Parenting

Tips and Advice

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Parenting

The World's Toughest Job

Parenting is the most difficult 'job' in the world. The process lasts longer than most modern careers. It requires a larger investment - in time and money - than just about any other activity. The complexity of choices is greater and the outcome more uncertain. Greater patience is needed and the roller coaster of emotions steeper than any other undertaking.

Parents have to learn, virtually from scratch, a range of new skills -- and they have to get it as close to right as possible the first time. Relatively simple diaper changing rapidly gives way to complex medical conundrums. Educating a child, both intellectually and ethically, not to mention choosing among formal education alternatives, is a serious and difficult process.

Dealing with divorce and single-parenthood, safety, emotional well-being and a spectrum of practical and value situations can tax the best parents. These, and many more situations, often offer puzzles to solve that have inherently mixed practical, psychological and ethical dimensions.

Mix in the elements of grandparents, media reports and 'expert advice', educators' views, other children and many other outside influences - both on the parents and the child - and you have one hellishly difficult stew to filter.

Parents who successfully negotiate the maze often have some basic characteristics in common.

Parents with the ability to view life's challenges with a sense of confidence and resiliency go a long way toward instilling those characteristics in their children. Those who show respect toward spouses - and their children - help grow that quality in the child in two ways. It helps grow self-respect in the child and leads the child to a proper respect for the rights and value of others.

Parents who early on demonstrate a sense of fair play when deciding among competing claims give children a good foundation in many ways. The child benefits from the justice shown toward their valid concerns, while at the same time getting the proper view that becomes valuable in later life.

Along with these values, parents who demonstrate the willingness to devote time to listening and sharing experiences establish a foundation of life-long trust and love.

Life doesn't always reward good behavior. But, fortunately, all the effort made to be a good parent pays off in a hundred ways. Raising children well is a tremendous source of pride and joy, and rightly so. Helping provide the skills - intellectual, emotional, ethical and social - needed to thrive in an increasingly complex society rewards parents many times over.

Parents are right to enjoy both the practical results of their efforts and the deep emotional satisfaction that comes from the process and the outcome. Few 'careers' consistently offer such high dividends for a 'job well done'.

Traditional vs. Non-Traditional Parenting

In the past 40 years, roughly since the 1960s, parenting (along with dozens of other life issues) has undergone a revolution in thinking. Traditional methods were questioned, in many cases rejected, and a spirit of experimentation resulted in the adoption of many alternatives.

Many people during the 1960s began to believe that the restrictive, almost Victorian parenting styles of earlier generations were unsuited to a modern society. Many converging views led to that conclusion, including Dr. Spock's books and those of other influential child psychologists.

The results of those 'experiments' has now been observed for the past 10-20 years and after a generation of experimentation, some have come to believe that the traditional ways were not so far off after all. The pendulum has begun to swing back to more traditional views of parenting.

But are those the only alternatives? Are the only possibilities a harsh and unreasonable discipline versus a soft and mindless lack of discipline? Many contemporary psychologists envision a third way.

Parenting is an enormously complex undertaking, requiring huge amounts of patience, struggle (both emotional and financial) and a long-term commitment. But that effort can be made much simpler by some relatively simple observations about human nature.

The first thing that will strike any parent is the unabashed joy that a child takes in exploring the world around him or her. Babies are fascinated by sights, sounds, movement and a variety of sensations. As the child matures, asking questions becomes a virtual mania, at least for a few years.

If a parent responds with enthusiasm to those early gropings, they are recognizing and supporting the fundamental attribute that young humans are using: curiosity. But, curiosity is another way of saying that the child is seeking to use his or her mind to understand and deal with the world.

Developing that faculty provides the foundation for other essential aspects of the child's personality, including self-esteem, empathy, enjoyment of life and other positive characteristics.

To develop a healthy self-esteem, it's necessary to feel that one can understand and deal with the challenges life brings, even to the young. To deal with others fairly, and to empathize with their circumstances and reactions, the child has to be able to understand what it's like to 'walk in their shoes'. To enjoy life, the young person - just as do adults - has to be comfortable with their ability to achieve the values - both material and spiritual - essential to a successful life.

Parents can help in that effort by leaving open all the options that modern society can offer an individual. There is no need to return to the socially restrictive views of a hundred years ago, with its conformity, rigidity and frequent disapproval of individual choice.

But neither do parents need to succumb to moral anarchy or relativism and regard all options as equally valid. Human nature is not infinitely plastic and the demands of the real world will require facing facts.

The third way can represent the best chance a developing individual has for a positive life.

Fathers and Children

Few things have changed so radically in the last 100 years as the view of a father's role in parenting.

Once, it was the Victorian view of 'rarely-seen law-giver'. Then the Freudian influenced 'not a terribly important factor' became dominant. That was gradually replaced with the 1950s 'wise breadwinner'. Then came the social revolution of the 1960s, which taught that fathers were little more than sperm donors. Now there's the contemporary, splintered view that encompasses a dozen conflicting outlooks.

Sorting out a better view, therefore, will have to involve getting back to basics and asking: "What are fathers for?", "What's the effect of their presence or absence?", and "What actual influence do they have?" Complex and difficult questions, to be sure.

Many broad-based studies concur on one point: kids raised without fathers have a much higher incidence of bad outcomes - poor scholastic performance, violent activities, drug use and criminal convictions.

What to conclude from that can be problematic.

Some point to the economic facts accompanying those fatherless households. Others point to more psychological or ethical factors. Whatever the root cause, and likely there are many, the conclusion remains: kids need dads in order to get the best chance in life.

Of course, being a father and being a good father are not the same thing. Studies and common experience suggest that merely supplying funds for food and shelter, helpful as those are, is just the beginning of paternal input to a good outcome.

Fathers, whether in single-parent homes or in two-parent, dual gender homes, are still looked to as guidance givers. Female children often look to fathers for a sense of protection, and as an alternative voice in conflicts with the mother. Young males will be influenced by their father when evaluating their own identities.

In two-parent, dual gender homes fathers can benefit children of both sexes by, among other things, demonstrating how decisions are made and how they interact with the mother.

Both male and female children get clues about 'normal' parental roles when they observe how the father acts when choices are being considered. Do they typically defer certain categories of choices to the mother? (Diet, bedtime, household chores) Do they discuss differences calmly, or do they loudly proclaim male authority?

These, along with a wide variety of other common experiences, help shape the children's views of interactions among the sexes.

Even during times other than joint decision-making, fathers influence children's views of adults and the world. Different fathers can display very different basic approaches to problem solving, for example. One is confident, objective, or displays a sense of the excitement of discovery and success. That's a very different outlook from the man who shows resentment, fear and self-doubt, or hostility at the need to overcome life's challenges.

Children observe fathers in these, and numerous other, settings. What they observe influences their views much more than what is explicitly said or preached. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but real experience offers volumes.

Single Parenthood, Pros and Cons

Since roughly 1970, approximately 20-30% of children live in single parent homes. The number varies from study to study and country to country. More of those are female than male, but again the numbers vary substantially from one study to the next. Whatever the sex of the parent, parenting alone raises some unique challenges.

Since most single parents continue to work, many of the basic difficulties involved are practical ones: how to find and afford a sitter or day-care, what to do when having to work late or weekends, how to arrange shopping, etc.

