

# What Makes a Terrific Parent?

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## What Makes a Terrific Parent?

By Alfie Kohn

*If you decided to have a child, presumably it was because you wanted to be a parent and anticipated that the experience would be fulfilling. You did it for you. But the child's arrival demands a radical shift: Now you must do things for him or her. Moreover, you need to be mindful of the difference and how it's predicated on the fact that your child is a separate being with distinct perspectives and preferences.*

*That may sound obvious, but some parents use their children to meet their own emotional needs – and seem unaware that they're doing so. To put this in positive terms, we might say that high-quality parenting is defined by three closely related features: (1) an awareness that a child's experience of the world is often different from one's own; (2) an ability to understand the nature of those differences, to imagine the child's point of view and tune in to his or her needs; and (3) a willingness to try to meet those needs rather than just doing what's right for oneself.*

*Each of these is more difficult for some people than for others. Those who are plagued by doubts about their own worth may be so consumed with getting what they lack, psychologically speaking, that it becomes impossible to focus on their children or even to see them for who they are (and aren't).*

*But it's not just about differences among parents. The same issues play out in the differences among situations that any of us will*

face. For example, when we're out in public, where other people may judge our parenting skills, we're more likely to respond to what we interpret as our children's misbehavior with too much control and too little love and patience. When a child is having a meltdown in the grocery store, it takes extra effort for even the best parent to remember that what matters are the challenges the child is facing, not our need to appear competent in the eyes of strangers.[1]

Not everyone who's preoccupied with his or her own needs fits the stereotype of an authoritarian, punitive parent who cracks down on any sign of disobedience. In fact, some people who are appalled by harsh traditionalism take pride in their extreme attentiveness to their children. Their assumption is that the more you do for your kids, the better your parenting.

But this isn't necessarily true. Some parents who conspicuously sacrifice everything for their children, whose very lives seem to revolve around them, actually turn out to be rather narcissistic. The family appears to be child-centered to a fault, yet the child is really being used to meet the parent's own needs.

Kids may come to feel their job is to keep their parents happy, to reassure them, to make them feel capable. Sometimes children are subtly encouraged to provide what the parent fails to get from her partner (or even from herself), and perhaps to provide adult-like companionship. The child may be steered into becoming a friend, or even a parent, to the parent. All of this can take place without anyone's realizing what's going on. But whether or not the child manages to figure out how to become what the parent wants, the result is that the child's development may be warped because the adult's needs have taken center stage.

Rather than seeing an aptitude for good parenting (or for just about anything) as something you either have or you lack, perhaps we should say that it takes more effort for some people to attain a level of proficiency that comes easily to others. I have a lousy sense of direction, for example, but that just means I have to work harder to figure out how to get where I'm going. Thus, the kind of

parent who's tempted to say to her child, "I'm cold. Go put on a sweater" (in the classic tongue-in-cheek example of this syndrome) may need to remind herself periodically, "My kid isn't me. She has different interests. Just because x makes me happy, or upset, doesn't mean it will have the same effect on her."

That's part 1 of the three-part formulation I mentioned earlier: taking care not to confuse a child's identity with our own. Part 2 is to figure out who the child is, what she's feeling, how her mind works, why she acts as she does. That invites us to engage in what psychologists call "perspective taking": getting outside of ourselves in order to imagine how things appear to someone else. The question isn't just "How would I feel if someone did that to me?" It's "How does he feel about someone's having done that to him?" It's not just about asking what it's like to be in his shoes, but what it's like to have his feet.

Three different studies, each from a different country and all coincidentally published the same year, confirm the importance of this attribute. A group of Dutch researchers found that one of the most important factors in predicting parenting quality was the level of understanding of children's unique interests and needs, along with a willingness to consider that perspective as distinct from the parent's own. Canadian researchers discovered that parents who were better able to "accurately perceive their [teenage] children's thoughts and feelings during a disagreement" ended up having fewer conflicts – or at least a more satisfactory resolution of the conflicts that did occur. And a U.S. study of families with toddlers showed that parents who were "able to adopt the child's viewpoint" were more responsive to his or her needs as a result.[2]

Part 3 in my little model consists of acting on what we understand about a child's inner life, which, in turn, entails a commitment to be less egocentric. That doesn't mean giving a child everything he asks for, or engaging in endless self-sacrifice (which, paradoxically, may mean the parent is using exaggerated devotion to the child as a way of proving something about herself), but simply being a caring and attentive parent. As yet another study

*discovered, parents who tend to think mostly about their own needs and goals tend to be less accepting of their children than those who are concerned with the needs of their kids or of the family as a whole.[3]*

*In short, the best parents acknowledge the needs of their children (as distinct from their own), learn all they can about those needs, and are committed to meeting them whenever possible. And those of us who find it a struggle to do these things most of the time . . . need to make a point of struggling to do these things most of the time.*

## **NOTES**

1. Consider how much of what we do with our children is driven by worries about how we'll be perceived by other adults. A grown-up hands something to our baby and we pipe up: "Can you say thank you?" – ostensibly addressing the baby even though he obviously can't say thank you and may be too young even to learn from our example. What we're really doing is speaking through the child to the adult, making it clear that we know the polite response as well as the right way to bring up kids. People in our culture are far more likely to fault parents for controlling too little rather than too much – and to approve of children because they're "well-behaved" rather than because they're, say, curious. So when you combine the parent's anxiety about being judged with the likely direction of that judgment, you end up with this unsurprising fact: We're most likely to resort to coercive tactics, and to become preoccupied with the need to control our children, when we're out in public. As is true of many other fears, this can set up a self-fulfilling prophecy, so that cracking down on kids for fear of what other people will think may produce more of exactly the kind of behavior that we don't want anyone to see.

2. Jan R. M. Gerris et al., "The Relationship Between Social Class and Childrearing Behaviors: Parents' Perspective Taking and Value Orientations," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59 (1997): 834-47; Paul D. Hastings and Joan E. Grusec, "Conflict Outcome as a Function of Parental Accuracy in Perceiving Child Cognitions and Affect," *Social Development* 6

(1997): 76-90; Grazyna Kochanska, "Mutually Responsive Orientation between Mothers and Their Young Children," *Child Development* 68 (1997): 94-112.

3. Paul D. Hastings and Joan E. Grusec, "Parenting Goals as Organizers of Responses to Parent-Child Disagreement," *Developmental Psychology* 34 (1998): 465-79. Those who habitually put their own needs first were also more likely to believe that their children's misbehaviors were deliberate and rooted in their nature or personality rather than emerging from a particular situation.

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