

Compassionate Parents, Compassionate Children

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August 08, 2017/ Brian Vondruska



You begin modeling compassion the day your child is born. Birth may be difficult for you and your spouse, but it must be downright terrifying for your child. After nine months of solitude in the muffled and relatively static atmosphere of the womb, your baby will endure a brutal introduction to a world filled with intense lights, colors, sounds, sensations, temperature variations, and smells.

Opportunities for Compassion

All the things she will perceive will have no discernible relationship amongst them, and will probably feel like a wild assault on her senses. Your baby's lungs may burn as they first fill up with air, and her back might fill with pain as her spine straightens for the first time. She will no longer be fed continuously and must space her meals out every few hours, not understanding this new feeling of hunger or if it will ever go away. She will have no control over her own movement, vocalizations, or feelings. She will have no sense of identity, no notion of where she ends and everything else begins. Everything is yet to be learned. She will experience discomfort from soiled diapers, being hot or cold, and wanting to move. She will experience tiredness, lonely feelings, overstimulation, the desire to be swaddled, and the desire to suck. She will be confused by all she is experiencing, and helpless to change her situation. Until she learns what is happening, what it means, and how to respond, she is completely dependent upon loving adult caregivers.

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How you answer your crying baby is her model for how to treat someone under duress. Whether she needs to be fed, to be comforted back to sleep, or to be changed, how you approach her plight makes a difference. Indifferent or cruel parents who feel burdened by the weight of their parental responsibility risk raising children indifferent to the concept of helping others. Compassionate parents recognize that without their intervention, their baby would be powerless to help herself. Compassionate parents who embrace their ability to solve their baby's problem, and who see her through her predicament with love and understanding, are positioning themselves to raise compassionate children.

No Shortcuts

Parents of infants, in response to the hard work and grueling hours involved in taking care of a new baby, often shift into survival mode. We do not always devote the energy to treating the baby with the compassion she deserves because we are overtired and overwhelmed. We can be tempted to think that because babies are resilient, taking emotional shortcuts is okay.

We can try to rationalize this choice by concluding that how they parent at this early age won't affect the child anyway. And we can presume that when the child is old enough to understand things better, we will change our approach – only we probably won't do it. In fact, as the child grows and learns, she will develop opinions and have motivations some of which will be in direct opposition to those of her parents. The level of emotional friction will increase and the level of compassion, if anything, will decrease. Lifelong compassion toward your child requires a baseline to be established in infancy so that it can be built upon later.

Taking care of your infant is your first [walk through the snow](#) as a parent. Take the route now that you envision using later, because the opportunity to start a new route later will never seem to materialize. If you are compassionate when you hear your infant crying at 2:00 a.m., then you can be compassionate when at two years old she breaks a beloved toy through carelessness, or at four years old when she has to suffer through wet shoes after deciding to jump in puddles.

Your Compassion Makes a Difference

Whether an infant utterly dependent on adult help or a toddler needing to be shown how to help herself, a struggling child offers you a chance to truly make a difference in the life of another human being. A child having a hard time needs to be accepted, understood, and comforted. She may not know why she feels bad, or that the bad feeling will come to an end. Show your child compassion when you are lucky enough to be called upon.

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The compassionate approach is far more fulfilling, for both parent and child, than resentfully slogging through your parental duties, cursing your lost sleep under your breath as if being forced into hard labor through the manipulations of a devious child. A "difficult" child is not a laborious duty, a task to be carried out with drudgery. A struggling child is a shooting star, a fleeting opportunity to let someone know that they matter, that their anguish is warranted and accepted.

Speak to your troubled child softly when you let her know that you are there for her, and look deep into her eyes. Transmissions of thoughts and feelings are subconsciously sent and received through subtle directional cues, dilations, moisture, and muscle movements of and around the eyes. Fixing your attention on the eyes opens up advanced levels of communication. As you attune to her emotional level and she to yours through eye contact, you send her the message that she matters and she is important enough to draw and hold your attention.