Single parents find all manner of creative arrangements for meeting these difficulties. Many rely on older children to care for younger ones, while the younger ones often take on more responsibilities than other children in their age group. Many rely on friends and relatives. Some simply leave the child home alone for extended periods.

But beyond the practical arrangements, there are many parenting issues of a more value-oriented or psychological nature that can be equally or more daunting. Single parents will more often second guess their actions, not having a spouse to bounce ideas off of.

Many find dealing with children of the opposite sex a special challenge. Single parents will often find it difficult to know how to guide a child of the opposite sex, not having a spouse to consult with about his or her childhood experiences. Some of that gap can be filled by discussions with grown siblings, however.

But single parenthood can have advantages, even in the light of difficult circumstances. The absence of a partner means the absence of sometimes irrational and vehement arguments that the child would observe. Establishing parenting rules and guidelines is more straightforward for the single parent, since there is no partner to consult or with whom to debate.

Several recent studies point to other positive - or at least the absence of negative - aspects of single parenthood. For those single parents with adequate incomes, there is no observed ill-effect of the single parent home on a child's educational or personality development.

Indeed, being raised in a single parent home often makes children more mature and self-responsible at a younger age. Many benefit from the increased attention that a single parent will often bestow in the absence of a spouse.

Being raised in a single parent home may have been a social stigma in previous generations, but those attitudes are largely gone. Some now regard the situation as more 'contemporary' or even 'hip'.

Single parents can do much to ease their own minds by paying close attention to observable behaviors to monitor their children.

Pre-teens who become withdrawn may be suffering from the effects of parental divorce or death. Children will often be reluctant to discuss their feelings on these subjects and much patience may be required to draw them out.

Teens left alone at home for long periods may be unduly influenced by peers. That can often lead to unwanted behavior. While most parents will want to respect their teen's privacy, watching for early tell-tale signs of drug use or other harmful behavior will save everyone much grief later on.

Single parents have a unique opportunity to influence their child for good or ill, without the counterbalance of another parent. Fortunately, many children raised in a single parent home will report with admiration the extra effort required and made by their single parent Mom or Dad. You can be one of them.

Step-Parenting and Sharing Authority

Being a step-parent is somewhat like being in middle management - you get the complaints from 'above' and 'below'. One way out of this dilemma is to step out from the middle and simply be part of 'senior management'. Successful employment of that strategy will require cooperation from the biological parent. But if you don't have that already, that may well be a major source of the difficulty to begin with.

Like any change in relationships, adjustments take time. Attempting to force the situation will likely result in frustration to all parties. The biological parent may well be threatened by the

need to 'share power' and the child will typically resent being guided by someone not 'officially sanctioned'.

Here again, cooperation of the biological parent is key. Honestly communicating frustrations in a non-confrontational way gives that parent the opportunity to hear what needs the step-parent may have that are being thwarted. Experience suggests that no-quick fix or instantaneous change is likely to take place. Several calm, mature discussions will need to occur before a meaningful, lasting shift can take place.

The step-child, too, will necessarily be part of the equation. Seeing another adult in the role of step-parent, rather than intruder, will take time. How much time will depend on the age and individual personality of the child. The child shouldn't be allowed to dictate terms - adults need to remain the term-setters in the house. But a sincere respect for the child's context will benefit all parties.

One way to ease this transition is to have the biological parent, the step-parent and the children sit down for a quiet, unhurried talk. This assumes the children are older than about three or so. During the discussion, which the biological parent should initially lead, an age appropriate 'statement of policy' can be revealed and talked about.

The two parents should have prepared this in advance and agreed on any compromise beforehand. The discussion should not be one of simply 'laying down the law'. Children need a sense of control and freedom to choose just as adults do. But the adults are necessarily in the role of ultimate 'decider' in the household.

Showing the children that the adults are united in this area will go a long way toward avoiding playing one parent off the other - including those in another household. It will provide the children with clear guidance that will need to be reinforced by actual experiences and occasional reminders.

Such an arrangement, formalized by the discussion, will help to relieve anxiety on the part of the step-parent about what he or she should expect. The step-parent, too, needs to know where to assert authority, and when to take a back seat.

All parties benefit.

Adoption Challenges

Adopting a child may be both a long train of practical and emotional nightmares and the fulfillment of a dream.

About 1% of all children in the U.S. were adopted. Thus, though the percentage may be small, the total number is considerable - in the millions. While, fortunately, many of the traditional stigmas have faded, adoption and raising adopted children remains a uniquely challenging process for millions of parents.

Many psychologists who specialize in such issues can report from their files such heartrending statements as:

"We knew this child would be different from us. But sometimes it seems we don't know him at all." or,

"Sometimes we just look at each other and ask what we got ourselves into?"

Many everyday, practical issues are more difficult to handle in adoption scenarios. Lack of knowledge of heredity in relation to medical problems, prior bad parenting or even abuse can seem to make understanding present problems more difficult.

Children who discover unexpectedly that they are adopted - especially from someone other than the adoptive parent - can feel (often without any input from others) that they are somehow less than fully loved and wanted. How and when to inform young children that they have been adopted presents a unique challenge to adoptive parents.

While no 'one size fits all' prescription for dealing with adoption issues can hope to be realistic, some general suggestions may help parents better cope with their special difficulties.

Parents who make the effort to endure the long and painful bureaucracy and expense that too often accompanies adoption should take pride in having persisted. Keeping the end goal in mind is difficult in the midst of so many needless hurdles, and those who do so are entitled to feel good about it.

Dealing with a child's medical problems is trying enough for any parent, but adoptive parents sometimes feel frustrated and fear being unable to cope. Some comfort may be had by realizing that hereditary information is only one small part of diagnosis. Physicians effectively treat unconscious victims, emergency cases and a wide variety of other patients in circumstances where such information is not available nor particularly useful.

Some value may be had also in realizing that psychological issues can and do arise about as frequently with biological children. Except in cases of actual abuse, former experiences are only a small part of the cause of what a child is presently feeling.

As adoptive parents know, the bonds that form between parent and child form very quickly and very deep. Both common experience and formal studies show that such relationships are as strong and lasting as biologically-based parent-child bonds.

That suggests that the relationships and their value to parent and child are as much the consequence of choice as of biology. Indeed, since they are chosen by the parent, both parties can benefit from the advantages such arrangements offer.

Adoptive parents can revel in and express with joy to their child that 'you were chosen'. This is not recommended in families of mixed adopted and biological children. Biological children should not be given the message that they were not chosen, nor should adopted children be encouraged in a view that they are superior to the other children for having been adopted.

Parents and child can each enjoy the many benefits of family life, the overwhelming majority of which have little or nothing to do with biological relations. Whether the specific child was the offspring of that particular parent or not, the pride of guiding and the joy of learning is the same. The special emotional bonds among family members transcends how the parties met.

When Parents Disagree

Sometimes it's surprising that the divorce rate isn't actually higher than it is (about 46% in the U.S.). Assuming it isn't just inertia on the part of the 54%, it's a tribute to the willingness of so many couples to work out their differences.

Fortunately, most parents will agree on one thing: the children should not be put in the middle of these conflicts. Avoiding that result requires skill, maturity, tact and compromise.

