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Giving a Space for Me to be Me – Parenting with Intention

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Introduction

Parenting is probably one of the most thought expanding and maturing experiences we will ever have, if we allow it to be. Often we think of parenting as a way we protect, guide and direct children but it is much more than that. I cannot think of a better course in personal development than being a parent. Parenting automatically brings with it a way to get to know new parts of ourselves. Parenting is a way in which to fulfill, expand and express our own unique potential as well as the child's.

Parenting is a wonderful, but also challenging experience for most of us. Children have a tendency to push “buttons” that has never been pushed before and awakening powers inside that we did not know existed.

Have you ever been in a situation when somebody did or said something to your child that you could see really hurt? That is when the Mama Lion or the Papa Lion comes out, ready to “kill.”

Have you ever lost your temper over a 2-3-year-old who wants an ice cream NOW, or a 5-year-old who tells you to shut up, because you are disturbing his game? Many simple everyday situations that are so common as a parent can sometimes be very challenging. We all lose our temper sometimes.

If we are tired, stressed or wound up from a busy day at work, our buttons are easily pushed and we say and do things that we later regret.

Three of my grandchildren were a little bored one day and decided to check out what my daughter had in the refrigerator. Maybe there would be something they could use to play with. They found two packages with eggs. “Hmmm, what can we do with these?” They decided to throw them first at the cabinets and then at each other. They had a lot of fun

doing it until my daughter came into the kitchen and found about 20 eggs smashed all over the kitchen and the boys soaked in egg yolk and egg white.

What would you have done?

Well, I am glad that it was not me, because I do not think that I would have been able to laugh with them and acknowledge their creativity and fun. Thinking about it now makes me smile and wish I would let more of the child in me loose, to be wild and crazy. Wouldn't that be hilarious, to throw eggs at each other?

Young children are so much in the moment and they have a wonderful way of enjoying each moment, often until we, as adults, walk in. But they have no sense of what the consequences will be when they are young. As adults we are often much more focused on the behavior and the consequences, than being in the moment.

Very often the wild and crazy within us, and the being-in-the moment dies or is numbed out when we are still quite young. Grown-ups react to the "fun" and to our being in a way that makes us feel criticized or ashamed. Early on, we learn how to "hide" those parts of ourselves that we experience as not ok, by the way adults respond to them.

I do NOT mean that we should encourage children to throw eggs at each other, especially not in the kitchen, or at all for that matter, but a part of me giggles over the creativity and being-in-the-moment-feeling it gives me. How about you? Can you feel that?

I think many of us have lost touch with that feeling.

There is nothing more powerful for our being than to be allowed to be who we are. So how can we, as parents, allow our children to be who they are without losing our mind or giving up? Is there really a way to nurture the "being" and guiding the "doing" in ways that keep us alive inside, to realize our full potential, not only while children, but through life?

Well, if there is, the power is in the hands of parents and other nurturing adults that interact with our children. How can we parent with intention – giving space for the child to be who he or she is without losing our own boundaries and our own integrity?

I think that we are all born with an inherited potential, a core Self. The core Self is who we really are, our unique potential. Then each one of us has a body, and a physical, mental and emotional system, through which our core Self is or can be expressed. This system is an organized, purposeful structure that consists of interrelated and independent elements. Under optimal circumstances both the Self and the System are integrated and connected and our unique potential can be realized.

The Self, however is very vulnerable and the system is wired for survival and will do anything to protect the Self from harm or hurt. This is a good thing, but it is also potentially difficult. To simplify the concept, we can say that there is a protective and flexible shield

that will protect the Self as soon as there is any threat, real or imagined. When the threat is gone, the system relaxes and the shield goes back.

When we are insecure or stressed or when we experience pain, the threat system is activated and our “heart” closes, to protect the Self. When we feel safe and secure the system relaxes and our heart opens. The thing is that the system has no idea what is real and what is imagined. It is not reality that shapes us. It is how we experience reality that shapes us.

We face every situation in life with either an open heart or a closed heart, depending on our personality and genes and our created world view.

When our threat system is activated, all the energy is used to protect. As long as the threat system is activated (closed heart), very little learning or no learning at all is taking place. The system is focused on keeping us safe and alive. The system is very creative. It can keep us safe by having us lie, making up really good stories, accusing others, avoiding dealing with the situation and so on. The list can be long. It is our system that is trying to keep us safe, but it is usually not good for our integrity and for our relationship with ourselves and others. We become disconnected, from our core Self and from others.