As Daniel Goleman points out in *Social Intelligence*, you also provide a model for how relationships are managed. The complex emotional back-and-forth between parent and child – with both taking turns providing a stimulus and a response – is practice for even more advanced forms of communication. Conversations that weave dialogue with the gauging of emotions, the reciprocation of sentiments as appropriate, the timing of responses, and the initiation of topical shifts, are built on the foundations of these early parent-child give-and-take communications.[\[1\]](#)

A baby who does not receive this sort of attention misses out on the practice as well as on the affection. If you withdraw emotionally while you wait for your child to soothe herself, your child will register your emotional distance even within the physical closeness of your embrace. A baby can sense your commitment, or lack of commitment, to her in that moment.

The Time is Now

So many parents fail to appreciate the precious little time they have with their young children. I don't know how many parents I have heard lamenting the work their young child demands of them, even portraying it as if it were thrust upon them by malicious and unfair means. They accuse their children of "being bratty," "looking for attention" or "causing trouble." They long for their child to grow out of their troubles, saying things like, "things will be easier when they are out of diapers," or "I can't wait until kindergarten starts and I can have my time back," or "as soon as high school is complete, my job is finally done." Before you know it, your child will become a teenager. And sooner than you realize that teenager will become an independent adult. Things can't get better later; things are already wonderful right now. Cherish the moments you have, for one day you will long to have them back.

Whenever I found myself challenged to savor a moment with a struggling or defiant child, I would use my imagination to reframe the situation. I would envision a time in the future when my children had grown up and moved out. I, in my imaginary retirement, no longer lived sleep-deprived and hectic days of getting children ready for school, working all day, and then coming home to homework, piano lessons, and brushing little teeth. Rather, I passed the time looking through old videos of my daughter singing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star and of my son climbing on the playground equipment. I longed for the sounds of little feet running through the house, the pealing laughter of

my children at play, and the perfect love in my small children's hugs, now all just a memory. And then I would re-enter reality. As if by magic my wishes were granted and I was whisked back to the time I had missed so dearly.

If the preciousness of the moment is not appreciated by you, you will let the opportunity slip through your fingers to the heartache of your older self. Too often parents start to feel time ticking away in the teen years, and attempt to spend their child's late adolescence and early adulthood tending to the unfinished business of building relationships. But it is often too little, too late. You only get one shot, and it will be over in a flash whether you resent it or treasure it. If you approach trying situations with understanding and a compassionate smile, you may get the same in return. If you approach difficult times with anger and conflict, your child will give you anger and conflict in return. How you behave in these situations starts with how you think about them.

Do You Feel Like You Have to Pick up Your Crying Baby, or That You Get To?

It is easy to think of soiled diapers, hungry children and uncooperative kids as "have to's," the part of the parenting job that we would like to skip. We love the hugs and smiles, but sometimes dread the cries and wails. But the cries and wails are really "get to's." Those are the moments when parenting really happens, when you get to define what kind of parent you are and your child gets to define in her mind who you are.

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Those are the moments she will remember most about you. It is when you get to learn all the quirks about your child's personality: what she likes; what makes her laugh; how she responds to stress, and what comforts her. It is how you get to know her, and she you. It is where you get to model compassion for your child, and where your compassion towards her earns you countless unsolicited hugs and smiles when circumstances are calmer. If you go to your child for the cries and wails, your child will come to you for the hugs and smiles.

It all starts with how you frame these types of situations in your own mind. Whether you view a distressed child with a positive outlook or with dispirited dejection, your mindset goes a long way toward defining how you set your example as a parent. So watch your thoughts, for it is said that thoughts become words. Words then become actions, actions become habit, and habit becomes character. Watch your character, it is said, for character becomes destiny.^[2]

Author's Note: This is the second in a collection of posts about [the example you set](#). Six different behaviors are covered.

- Which behaviors are important to you?
- How will you cultivate those behaviors in your home, for your children to emulate?
- What challenges will you face as you cultivate those behaviors in interactions with your children?
- How will meeting those challenges make you a better person, and help you improve other facets of your life?

Please share your comments below.

[1] Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The Revolutionary New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2006), 164.

[2] Adapted from a saying often attributed to Lao Tzu.

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