To work out reasonably consistent policies to cover the thousands of different real-life experiences of family life requires careful thought. It also takes a willingness to be frank about what each partner wants and views as fair. It requires buckets of honesty.

Each parent needs to be willing to face reality and be reasonable. That's difficult to do in states of high emotion and about subjects that are important like those involving how to raise children. Just as in society in general, when one party simply bulls another to achieve a short-term gain the result is frustration, injured feelings and often a violation of simple justice.

A willingness to recognize, despite anger or irritation, that the other party has a valid point of view and a vested interest in the outcome, requires considerable objectivity. But objectivity doesn't have to mean emotional or value neutrality, simply a willingness to see things as they are.

One thing that will help encourage that objectivity is the realization that each party has an equal stake in the larger issue - the welfare of the child.

That shared interest can form the basis of a mutual effort to discuss different evaluations, background that may be exerting biasing factors and other barriers to a satisfactory arrangement. But when each party makes a sincere effort (or more accurately, repeated efforts), such resolutions are possible.

Successful marriages are fundamentally those in which each partner genuinely admires and cares for the other. That forms the basis of respect that children both observe and absorb over time. That respect and admiration makes it possible to see the larger picture and longer-term goal - a compromise that doesn't simply leave both parties exhausted or unfulfilled.

Mature parents will ultimately realize that no single disagreement is likely to be so important that it's worth harming the happiness of the family members. You don't burn the house down because you don't like the color of the drapes. Respectful parents will see that one may get his or her way this time, but the next time the partners point of view will prevail.

Few concrete objects or circumstances are so important that no compromise is possible. What time to have dinner, or how clean the house should be, or what time the child should be home from outdoor activities, or even what college to attend... the list is endless. But only in the rarest of cases is it overwhelmingly important that one point of view must prevail for all time.

In every case listed, and many more, it's healthy to try one person's preference, then experiment with another if the results are less than satisfactory. Viewing the process as ongoing allows each parent to feel his or her values are respected.

The child benefits doubly from this. He or she gains the best possible outcome, discovered by experience. The child also sees that Mom and Dad can disagree while still respecting one another's points of view. The child sees honesty and reason at work in an atmosphere of admiration and love. The latter may well be the best lesson of all.

Grandparents and Other Dilemmas

Sometimes being a parent is like being in middle management. You have not only a whole host of issues to deal with in relation to the kids, but grandparents can introduce another set. Grandparents in the parenting mix present all the issues of influence from others, but with the obvious added wrinkle that they have a special relationship to both the parents and the children.

So, how does a parent maximize all the good things grandparents bring, while minimizing some of the potential difficulties?

Grandparents can offer enormous value by sharing the wisdom of long experience. After all, they have raised children before and most parents will want to believe they did a good job. For such advice to be valuable, however, it has to be delivered at the right time and in the right way.

Grandparents who need some reminding can be diplomatically asked to hold off on offering wisdom until the parent is in a more receptive frame of mind. Unprompted comments during child disciplining almost invariably sound like a rebuke. It will usually, understandably, be met with a defensive reaction.

For the parents' part, their long-term self-interest will be served by exercising some objectivity. After the strong emotions fade, give some thought to whether the grandparents advice has merit. It usually does. Place a lower emphasis on how or when it was delivered.

Grandparents want what's best for the grandchildren and their own, naturally. That hope can be realized by their exercising some objectivity, as well. Realizing that the parents bear the primary responsibility for establishing rules and inculcating values for their children will help avoid conflicts.

Parents can help by picking their battles. Grandparents are individuals and will have different views on many subjects. As they express those views in action, their choices can collide with what the parent wants.

But not every minor disagreement is grounds for a major battle, or any at all. Rules about bedtime and diet should be respected, since these have a real effect on health. But there are many areas where the grandparents, rightly, want to enjoy giving the children a little more -- materially and in freedom -- than the parents might feel comfortable with.

A healthy compromise can be reached when all parties exercise a little creativity. A $500 chemistry set as a birthday gift might worry some parents. Substituting trips to the aquarium and zoo might be one way to 'split the difference'.

Conflict negotiators often suggest that parties at loggerheads seek common ground. Fortunately, when it comes to raising children, both parents and grandparents have much fertile earth to share. Both almost always have the interests of the child first and foremost in mind.

Settling disputes is easier when both parties seek to 'make their case' by patient reasoning based on a foundation of fact. Combining that attitude of objectivity with respect for individual values is a winning package.

All Important Communication

Few subjects in parenting are as fundamental, or as important, as communication. Humans function so much by language, whether implicit or explicit, that learning how to communicate effectively affects virtually every other sphere of family relations.

But developing good strategies for good communication, based on sound ideas, is extremely complicated. Individuals differ so widely in age, temperament and circumstances that outlining a 'one size fits all' approach is guaranteed to fail at the outset.

Does that mean that every parent has to start from scratch and simply improvise for 20 years? Fortunately, no. Both cognitive studies and generations of experience have shown that some methods do work better than others.

One essential element is suggested in the short list above. Since individuals differ in those ways and so many more, a method that accepts that fundamental fact has a better chance of producing healthy results.

An effective communication approach between parent and child will start with openly recognizing facts. Just as good communication between adults requires honesty, so will that between parent and child. Children, as any parent knows, are very intuitive. They sense very quickly when they are being lied to.

That doesn't imply that parents must, or should, be so frank as to answer fully every question put to them. Parents are individuals too and are entitled to a sphere that respects their privacy.

How much to share, and in what manner, will take into account the individual child's age and level of genuine interest. For example, when communicating 'lessons' about appropriate behavior with respect to other people's property, picking the time and place is helpful.

Using a shared experience, such as a TV program being watched or something seen while on a joint shopping trip, can be a good springboard. At the same time, approaching the talk in a way that makes it a discussion rather than a lecture will benefit both parent and child.

The child sees that his or her viewpoint is respected while they benefit from the experience and ability to articulate that the parent has in greater abundance. Despite their occasional bravado, children know they don't know as much as adults and look to them for input. When that input is delivered in a respectful, honest manner most children will respond appropriately most of the time - provided the approach is followed consistently.

Children are also very intuitive about sensing hypocrisy and observant about any inconsistency between 'the rules' and the parent's behavior. Sometimes embarrassingly so!

Part of that process involves being willing to listen attentively and fully to the child's point of view. Most parents know the delight of hearing the wisdom 'out of the mouths of babes' that children can exhibit. The child's honest appraisal of what they observe is often insightful and refreshing.

Echoing back, in the parent's own words, what the child has said will help both parties. The child observes that they have been listened to, while at the same time gaining additional insight from the experience of the parent. The parent gains the deep satisfaction of observing his or her child develop and the joy of interacting with an individual who is immensely important to them.

One form of this is sometimes called the 'stop, look and listen' approach. It entails - when feasible - stopping what the parent is doing, looking directly at the child and listening completely without interruption before responding.

It helps the child practice communication in an atmosphere of respect and allows the parent to get hugely important information about what their child is attending to and how he or she is processing that experience.

The phrase is overworked, but this is one approach that is truly a win-win situation.

Active Listening

A major part of good communication between parent and child is active listening. But, what is ACTIVE listening? It means not merely staring at the child while he or she talks, but actively taking in what is said and exploring its meaning.