I have worked with parents and children for over 35 years. Through the years I have seen many examples of how we often address a situation with a closed heart. With a closed heart it is impossible for our unique potential to be realized. I have dedicated my work to helping parents understand these mechanisms, so that we can all realize our full potential, both as adults and children.

To make sense of our experiences, to create meaning and to learn, mature and to realize our full potential, children need an open heart. We all do. The key is to create an environment that allows the heart to be open and to help the child make sense of the world, both on the inside and the outside. This is not an easy thing but it is possible if we raise our awareness.

Parenting with intention means that I become aware of my own system, my own needs, my own boundaries and my Self. It means that I act instead of react, guided by values that are important to me. It means that I see beyond the behavior and see the human in my child and myself. It means that I see that we are the same, unique human beings sharing a space. We are the same, but uniquely different.

This is not easy and it is a job that takes a lifetime, but it is very enriching and life sustaining.

For most of us we go about life, working and everything else we do, on “auto-pilot”. There is not much reflection and not much intention or awareness of why we do what we do. To live a life with intention and to parent with intention we need to raise our awareness, reflect on the purpose and values that we hold sacred and dear, and start living our lives in accordance with those.

If we go back to the children and the egg situation and use that as an example, how could we think and how could we act?

1. PAUSE – do not react on your feelings!

The situation will trigger different thoughts and feelings in different parents. By itself, the situation is just a trigger: it is experienced through your filter (personality, genetics, experiences from the past and the way you now “see” the world). This will create your feelings. Emotions are what move us and your feelings will move you to take action. Most of us act on our feeling – we REACT. To be able to ACT *with intent* we need to practice pausing, maybe take some deep breaths, reflect, raise our level of awareness, connect with ourselves, acknowledge whatever feelings are there and then act with intention. Sometimes, if the situation triggers very strong feelings that are hard to handle we might need to leave the situation for a while and then come back to it.

2. Try to look at it from different perspectives

For the most part we see a situation solely from our own perspective and REACT accordingly or sometimes we see it solely from the child’s/children’s perspective and REACT accordingly. The key is to see different perspectives and then choose how you want to ACT and what values you want to act according to. Sounds tricky or maybe impossible? Well, it is, for most of us, in the beginning. With practice it becomes more of a habit and it will become easier and easier to pause. In the beginning you probably will not pause until it is too late, *after* you have reacted on your feelings. That is a good start. Then you reflect, look at different perspectives, look at the values that you want as a guide in your life and think about how you would like to act next time something similar comes up.

If your reaction did some damage, you need to go back and repair whatever relational (emotional), physical or material damage you did when you reacted.

In our example of the egg throwing, what would the children’s perspective be? Can you see it?

We do not know of course, but we can guess.

This is what I guess:

They are exploring to see if there is anything exciting to do. One of them or all of them, come up with the idea to look in the refrigerator, to see if there is anything interesting in there. They see the eggs and come up with a really fun idea. What if we throw them? What will happen then? It sounds like a great idea. Let’s try it. They start throwing and they see the eggs splash against the cabinet doors. Splash.....Splash..... Their curiosity guides them and they are totally lost in the thrill of it. They giggle and laugh and now start throwing eggs at each other. They

are not doing it to annoy their parents. They are only in the here and now – having a lot of fun. Not thinking of how hard it will be to clean up or how upset mom or dad might be, at least until mom or dad shows up.

Mom's or dad's perspective will probably be very different. My system would say: "Alarm, alarm, alarm! Messy kitchen, messy kids, lots of work, I do not have time for this, I do not want to do this. I do not want them to play with food." If I was tired or stressed my thoughts might be: "Why do they do this to me? They never listen. They are always up to something. Playing with food is not okay. Twenty eggs, nothing for breakfast" and so on. This is all coming from a closed heart, protecting my own perspective.

I would have had a very hard time seeing the fun, the joy and the "life" in it.

Maybe my first feelings would have been anger, deep frustration and I think I would have felt very provoked. What about you? What would be your perspective?

Coming from this perspective it would be very likely that I would act in a way that would disconnect me from both myself and the children. It would be likely that I would use a tone of voice and words that were harsh and maybe shaming and maybe I would have pulled an arm or two, maybe too hard. Looking at it now, I can only feel the joy, the excitement, the fun and the "life". But I know that taking this attitude would have been very difficult for me, in the situation.

3. Connect with your feelings, and own your feelings

My feelings are my feelings. They are not anybody else's feelings. I have them and I need to take responsibility for them. So, allowing the feelings to be there without RE-ACTING on them is the key. Connect with yourself. If you need to leave the situation for a while, do so. Breathe. And come back when you have connected with yourself. This is when you can be authentic and genuine in how you act in the situation.

