

Humanistic Parenting

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Parents often come to my office feeling frustrated, exhausted, and overwhelmed. Many of them explain to me that they feel they are at the end of their rope and at a loss for what to do. Having read numerous books and articles on parenting, experimented with all sorts of techniques, talked to friends, school counselors, and teachers, they long for something that works; something that they hope might possibly help them in dealing with their child.

While some parents wish and request that I “fix” their child, many say they would be grateful to settle for anything that may help their child and alleviate their feeling frustrated.

Through years of consulting with parents, working with kids in therapy, and leading parent-skills training groups, I experimented with different approaches to helping parents. In wanting to simplify a large body of information, I arbitrarily categorized the world of parenting into two philosophies: behavioral and humanistic. I strongly advocate and practice the latter, while I grudgingly (and with disappointment) accept that the former continues to be widely adopted. Before elaborating upon my preference for humanistic parenting, I’d like to briefly describe the behavioral model.

The behavioral approach to parenting is based on the premise that children’s behaviors can be shaped through modifying the consequences in their environment. Common terms in the behaviorist’s vocabulary are: reinforcement, reward, punishment, tokens, shaping, and time-out. In certain circumstances and situations, implementing behavioral strategies can effectively and quickly change a child’s behavior over the short-term. I believe this is one of the reasons behavioral techniques maintain their widespread appeal with parents and professionals. Moreover, research has repeatedly demonstrated that one of the best ways to immediately reduce or eliminate an undesirable behavior (e.g., hitting, temper tantrums) is to punish a child as soon as possible following the emitted action. Behavior management programs seem to work best when the parent or teacher holds a position of *power over*, and maintains a reasonably high degree of *control over* the child.

When I trained as an intern, I counseled parents on ways to set up these behavioral systems in their home to enable them to reduce or control their child’s “unwanted” behaviors. Our programs seemed reasonable, simple, and commonsensical. Parents and I, however, soon started noticing some reoccurring common patterns and problems. The first two to three weeks was a “honeymoon” period. At this stage of the program, the charts and rewards were often fun for the parents and kids. The ideas were new and fresh. With most honeymoons, though, the novelty and behavior changes did not endure. The reduced effectiveness, or total breakdown, became predictable. Parents told me stories of their kids becoming bitter and resentful, and tearing down the star charts off the refrigerator door. The once-effective rewards (e.g., T.V., video games, money, candy), were no longer sufficient. Parents and I also observed another common problem with this approach: when

the parent was not present (i.e., the person in charge was not around), the children usually reverted to their previous actions. For instance, Billy would act “good” when mom and dad were watching, but he would return to hitting his sister when mom and dad weren’t around.

I felt uncomfortable advocating and supporting a system that was based on parents having control and power over their children. This contradicted my belief that children are intelligent human beings who deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. Another troublesome outcome associated with the behavioral techniques was that kids seemed to react with negative feelings, such as feeling angry or feeling scared, toward their parents. This prompted my search for another way to enhance the emotional climate in the home.

What, then, is an alternative? What is humanistic parenting?

Humanistic parenting is an attitude, a philosophy, and a way of relating to your child. It is an approach where the inner goodness of the child is valued.

A core principle of humanistic parenting is respecting children and treating them with dignity. A useful exercise to help in following this fundamental principle is to ask yourself the questions, “would I like to be treated that way?”, and “how would I feel if I was in their shoes?”. If the answers are “no” and “I would feel disrespected”, then your actions as a parents most likely do not follow the humanistic parenting philosophy.

When treating their children with respect and connecting with their children’s feelings, parents are empowered. They often experience considerably less feeling guilty and frustrated.

In the humanistic approach, children are allowed to have and to feel their feelings. I am not proposing that kids be allowed to go around hitting whomever they please! I am, however, suggesting that children (just as adults do) are entitled to express their feelings in a constructive nonviolent manner. In allowing their feelings an outlet, children often feel better about themselves, and feel accepted by their parents.

Humanistic parenting practitioners also respect the feelings of parents. Through being aware of, expressing, and communicating their feelings, they can act as sincere and genuine models to their children.

Skills and terms in the humanistic parenting vocabulary include: active listening, acknowledging and validating feelings, openly communicating your own feelings, problem solving, describing, and giving information.

Some professionals and parents believe that the skills and techniques from humanistic philosophy are not sufficient for dealing with “difficult” and “tough” children with serious problems. My experiences, generally, have not supported this assertion. Contrary to these concerns, I have repeatedly witnessed the success of humanistic parenting strategies with a wide range of children.

It is sometimes beneficial to incorporate skills and strategies adopted or borrowed from the behavioral model within the humanistic framework. The key seems to be how these techniques are used and the underlying attitude that parents have when relating to their children. For instance, it may be helpful for a parent to use a version of the time-out

strategy when their child is feeling very angry. Within the humanistic framework time-out could provide the child an opportunity to cool down and maybe even to reflect on his feelings. It would be used in a respectful, non-punitive manner, and often with the previously agreed upon consent of the child.

Although it may take longer to see the results of the humanistic approach with “difficult” children, in the end, those children incorporate values and acceptable behaviors that tend to endure. Rather than questioning themselves whether their actions will elicit a sticker or reprimand from their parents (or teachers), children learn healthy ways to act and to express themselves in everyday situations.

When humanistic parenting is consistently adopted by parents, I believe that long-term changes are possible in all families and with all children. The positive feedback from parents bolsters my conviction that this is an effective and respectful way to relate to children.

For more information and for techniques that were developed from follow a humanistic parenting philosophy, I often recommend the following books: How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish; Parent Effectiveness Training, by Thomas Gordon; and Kids are Worth It!, by Barbara Coloroso. Videos, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, and Barbara Coloroso, are also available.

Participating in parenting groups and consulting with a professional who is familiar and experienced with the humanistic approach may also be helpful ways to practice and fine-tune these skills.

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