The mechanics of active listening are simple, though a parent may need to remind him or herself of them when interrupted during a busy day.

Focus on the child's eyes, but keep aware of the child's posture and movements, tone, rhythm and other physical factors. Stifle - for a few moments, at least - the urge to immediately respond with a 'quick fix' or piece of advice. Often, the goal isn't problem resolution as much as simply hearing what the child has to say. Like adults, children want to be heard.

With active listening a parent is positioning him or herself to carry out another important aspect of communication: echoing back what has been said. But 'echoing' doesn't mean 'parroting'. In order to truly hear, you have to engage the brain, not just the ears. Reflecting back what has been said, in the parents own words, demonstrates that not only has the child been heard, but - more importantly - understood.

Sympathy may or may not be part of the equation. A parent does not have to feel obligated to be sympathetic to a child's expression of a desire to punch a sibling. But neither should one be immediately dismissive of any expression of 'negative' thoughts or feelings. Responses such as 'You don't really mean that' may be true and honest, but they are not always helpful.

It isn't necessary to be morally or emotionally neutral, simply objective. Before words - and the thoughts and feelings behind them - can be evaluated, they have to be understood.

Some conversations will be spontaneous. But parents have lives, too. They can't reasonably be expected to instantly drop everything they are doing. Those goals may well be important to both them and the child, even though the child may not be able to grasp that.

Still it's important to both parent and child to be open to hearing the child when he or she has something to say. Too many 'tell me later' episodes will erode trust and the child's interest in communicating.

Fortunately, there are creative ways to deal with this dilemma.

For those old enough to do so, one method may involve having the child write out thoughts and feelings and place it in a cookie jar or send it via email. This should be reserved for those times when the parent is unavailable due to work and other important activities. It should not be a regular occurrence, lest it become a way of avoiding face-to-face communication.

However the listening is carried out, it's important to allow the child the freedom to express him or herself completely. Any subject or viewpoint should be allowed.

Once again, it isn't necessary to be morally or emotionally neutral to any and every statement. But children don't always have the moral knowledge or experience of adults. What an adult knows instantly to be wrong, a child must learn - preferably from an active listening adult.

Child Temperament and Personality

Most child development professionals, following a study by Thomas and Chess in the 1950s, hold that temperament is inborn. Personality, by contrast, is influenced by environment and self-development.

The characteristics of temperament - nine categories, including Activity Level, Sensitivity, Adaptability, and others - are sometimes regarded by parents as a source of frustration, since they are inborn and therefore not subject to much change.

But the fact that inborn traits are stable can work to the parents' advantage. Individual humans are so complex and varied that it can be difficult to develop effective strategies for healthy child development. The existence of inborn traits, however, can help parents by providing an identifiable pattern on which to base their guidance.

The first important element in any parenting strategy is objectivity. That's a difficult status to achieve given the enormous importance and value of the child, but much frustration can be avoided by making the attempt. But objectivity does not mean emotional or value neutrality. It simply means honestly assessing the facts. Evaluation of those facts, and deciding what actions to take is a later step.

Temperament is one area where objectivity is easier to achieve, since a variety of tests exist to help measure its dimensions. Such tests are typically a mix of questionnaire, interview and observation of both parent and child. Even an Internet questionnaire can represent a good first start.

Knowing whether your child is inherently more active, more easily distracted, exhibits a higher intensity of emotional expression, and so forth is a good first step to understanding his or her nature. Parents would do well to test and analyze their own temperaments, as well. Some temperaments mix better than others.

Beyond the inborn characteristics of temperament lies the vast realm of personality.

Personality is even more complex than temperament, and ideas about it correspondingly more controversial. Theories abound about what shapes it and to what degree - environment, heredity, self-development. Added to the mix are the many cultural factors around the world that differ with regard to parenting approach. Values, both individual and social, make an objective assessment much more difficult.

Even so, non-professionals can readily recognize different personality types. Parents rapidly gain valuable experience in assessing and dealing with the personality of his or her own child, especially when the child is not the first.

That experience should not be too lightly dismissed, even in the face of a bewildering array of professional tests, theories and advice. Good science requires taking seriously experimental data, whatever theory the parent may be exposed to or inclined to favor.

Many parents are surprised to find that one child is so different from the other. They often wonder how this could be and what could be attributed to their own parenting. Parents rest easier when they know that some inborn features are just that, and can easily differ from one child to the next.

Knowing the actual nature of your child is the first step toward developing a sound parenting strategy. The results are less frustrated parents and healthier children.

Teaching Responsibility

Teaching responsibility is one of the most difficult aspects of parenting. It is here that parents most often worry about the dilemma of stifling individual choice versus inculcating values and habits that lead to appropriate behavior.

The political parallel of that dilemma is the reasonable desire for maximum individual freedom, but the need that arises to respect the rights of others. The way out of the dilemma is to recognize that healthy self-interest and respect for others not only do not conflict but reinforce one another.

Being 'responsible' in the most fundamental sense of that term means 'being the cause of or the agent that produced some effect'. Recognizing that the causes we initiate lead to good or bad consequences is part of a view of responsibility called 'logical consequences'.

Connecting the child's chosen actions with consequences for the child allows him or her to make the connection by choice, rather than being imposed from the outside. When that is done, the connection has a much greater tendency to 'stick', while at the same time being viewed as fair and reasonable, since it was chosen rather than forced.

Extreme examples sometimes best help clarify the principle involved. A teen flirting with drug use might be 'scared straight' by being exposed to the real-life consequences that habitual drug users invariably experience: bad health, jail, etc.

But one can use the idea in much less serious circumstances. Most individuals past the age of 5 or so grasp that being treated the same as others in similar circumstances is part of the essence of fairness.

This insight helps the parent show the child that failing to accept responsibility for, say, cleaning the room or getting ready for school on time inconveniences parents. Connecting the refusal to study with the likelihood of a bad grade is another common example.

Removal of privileges for failure to take responsibility is rarely greeted cheerfully, but provided the consequences are seen as fair most children will accept them and learn the proper lesson.

One key to successfully implementing this strategy is to ensure that the connection between cause and consequences is something the child can grasp at his or her level of development. It's pointless to tell a five-year-old that failing to practice pitching two hours per day will keep them out of the Major Leagues.

On the other hand, connecting the refusal to study diligently with the failure to get into a desired college - and the attendant long-term consequences - is perfectly appropriate for a teen in High School.

Parents should keep in mind, however, that rarely are consequences life-threatening or irreversible.

A teen that chooses not to exert the effort to get good grades one semester is unlikely to be damaged for life. There are many good schools besides Princeton and Stanford that do not require perfect grades.

Similarly, unless the child is in immediate physical danger it's sometimes the case that doing nothing is (at least temporarily) the best approach. Sometimes allowing that extra bit of freedom to, say, not clean up the room today or skip chores, leads to a child who appreciates the breathing space. Even adults get vacations.

The highest probability of success will come from recognizing that children, like adults, have free will. Studies show that the amount of influence parents can exert over children is limited. Setting reasonable expectations, then being firm (but not bullying) is often the best one can do.

Remember, you are raising a person with the capacity to think, an individual in whom you hope to encourage self-responsibility. A duty-driven robot is an unhealthy individual just as much as is an out of control, self-indulgent whim-worshiper.

