

Sense and Psychotherapy

Thoughts and Ideas on Psychotherapy and Living

Summer 1998

Dear Reader,

Welcome to *Sense and Psychotherapy*. Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to glance over this first issue of my newsletter. I hope you find it informative and entertaining, and I welcome any suggestions or ideas on how to improve it. I expect it to evolve over time, hopefully for the better.

As I've devoted a great deal of time over the past few months to parenting issues, it seemed natural to start off by writing about some of the issues and ideas I've encountered. As a parent, a therapist, and a former preschool teacher, I'm concerned about the future of our children. Many adults are exhausted by the overwhelming demands of supporting a household, raising children, and remaining financially solvent. As our society becomes more rushed and depersonalized, and fewer adults seem to have time for our youngsters, the needs of children seem too often ignored or discounted. Yet, with little effort, there are steps we can take to improve children's lives.

Thanks for your time,

Just the facts...

- A newborn infant's brain contains the hundreds of billions of nerve cells needed for the rest of her life
- Studies show that parental involvement in school activities is one of the strongest predictors of academic success
- American children watch an average of 3-4 hours of TV every day

Thoughts on Learning and Academic Success

I've recently been researching childhood learning styles and behavior for a series of presentations I'm doing at a local elementary school. It's given me a chance to explore aspects of childhood learning development, and think about how it relates to learning styles and school success. One subject I find fascinating is the recent research coming out on how the brain develops, and how that affects our learning style and our ability to integrate information. Different areas within the brain control specific emotional, intellectual and physical functions. Many theories describe how the timing and type of stimulation the brain receives can enhance or detract from development in a variety of areas.

I've been attracted by Howard Gardner's theory of the eight "intelligences", which argues that we are all gifted in at least one, if not many, of a common set of learning styles. He suggests that we increase a child's chances for success in school by identifying her learning styles and tailoring learning situations to utilize her strengths. One of the strongest implications, which I find very appealing, is that there's no such thing as a "one size fits all" educational strategy. While some children may thrive in a traditional "3-R" environment, others will learn more effectively in an open, exploratory environment that develops basic skills by focussing on areas of interest. With so many school choices available these days, it seems more important than ever for parents to know the learning styles of their children and to explore the range of educational experiences that are available.

Much has been written for parents regarding strategies for academic success, and more is being published every day. Fortunately, I've found that most of the material available offers similar common sense suggestions. For one thing, most writers strongly encourage reading at all ages. We live in a very linguistic culture, and functional literacy is absolutely essential for almost any student. Not surprisingly, many books suggest turning off the TV as a way to encourage reading. Another common theme is that children need to develop regular study habits. The more embedded the homework routine becomes, the more likely children are to regard it as a natural part of their lives. Positive role modelling appears as a strategy in many books on academic success. Children in households where learning, and enthusiasm for learning, are part of their parents' lives seem to grow up to share that excitement.

I've seen many studies citing parent involvement in their child's education as one of the strongest predictors of academic success. I strongly encourage parents to become involved in their children's schools. There are so many benefits, not only for the schools and the children, but for the parents as well. By volunteering in the classroom parents stay in contact with teachers, and regularly observe their children's academic and social progress. By becoming part of the school community, they can find common ground with parents who, like themselves, are striving to raise children who will grow into responsible, productive, happy adults.

Why Not Corporal Punishment?

When I was pregnant with my son, I was filled with hopes and fears about my impending parenthood. I felt strongly that although I wanted a well disciplined child, I never wanted to strike or spank him. I wondered how I could raise my son in a peaceful, nonviolent, respectful environment, and still treat him with appropriate firmness and discipline. When experienced parents gave me a knowing look and the “just wait and see” speech, I was all the more determined to find methods of discipline other than corporal punishment.

Since the birth of my son, I’ve had plenty of conversations with other parents, and lots of time to think about my goals. Although I still believe spanking, slapping or striking a child is a misguided, short-term “solution”, I’ve also found that it’s critical to place firm, consistent boundaries around children. They need predictability and security. Weak, inconsistent limits leave them confused and anxious, and that’s when they are most likely to misbehave. Firm boundaries and fair, consistent consequences give them the safety to confidently explore new experiences and develop self discipline.

Yet, if limits and discipline are so important, why do I have such strong feelings about corporal punishment? I believe it teaches lessons directly opposed to what many parents expect. When an adult hits a child, the adult is usually

angry and frustrated. S/he isn’t thinking clearly or rationally, either about what the child has done or how they should react to it. The child learns from the adult’s behavior to strike out when angry or frustrated, that it’s normal to lose control and physically hurt the people you love. In the short term the child may “shape up,” but in the long run they’ve really learned the wrong lessons. Often, they become sneaky, resentful and rebellious in response to their punishment. They respond in kind, maybe not by returning the spansks or slaps, but by acting more aggressively with siblings and peers.

Rather than resort to corporal punishment, I try to establish natural or logical consequences for misbehavior, such as taking away a toy if Eugene can’t play with it appropriately, or giving him a time-out if he behaves aggressively. When he understands that he loses privileges if he mishandles them, he seems to have an easier time controlling his behavior. So, I try to make it as clear as possible what the consequences will be if he misbehaves. In many situations, I give him a warning, explaining how he needs to behave, and what will happen if he doesn’t. I try to be as absolutely consistent as I possibly can, so he knows what to expect if he misbehaves. Establishing firm and consistent rules also helps me maintain my self-control, making it much less likely I’ll become exasperated and lose my temper trying to figure out how to stop his misbehavior.

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“It is nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry.”

Albert Einstein