There is not a given answer to what the best solution would be or the right behavior would be. There would be very many different ways of acting in a way that took the perspective of all parties into consideration. But when you are in a reactive mode you will not be able to do that and very often the result will be disconnection, maybe shame and children that obey out of fear, not out of love and respect. Criticism and shame, instantly trigger our defense mechanisms, close our hearts and make learning very hard, if not impossible.

We are all wired for relationships and we all want to cooperate with people whom we trust and who will give us space to be us. When we feel connected, we want to contribute, we want to cooperate and we are very loyal. This is especially true of children. We do not need to use shame or fear to get children to obey. Fear always closes our heart and makes us less susceptible for learning.

4. Connect with the child/children

Acknowledge what you see. Take some deep breaths and make sure you come from a place where you genuinely can feel what they feel and experience what they experience. There is nothing more powerful than to be “seen”, “felt”, “heard” and taken seriously. This is when we connect. When we are connected we are open to learning. It is so simple, yet so very difficult in the moment.

Take a few breaths and try to feel the joy, the fun and the excitement with them. If you can acknowledge that in a genuine way, it is very likely that now they will be open to hearing your perspective of the situation and see the consequences of their fun. Learning from the situation is much more likely to happen.

It is a slower process than parenting by fear but it builds trust and a willingness to cooperate. TRUST is the platform from where the core Self opens up and our full potential can be realized. Without trust we close our hearts, we protect and we defend, very natural mechanisms. This creates disconnection both to Self and others. It is simple, but yet, so very, very difficult in the moment.

5. Share your perspective with the child

Share your perspective and your feelings without blaming or evaluating.

“When I saw you having so much fun in the kitchen, I was first very happy, because it makes me happy to see you happy. I could see how fun and exciting it was for you to throw the eggs. But then I felt sad for all the eggs that were wasted and for all the hens that made it possible for us to get food. I was also both sad and frustrated when I saw the mess. I was very tired and had been looking forward to spending the evening with you. With the mess that needed to be cleaned up, we did not have the time to do other things together. And I did not at all feel like cleaning after a long day at work. I got frustrated, sad and angry.”

6. Help your child see the consequences

Children do not see the consequences of their behavior in the moment but with help they can start learning that every choice has a consequence. They can learn about cause and effect instead of good and bad behavior.

“Look at you, with egg all over you and look at our kitchen cabinets, the floor, and the chairs. They are all full of egg. It will be a big cleaning job to clear this mess.”

7. Invite the child to find a solution and to be part of the solution

Children are very competent and are very willing to contribute. Once you have acknowledged their feelings, “seen” them or “heard” them, they usually have great

ideas about how things can be solved. They like to be invited, to help find a solution.

“What do you think we can do about it? How can we clean up this mess?”
You probably need to add solutions and together you can make a plan.

8. Help and support all the way to the end

Small children (and big for that matter) will give up very fast if they need to clean up or “repair” on their own. They need the support and guidance of an adult who can connect. If you cannot do that, which is very natural and nothing wrong, you can let somebody else do that. Make it fun, do it together and if the “mess” they have caused is too hard or too much to handle, give support and take over before it becomes a power struggle.

“This was a hard job, wasn’t it? You have worked so hard to clean up. Now, you run up and take a shower and I will fix the rest.”

9. Reflect together

At a time when you are connected, maybe later the same day or the next day, you can reflect on the situation together. Let the child tell you how he was thinking and what he was experiencing. No judging, no evaluation, JUST INTERESTED LISTENING. This is a mutual learning experience where you can get a glimpse of the inner world of your child.

Now you can teach, now you can tell the child if you do not want him or her to take eggs from the refrigerator and throw them in the kitchen, or whatever the situation may be.

Now he is likely to listen AND learn.

Parenting with intention is to create an environment where the child feels protected, to make it comfortable to participate and openly share ideas, experiences and thoughts. Parenting with intention is a way to give space for you to be you and the child to be him/her. Let curiosity and interest guide you. And remember that CONNECTION is the greatest and most important key to realizing potential, both yours and your child’s.

Author

Agnetha Stagling Birgersson writes: I am the mother of six children. My passion is human potential and I have dedicated my work to developing programs and models that help adults to build strong relationships and realize unique potential. I have worked with parents and children for over 35 years, in different countries.

In 1997 I started Familjeakademin (Family Academy) in Sweden. We train Group Leaders in our different programs for adults living with or working with children. Family Academy has trained over 750 Group Leaders that work mainly in Sweden but also in Europe and Asia.