Teaching About Strangers

Parents understandably want to do everything possible to protect their children from harm. Today, that often includes - some would say is first and foremost - teaching them to be wary of others. Parents will often instill a (healthy, they would argue) fear of others, along with providing practical tips on staying safe.

While the attitude is understandable, in light of the many news stories to which they are exposed, it's possible for parents to go overboard and do harm along with the good.

Childhood attitudes about other people tend to persist into adulthood. It's a rare individual who is sufficiently enlightened that they can entirely erase incorrect views of others learned early in life. As a result, parents - while taking reasonable precautions against real risks - will want to carefully consider the extent and manner of their warnings about strangers.

The first difficulty parents encounter, though they are sometimes unaware of it, is the difference in the meaning of 'stranger' for the parent and the child. To a child, the person behind the counter at a local store may not be a stranger. They've seen Mom talk to him many times.

Still, children are often capable of finer distinctions than adults give them credit for. They can, beyond the age of three or so, be taught that looks alone don't define who is or isn't a stranger. Just because the elderly man looks 'nice' doesn't make him not a stranger.

Also, they can be taught that there are circumstances where seeking the aid of a stranger is safe and reasonable. If they become separated from the parent in the library, the teenager wearing an employee badge and pushing a cart of books who directs them to the front desk shouldn't necessarily be regarded fearfully.

Parents are right to be concerned, but they should also try to be objective. Objective does not mean being emotionally or value neutral. It simply means assessing facts honestly and without bias.

Some relevant facts:

- Most child abductions and harm originate from someone familiar to the child - a male relative or neighbor

- Only a very small percentage of children are abducted or harmed by strangers

- Those abducted or harmed tend more often to be children who display fear or lack of confidence when approached by strangers. Also, those who travel alone are more at risk.

Good data is difficult to obtain, owing to an array of different definitions of criminal abduction. Approx. 58,000 children per year are abducted by non-family members. Most are returned within 24 hours. That's a horrifying tragedy for those parents, but it does mean the odds are low.

However, it's understood that since the consequences can be so severe, parents will want to take precautions even against this unlikely event.

Long term harm to a person's view of others can result from succumbing to media-induced paranoia. There are several, reasonable precautions parents often learn in order to protect their children. Teaching children to travel in groups, to stay at arms length when a person appears mistrustful, to run away and/or say 'NO!' loudly and continually when a stranger attempts to lead them away and other common practices are healthy and reasonable.

At the same time, parents should attempt to instill a sense of confidence in dealing with the world - a world that includes strangers. The alternative risks raising children who have never been harmed to have the same fear as those who have.

Nurturing Independence

A fundamental fact for almost all children is that eventually they grow older. But, sadly, not all grow up. If an individual is to have a hope of a happy life, a large amount of independence is essential.

Independence, here, does not mean never needing another person, nor creating every value that one needs - physical, intellectual and emotional - without any involvement from others. Life alone on a desert island would be harsh and dreary. But it does entail a significant amount of independence in the traditional sense. It means thinking and choosing for oneself, without undue influence or consideration of the views of others.

Why is that important?

Life presents everyone with choices, often difficult and sometimes unpleasant. When faced with such choices, each one of us has a fundamental alternative - to think for oneself and do what that tells us is best, or to be (relatively) mentally passive and simply do what others do or think should be done.

But to develop one's own thinking ability, to exercise individual choice is to practice the basic skill that allows determining what is best. You can not become an athlete by watching others run, you must get on the track and use your own legs.

Sometimes that process will go astray. Sometimes heeding the advice of wiser or more knowledgeable and experienced people - parents, in many cases - would have indeed produced the best result. But as the child matures, the process of individuation is important if the results are to be a healthy person, not just a passive robot fortunate enough to have good advisors.

Advice from others can be enormously helpful to any person at any age. But at a certain point in the process, the decision to do this rather than that is presented to everyone. And, just like the athlete who never trains, performance in that task is affected by whether the person has done any independent exercise, or just drifted along.

It's possible to make a mistake when you don't give enough weight to the views of others, particularly those more experienced and thoughtful. But you retain the ability to correct your mistakes much more readily if you've made a practice of thinking for yourself.

Parents find it difficult to know when to let a maturing person make mistakes that they - with greater insight - can see will turn out badly. The desire to protect them is understandable and the frustration from being ignored even more so. But the most important task facing any parent is to encourage the healthy development of their child.

Sooner than we think that individual will be faced with the necessity of making decisions that are much more important. The practice they get exercising their faculties is essential to meeting those challenges.

Natural and Logical Consequences

Knowing when to require a child to obey and when to let them take the consequences of an independent choice is always a tough dilemma for parents. One pair of ideas that can help them are the twins: natural consequences and logical consequences.

Natural consequences are the reality-determined effect of some choice a child has made. Burning a hand on a hot stove is the most obvious and extreme example. No intervention on the parent's part is needed to show the child the connection between its ill-chosen action and the bad result.

Feeling the effect of failing to stick to a commitment is a better, and typically safer, scenario. A child promises to save money in order to buy a bicycle. But he or she yields to temptation and spends the money instead on worthless junk that quickly breaks, then still expects to receive the bicycle.

In these cases, the parent need do nothing but simply allow the child to see the cause-effect relationship between choice and consequence. One of the advantages of this method is it works both ways. When the child makes a good choice he or she benefits, and in two ways. They have enacted something that results in a value to them, and they achieved that value independently. Those two reinforce one another in a positive feedback loop.

But, most parents (rightly so) won't allow a young child to rush out into traffic to see for themselves the result of failing to look both ways. There are times when it's necessary to employ logical consequences instead.

Logical consequences require the active participation of a parent in producing the outcome. But the parent makes clear that the parent's choice is logically related to the choice made by the child.

Failing to return a video on time results in a late fee. Subtracting that fee from the weekly allowance is a logically related consequence, directly connected to the child's failure to keep a commitment.

Sometimes more serious circumstances exist, where the consequences may be severe. A sixteen-year old girl who has unprotected sex with her seventeen-year old boyfriend risks becoming pregnant, a possible natural consequence. But a logical consequence can be employed to teach a lesson without enduring that degree of risk.

Those logical consequences can be as creatively diverse as the parents who are faced with the situation. They may involve severing the relationship between the pair - which rarely works. They may involve requiring more extensive supervision, restriction of the freedom to go to the mall or a dozen other alternatives. No 'one-size-fits-all' solution is possible, since teenagers are all individuals. But employing a logically related consequence is typically much more effective than mere punishment.

There are times when it's safe to allow a child or teen to experience the natural result of their actions. In other cases, the consequences are too severe or long-lasting. Knowing when to employ which method will always be a difficult choice for parents. Let experience be your guide.

Punishment and Objectivity

In parenting circles, the word 'punishment' often brings to mind 'corporeal punishment' - spanking, slapping or other forms of physical action. One can agree that such behavior is counter-productive in rearing a healthy child, while at the same time avoiding the false alternative of excessive permissiveness.

In life, both children and adults are 'punished' for bad behavior or failing to obtain a certain standard. Poor performance on a test leads to the punishment of a low score. Poor performance at work leads to lower raises, delayed promotions and other results.

