

Being a Great Parent

I was driving along thinking about what it takes to be a great parent and began thinking about what it takes to be a great artist, a great manager, a great entrepreneur, a great writer, a great athlete, really a great anything. It takes incredible dedication and effort. Over time, you try harder and harder. You learn from your mistakes. You try different techniques. You look for what is your natural forte, but you don't stop there. You practice, you practice, and then you practice some more. You look at your "accomplishments" and you critique yourself, your style, your delivery, the results, the process you took, and you rack your brain trying to figure out an even better, more effective way of honing your craft. You seek help and guidance from experts in your field.

The amazing thing is most of those areas where people try and achieve "greatness" – the arts, business, sports – really the results all have to do with inanimate objects – a basketball, a baseball, a piece of art, a book, a business. For those endeavors, people strive long hours, they meet with "master's" in their field – they critique, they analyze they practice, they attempt to achieve their own personal best, and they try and better it. But what about what may be the most important "job" or endeavor in life - raising children?

How often do people even take a basic parenting class? How many child development classes do people take while raising children? How many books do parents read past that first astounding year of a child's life? How often do you "consult" with a child development specialist rather than relying on a pediatrician?

How often do parents yell in front of children, fight, or have quiet sieges where the tension is palatable throughout the house? How often do teenagers get ignored or harangued? Isn't there something in between? But if a parent doesn't know what does a parent do? Do they look at their canvas of a child and try, and try, and not give up? Do they consult the "manuals" the newest child development literature? Do they see a professional?

The October 7, 2002 cover story in Newsweek magazine was on depression and teens – how to tell the difference between normal teenage angst and true depression. They say anything lasting more than two weeks in duration is quite possibly depression, which may need to be medicated and often talk therapy can help. But so often I think parents want it to just "go away" on its own. In all fairness kids want that too. "Oh, leave me alone, I'll be okay" is a common teenage refrain, even when it's not true. When faced with that, most parents do just that for fear of escalating things into a screaming match of, "I don't want to leave you alone, I'm worried about you" responded to with, "I TOLD you I'm FINE. Now get out of my room and LEAVE ME ALONE!"

So what's a parent to do? One option is to pray through the rough times. Another is to follow the route of people trying to be great in other fields. Seek advice from "masters in the field" – therapists specializing in child development or adolescent behavior. Remember that you don't have to have all the answers. Seek help from parents who seem to be doing a different job that is more effective than your efforts. Read some of the newer books on your child's age. Keep reading. Go to parenting classes offered throughout the Denver metropolitan area. Don't give up. Try, try, and try some more. Practice, practice, practice. Brain storm with your spouse and your children. Talk about

what's happening and what's not happening. See who around you has some clever ideas that may be worth trying out. Bring your children into your quandary and ask them what they think it would take to have a more peaceful loving home. They often have good ideas to contribute if they think you're really listening and interested in using their ideas. Try different techniques from Jim Fay and Foster Kline's – Love and Logic to whatever else you can get exposed to. There are so many resources out there if a parent chooses.

Parenting may be the most important and incredible thing you ever do in your life. It makes sense that this is not just an effortless journey. The only “instincts” you have are based on what you experienced as a child and what you, from a childish place said, “I’ll never do THAT when I’m a mommy or a daddy.” But if you’re not going to do THAT, what will you do instead? Often there’s a void that you thought would naturally be flooded with options. Well, the parenting options pit is big, but often almost empty unless you make concrete and conscious efforts to fill it. This raising up stuff, takes all the same kinds of efforts it takes to be great at anything else.

Even natural born geniuses work hard. They may begin with a God given talent, but they will still spend hours a day at a piano, at the golf range, on the basketball court, or in an art studio, perfecting their craft. They don’t just sit down or stand there and “produce” incredible results. It takes time, effort, persistence, discipline, desire, and a willingness to do what it takes to get there. How would your kids be turning out if you prioritized parenting as the most important thing you’ll ever do? How would you feel about parenting if you gave it the commensurate time and effort that you would put into anything you wanted to be great at? Okay, if “Great” standards are too high for you what about striving for “really good?” How about realizing that this parenting thing is

incredibly challenging and there's no way you could have all the tools at your fingertips just because you have a child who is growing in front of your eyes?

A great-uncle of mine once said something like, "You know it's pretty incredible when you think about it. In order to be a doctor, a lawyer, a counselor, or a teacher you have to go to school for many years. There are tests and people who have to watch you to make sure you're at least competent to do your job which will affect and touch many people if you want to work in any of those professions. But, in order to be parents, all you have to do is have a child and you're a parent. No training, no books, no learning, no mentors, no observers. They hand you the baby as you leave the hospital, supposedly prepared for parenthood." He was incredulous as he added; "You will be influencing that person for the rest of its life, in much more serious ways than a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher or a counselor." He didn't think it was right. He thought there ought to be classes about being a good parent.

So next time you're challenged by those younger human beings called children that you're parenting, slow down and consider this reality; you may not currently possess the skills you need to do an optimal job with the situation at hand, but the resources are out there. All you have to do is make a concerted effort to become a great parent.

Joanne Baum, PhD, is the author of *Got the Baby Where's the Manual!?!? Respectful Parenting from Birth Through the Terrific Twos*. You can find more information on her website: www.respectfulparenting.com. Or you can call 303-679-1949 or 800 519-6003.