love, paying attention and open communication.

Children don't learn responsible behaviour and good conduct from lectures and reprimands but from seeing it reinforced in their lives again and again. "Our children are extensions of ourselves." As I write this, I hear a swishing noise outside and looking out see a young man thrashing the tops off the plants that stand in a neat row before my window. No, the parents aren't away at work. Amma is right there talking on phone.