Punishment, in the proper sense, is simply one side of the coin of justice. Justice or fairness, entails giving of the deserved, whether good or unpleasant. Children, like adults, have a healthy self-interest in seeing that justice is enacted.

As a result, it can be a net positive benefit to children to see that their actions have consequences - even if, temporarily, those consequences are painful. Both nature and social arrangements require that certain actions be taken to achieve values. When those actions are destructive of positive values, or fail to achieve them, the logical consequences are undesirable.

As part of the learning and maturation process, not shielding children from the logical effects of their behavior results in absorbing those lessons in relatively mild form. Children too, need to learn to relate cause and effect, both in natural actions and in social circumstances. They need to connect choices to values and fairness.

There are several aspects of this approach that are essential to achieving positive results. First and foremost among them is being objective, followed closely by a sense of proportion.

Objectivity does not mean value or emotional neutrality. It simply means attending to the facts and evaluating them reasonably. As every parent knows, this is easier said than done.

But, just as courts of law have to make an effort to sort fact from fiction, so finding out what actually occurred - and responding appropriately - requires careful thought, maturity and a commitment to being fair.

Mother and her 10 year-old child have just had an argument. A moment later, the child enters the kitchen and pours him or herself a glass of milk. From the other room, Mom hears the crashing of glass on the floor. Mom enters to find milk spilled on the floor, a sugar bowl upturned and a child stomping its feet.

Was the child negligent? Was the child hasty because of its anger? Once the milk had spilled, was the sugar bowl dumped over in frustration or was that part of what was a multi-part accident?

Already upset over the just-past argument, it will be a real challenge for the mother to attain objectivity - to get the facts and draw the correct conclusion, then take the appropriate action.

Here there are several alternatives. Mom can react in rage, order the child out of the kitchen or angrily toss down a wet towel and demand the child clean up the mess. Or, she can take a deep breath, sweep up the glass and begin to ask questions.

When she takes the latter approach, she quickly finds that in pouring the milk, the child brushed a hand up against the hot coffee pot. They clean up the mess together and Mom pours the child another glass of milk while they talk.

Even in clear circumstances where a definite bad behavior has been willfully engaged in, it's possible to err if a sense of proportion is ignored.

Repeatedly dismissing or ignoring bad behavior teaches many incorrect lessons and encourages the development of adults without a sense of right and wrong. But not every wrong action is serious. Like most things, there are degrees.

Remaining objective and fair will help parents arrive at responses that are proportional to the actual harm done. In the middle of an angry exchange, this is especially difficult to do. Parents will benefit themselves and the child by deferring 'sentencing' until they have regained self-control.

This benefits the child in two ways. In the first instance, they receive a punishment that is appropriate to the action they initiated. Even though unpleasant, they observe that fairness is at work. At the same time, they see that mature self-control is possible and that outcomes are more beneficial to both parties when reason isn't swamped by emotion.

Discipline and Individual Choice

The word 'discipline' often brings to mind images of harsh punishment, unreasonable restrictions and an approach to parenting that is cold and insensitive. As a result, many parents will accept the false alternative of being excessively permissive.

Much of that dilemma has been addressed in recent decades by recognizing that there is, in fact, a third alternative. This alternative approach recognizes the facts that are universal about

developing humans, while providing room for individual variation.

All individuals have capacities that develop over time. Wise parents will therefore recognize that what is appropriate with a two-year old is ineffective with a teen and vice versa.

To make the point in an exaggerated form, it's pointless to explain in detail to a two-year old that he or she is failing to respect the property rights of a sibling by forcibly snatching away a wanted toy. Similarly, it's ineffective to force a teen to endure a time-out or to redirect their behavior away from an inappropriate action.

The basic principle underlying 'age appropriate discipline' is this: recognize the actual nature of the person in front of you when developing a rule or response. That entails much more than simply acknowledging the child's age, though that is one aspect of the principle.

It means accounting for intelligence level, ability to process what they are told properly, temperament and physical ability. Never ask a child to comply with guidance they can not, in fact, follow. Naturally, determining what they actually can and can't understand or do isn't always an easy task.

There is a condition, for example, similar to dyslexia. Upon hearing speech the child with this disability will often reverse sentence meaning or have other forms of difficulty processing spoken sentences. They may or may not have actual reading dyslexia, as well. Though rare, it's an extreme example of many children's difficulties in actually understanding what is being required of them.

That can lead to parental frustration if parents conclude that the child is willfully ignoring what he or she is being told. That sometimes is the case, of course.

The cause of that disability, though, may lie less with the child and more with the parent. Pay careful attention to what you've actually said, and the manner in which it is conveyed. It's difficult to be clear and consistent when you're angry, for example.

Take a few seconds, or longer if needed, to cool down. Leave the room if necessary, or look away from the child. Not only will this help the parent regain his or her self-control, it shows the child that it isn't necessary or inevitable that emotion has to swamp reason. It shows the child that, with maturity, it's possible to control impulses to produce a positive outcome from a bad situation.

That in itself is a highly valuable discipline lesson since, ultimately and in the long run, all discipline is self-discipline. After all, as every parent has observed, children are individuals and - no matter what approach to discipline is taken - they will make their own decisions. Avoid perpetual frustration by recognizing that, like adults, children have free will.

Helping them to see the outcomes of those decisions, by reason and respect, is the best you can do for yourself and your child.

Parenting Difficult Children

Sometimes a child labeled 'difficult' is just expressing a healthy need for independence. But in other cases, the label is actually too mild. Adults can be violent, irresponsible, indifferent to the harm they do others and typically that behavior begins in childhood.

Not all such children are potential criminals, but they share some of the characteristics - refusal to fully accept reality, poor impulse control, lack of empathy, disrespect for the rights of others and a range of destructive behavior against people, animals and property.

Usually the signs are all too clear to parents - refusal to accept limits or take instruction, shouting, temper tantrums and sometimes hitting siblings or even parents. Sometimes the condition is influenced by genetic and hormonal factors - as in Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD or even autism. It can be magnified by stressful factors in the environment.

Some temperaments are natural, such as extreme sensitivity to stimuli, some moods can be brought on by new elements such as a new child in the home. Sometimes, as with adults, it's simply a choice to misbehave.

Sorting out all these complex factors is one of the parent's toughest jobs. Testing may help. It can be useful to get a good diagnosis, but take what you hear with a grain of salt. Consult more than one specialist when possible. There is a lot of junk science in child development.

But whatever the causes, the parent will need to exercise even more than normal patience to deal with the child's behavior. Frustration and anger are normal, but only add to an already difficult situation.

Dealing with the child and its behavior can range from simple time outs to distraction to some drug therapy (in extreme cases). When a child misbehaves and refuses to listen, removing a wanted toy or restraining a desired activity can be helpful. It should be accompanied by clear and firm expressions of the reasons for the actions. That helps the child associate its unwanted behavior with the consequences.

Physical punishment rarely helps, but a tap on the hand is hardly abuse. Parents should avoid feeling guilty, as if they caused the behavior. There are abusive parents, but these are not the ones who are seeking to understand and mold their child's actions toward more healthy expressions.

Be prepared to alter the environment. It may be necessary in some cases to not have pets in the house and siblings should be protected from any bad behavior. Often, with patience and the employment of standard techniques, the child's behavior can be altered, sometimes dramatically.

