

Raising People

A mother shared with me her favorite parenting one-liner: “I have to remember that I am not raising children, I am raising people.” She explained that whenever she was facing a tricky parenting moment and wasn’t sure how to proceed, this piece of self-talk would remind her to think past the day and to consider all the tomorrows to come.

Though it is almost impossibly difficult to imagine, our children will be husbands and wives someday. Before that they will be college students, living in a dorm, maybe a plane trip away from us. They will be licensed drivers, perhaps stopped by a police officer for rolling through a stop sign or for driving ten miles per hour over the speed limit. They will be employees, first part-time and later, after college, working full-time, probably forty hours per week or more.

Raising people is different than raising children and parenting with a long-term perspective is different than parenting for the short-term. But most of what we do day in and day out is short-term. Starting with getting out the door in the morning (homework done, dressed appropriately for the weather, backpacks ready for whatever the day brings), arranging for transportation to extra-curricular activities and appointments, moving through occasional attitude problems and power struggles, everyday life seems to be on a mission to prevent us from *considering the child in front of us as a person in development*. We are at times too exhausted from dealing with the day we have to consider how to use the day’s challenges to prepare our children for their future.

Let’s take homework or chores as examples. Every parent wants their children to help out a bit at home and be successful in school. Parents who are “raising children” tend to focus on whether or not the chore gets done and how this semester, this week, this day’s schoolwork and grades look. If a child resists a chore, this parent puts her foot down, raises her voice, and sees to it that the chore gets done.

If an assignment is forgotten or done poorly, or if a grade drops, this parent leaps into action right then to remedy the situation. Many parents believe this is what good parenting is.

Parents who are “raising people” have the same goals but different strategies. A poorly done chore becomes an opportunity to teach about the work ethic, pride in accomplishment and the logical consequences that follow poor effort or poor cooperation. Not taking school seriously is viewed as training grounds for all the years of education to come. Students who have privileges removed and consequences given for not taking school seriously will learn to take school seriously. It is simple except that the time frame for growth is slower than the parent wishes.

Parents who are “raising children” inadvertently sabotage their own long-term strategies when their feelings of worry and impatience lead them to use a frustrated or discouraged voice and offer too much help. Instead of learning about autonomy and feeling their parent’s unconditional love, children learn about dependency and how they are treated differently when they are thriving and when they are not. And while there are many causes of adolescent depression, anxiety, eating disorders and perfectionism, this is indisputably one of the causes.

With a long-term focus, parents take advantage of lower grades or poorly done chores to present themselves as exactly the same caring, warm and loving parent. Children learn that their worth as a person is not contingent on each assignment, every chore or every grade. In fact, they feel the loving embrace of their parent while that parent is doing the discipline. If this doesn’t sound like a big deal, it is because of my limitations as a writer. Many older teenagers with mental health struggles were not taught the difference between their inner value and the day-to-day mistakes of childhood. At its worst, children do not learn to view disappointing life events as obstacles to be faced; rather they come to view them as indictments of their character and value as a person. Better for us to keep this long-term focus in mind and plan to handle our children’s weak moments with a simple discipline plan and a kind and forgiving tone.

Please check out www.drstevekahn.com, a free resource for parents. Dr. Kahn is the author of *Insightful Parenting: Making Moments Count*. Previous articles are archived there and can be downloaded and shared at no cost.