Dealing with difficult children is, by definition, difficult. But with patience and training both parents and children can achieve satisfying results.

Sibling Rivalry

Sibling rivalry - conflict between and among brothers and sisters - can take all the forms that occur among adults: loud arguments, sports competition, physical fights, property destruction, etc. As the list suggests, some forms will require parental intervention, while others may be safely left to the kids to work out for themselves.

The first key element in helping brothers and sisters resolve conflicts is to use what is beneficial from adult life, times ten. Children, of all ages above about three or so, are keenly sensitive to issues of justice and fairness.

Like adults, some children will engage in bad behavior based on wrong choices. Rarely do they have the awareness or experience of the moral dimension that adults are capable of, but neither are they (over a certain age) completely unaware of the distinction between right and wrong.

How the adult helps them clarify those issues will play a large part in how they develop.

Kids can engage in as many kinds of conflict as adults. Not having full responsibility for their choices, they need the guidance of adults if those conflicts are to be turned to advantage and not simply be a dead loss.

The importance of respect for the safety, property and individual choice of others can serve as a good basis for guiding adults in resolving their children's conflicts. Just as in the larger society around them, kids can learn from an early age that there are boundaries no one may reasonably cross.

By the same token, just as in adult interactions, there are some conflicts that it is simply best to ignore, allowing the two parties to resolve on their own. Even children need the space to express thoughts and emotions, and the freedom to take actions based on choices - provided those choices don't cross the line into physical harm or property destruction.

Naturally, no child younger than a teen can be expected to exhibit the impulse control, nor the intellectual understanding we expect of adults. But avoiding the false alternative of 'well, kids will be kids' is equally desirable, if the child is to grow into a mature, healthy adult.

As a case in point, a recent news program carried a story about 'fight clubs' - loosely organized (largely male) clubs whose members engaged in physical fights that went well beyond ordinary teen rough housing. The mother of one member who had recently been seriously injured excused her knowledge of the activities by declaring that 'boys will be boys'. Such casual responses quickly evolve to 'criminals will be criminals'.

Parents can avoid those results by exploring early on in their children's lives the roots of conflicts between and among brothers and sisters. Many of the same basic factors that play out in adult rivalry are present from an early age.

Failure to focus on reality over indulgence in whims, difficulty in impulse control or to accept payment for achieving longer term goals by foregoing immediate rewards and many other shortcomings of 'emotional intelligence' are often at the root of such conflicts.

It isn't necessary to be harsh or physical, when teaching children that honesty, respect for others and self-control are positive values. Guiding the child to understand that such things are actually in the child's long-term self-interest will make the child's nature your ally.

The best way to start demonstrating that is by allowing the child to see that the parents themselves resolve differences in just that way.

Preschool, The Big Day

Well, the big day has arrived. Son or daughter is about to spend his or her first day at preschool. Is your child nervous or fearful? Well, that's natural. Here are some suggestions about how to make that first time a little less worrisome.

Research, research, research. Parents who want to do the best for themselves and their child (and that includes nearly everyone) will want to do lots of homework long before the child does any.

Finding out about quality preschools - which are good, which are to be avoided - is, of course, basic. Recommendations remain one of the best sources, and are usually easy to obtain since most preschools are relatively close to home or work and often used by others in the area.

Montessori (when they practice genuine Montessori methods) remain one of the best organizations around. But there are some, unfortunately, where the resemblance ends with hanging up the sign. Be sure to meet the teachers personally and ask probing questions that include hypothetical scenarios.

The 'big day' can be softened by making an effort for it not to be the first day the child has been away. Many children, along with the parents, will experience separation anxiety when being parted from a parent and placed in an unfamiliar environment. Others see it as an adventure. Children, like adults, are individuals with a wide range of responses.

Make the transition easier by making it gradual.

Spend some time away from the child while a trusted individual cares for him or her. Expand the time from a few minutes to an hour, to a few hours. Work up to it slowly. During the parents absence, have the caretaker practice some elementary 'lessons' with the child.

Then, move the action outside the home - to the neighbor's house, or elsewhere unfamiliar. The first few times the new environment should include the parent, then with parent and caretaker (varying the time spent with both), then caretaker alone.

Set aside some time during the day to give the child formal 'lessons' that are a mixture of exploration and verbal or visual learning. The length of time will vary, of course, depending on the age and personality of the child, but should be extended gradually from a few minutes per day to an hour or more.

Most children are naturally curious, but one will express it differently from another. Assist that natural curiosity by relating the new material to the child's individual context. This can spring from a shared sight viewed from the living room window or a movie or any of dozens of other experiences. Emphasis on exploring phenomena the child can see, touch and manipulate personally will go a long way toward feeding that young mind.

When possible, trade off the individual caretaker, switching genders if possible. Gradually exposing your child to new people in a familiar environment where they feel secure will help that first day seem like nothing new.

Of course, how to get the parent to overcome his or her 'first day jitters' is a completely separate topic...

Beginning School

For children who have attended preschool, beginning school will involve less of a transition than for those who have not. But in either case, school is typically quite different from preschool. Added to that is the unfortunate fact that many public schools are often - whether through lack of funding, bureaucratic bungling, bad philosophy or factors outside their control - far less than ideal places to educate children.

But whether parents are enrolling the child in a good public school or private school, there are many similar new factors parents will do well to prepare for.

Some children (and parents, too) will naturally experience a certain amount of separation anxiety. One effective way to deal with this is to avoid the false alternative of 'Stiff upper lip' versus 'Yes, isn't it horrible'. Children are neither soldiers nor made of Jello.

An honest recognition that new experiences can be difficult, without over-dramatizing, is healthy. Children should be helped to see that the new environment isn't threatening, but without dismissing their valid concerns.

Meeting the teacher before the first day of school is extremely helpful. Introducing the child to a new adult, one whose goal is to help them develop, with the parent present helps everyone relax. Many schools will hold special events to do just that, but don't expect to have a long period alone with the teacher. They often have many parent-child groups to meet.

Explaining to the child that attending school is a natural, indeed an exciting, part of growing up will help prepare them for the experience. Most children are naturally curious. Making school a

continuation of the home process of developing the child's mind and confidence by exploring the world will help school seem less strange.

Most schools will assign some form of very simple homework before long. Here again, parents can help avoid any anxiety that may occur in the face of this new challenge by making it not new. Giving the child age-appropriate tasks to complete before school begins helps build confidence, especially when the parent demonstrates eagerness to help overcome the humps.

Beware of giving too much aid or too much comfort, though. Allowing the child to experience difficulty, and seeing first hand that they are competent to meet the challenge, creates those early self-esteem building blocks. Shielding a child from any and all possible sources of discomfort is both unrealistic and harmful to the child.

Demonstrating excessive parental concern can inadvertently suggest to the child that there is something real to be feared in the new environment. That's contrary to the message the parent wants to convey.

More fundamentally, every aspect of human development needs some kind of challenge to build strength. That's true not only for muscles and bones, but for mind and emotions as well. When those challenges are within the reach of the child's real potential - given his or her individual nature - confidence and intellectual capacity grow simultaneously.

Home vs. Public vs. Private School, The Never Ending Debate

Few issues have such a long-term effect on the welfare of a child as the choice of the type of school to attend. The average child will spend about 13 years in school prior to college, often attending one type the entire time.

Not surprisingly, emotions run high when discussing the choice. Advocates will stake out a position and cling to it tenaciously, seeking to find flaws in arguments for alternative choices. This, too, isn't surprising since the different camps typically have radically different starting points or outlooks.

The choice, and the arguments in favor of it, generally revolve around a difference in basic values. They ask: what is regarded as most important in education? Scholastic achievement? Social skills development? Future college or income opportunities?

Naturally, parents will have to weigh any and all of those against cost, parental time investment, legal requirements and other factors.

Those who weight one (and several other possible) value(s) more significantly or more heavily than another will tend to align themselves in favor of one choice over the others.

For example, statistics are clear that homeschooling tends to produce young individuals that score better on standardized tests and achieve the college of choice more often. This suggests

that homeschooling, whatever other benefits or drawbacks it might have, tends to produce students with higher scholastic skills.

The outcome of emphasis on that value is debatable, but again statistics are influential. Studies show that those with higher grades, and who attend a college of choice, tend to have more career opportunities after graduation and enjoy higher starting salaries.

Others will argue, reasonably enough, that there is more to life than scholastic-style learning and the potential for increased income.

This camp will point to the increased opportunities that public school provides for social interaction. Advocates will say that it does a child long-term harm to 'put them in a bubble' for 10 or more years, then throw them out into the world unprepared.

Public school advocates will also point to the higher costs of private school and the much higher time investment (for parents) typically required for homeschooling. Kids, too, often voice their preference in favor of public school, since it allows them to associate more with those whom they already know.

Private school advocates will argue that this choice offers the best of both worlds. At the same time, they argue, prices vary and are often not as high as parents may think. Private schools often have very rigorous curricula and many rank well in studies that measure standardized test results, college entrance success and other factors.

Montessori proponents, for example, can rightly point to a track record several decades long showing students who succeed scholastically, creatively and in other measures. Wise ones will also assert the caveat that Montessori schools can vary widely in quality. Some may bear little more resemblance to another than the sign outside.

There is, of course, no straightforward way to settle such a debate without engaging in a much larger discussion of basic philosophy. Each parent will do well to examine his or her goals for their individual child and research each choice thoroughly.

Divorce and Children

Few things in the life of a family are as traumatic as when it alters through divorce. Each individual involved is often confused, angry, feeling betrayed and uncertain about what comes next.

Making the transition even more difficult, there will be many practical changes that affect both parents and children. Living arrangements will alter, incomes may well change and there will often now be only one adult to take on both work and home responsibilities. Dealing with those common and real-life issues is doubly difficult when emotions are running high.

Though seldom is the process painless, there are many things that can ease the transition for children.

Parents engaged in divorce proceedings will understandably be angry with one another. Pretending it isn't so isn't helpful to them or to their children. But anger can be present, and honestly expressed, without controlling every action.

It should be made clear, in age-appropriate terms, that the anger isn't caused by nor directed at the children. Nor should the anger one spouse feels for another be allowed to spill over into using children as bargaining chips or instruments of revenge.

Disagreements will arise over money, housing, child custody and support, and a host of other thorny issues. These should all be handled with children out of earshot whenever possible. Depending on the age of the children involved, it can be helpful to ask them what they would like to see happen. Most will just wish the divorce wasn't happening. But children can be realistic, too.

Allowing children to express their feelings and wishes, even when those wishes can't or shouldn't be fulfilled, will give them a sense of being understood. To the extent possible, children also need some sense of control over their environment. Allowing them to arrange things as they like in new circumstances is one small way this need can be met.

It's essential that parents make clear that the divorce is the result of unresolvable issues between the parents, and has nothing to do with any actions of the child. It's equally important that they be helped to understand that no change of behavior they make can reverse the decision.

After new living arrangements are made and custody issues (at least temporarily) settled, parents need to ensure that children have everything they need at both locations. A valued object at each house can help them feel more at home no matter where they are.

It's also important that children be allowed to express disappointment, anger and other 'negative' feelings without reproach or denial. Seldom are such feelings permanent in children. But it isn't helpful to tell them, however expressed, that 'You don't really mean that'. Typically, at least for that moment, they do indeed feel that way.

If the divorce, for at least a while, results in single parenthood, there are new challenges to be met. But those circumstances can offer new opportunities, as well. The absence of negatives - loud arguments, angry silences, etc - can in itself be an immediate benefit to the child. Rules and guidance can be established without the sometimes bitter debates that parents nearing divorce engage in.

Many children go through parental divorce, increasingly so since the 1970s. Studies show that, if the adults do their best to meet the difficulties maturely and with the child's best interests in mind, children do not necessarily suffer long-term negative consequences.

And, for nearly all parents, that surely is among their highest goals.

Grief and Children

All parents wish they could shelter their child from grief. No one wants a child, with limited experience and understanding, to have to suffer through the loss of a beloved dog or the death of a treasured parent or grandparent.

But real life does include the possibility of such things and children grow up healthiest when they're taught to face reality. How they confront facts can be influenced, positively or negatively, by what they observe from their parents, along with their parents words.

Feelings of sadness at the loss of an important value is a natural, even healthy, reaction. Degrees and style will both vary, of course. But the extremes of stoical 'stiff upper lip' or severe, long-term depression may signal an unhealthy message to children.

Reactions to loss from children will naturally vary with age. Very young children are rarely able to grasp the permanence or even the disvalue of the loss. Children from around 5-10 will look carefully to parents as a mirror for their own feelings. Older children may even rebel against painful feelings and claim not to feel sadness.

In every case, it's helpful for parents to allow children to honestly acknowledge any feelings they have. They should not be made to feel guilty for spontaneous feelings.

Along with age differences, variations in inborn temperament and (externally influenced or self-)developed personality among individuals will produce a range of reactions. Any initial feelings are legitimate and generally healthy.

A healthy personality gradually passes through those feelings. Life brings new values, along with the recognition that even when one irreplaceable value is lost, not all values are thereby lost.

Individuals will vary in how long they take to undergo the process. Some lingering feelings may last months or years. But there is a large difference between sober reflection and depression. Helping children to see value in the former and to avoid the latter will require inculcating realism.

The risk of great loss is inherent in living. Parents, too, will differ in how they react when that risk becomes fact. When they demonstrate an attitude that displays to the child an honest evaluation of the loss, they do their child a service. When they help the child to experience those feelings without guilt or repression they are benefiting their child.

But parents can inadvertently disrupt or retard the return to a normal, self-confident approach to daily living by embracing the false alternatives of too lightly dismissing the loss and excessive emphasis on it.

Dismissing the loss, which the child may see as significant, can lead to repression. The child disowns feelings he or she naturally has. Alternatively, he or she may learn to attach little or no value to any life, even those close to them. The attendant negative consequences are obvious.

Alternatively, when the parent fails to move through the feelings, the child may feel guilty at their naturally-paced recovery. Or, they may feel inclined to be 'stuck' as the parent is. Neither is helpful to parent or child.

It is during such periods of sadness and grief that it is hardest to retain the outlook that life still offers the possibility of significant values. But it is also the time when that realization is most needed, for the parent's sake and that of the child.