

The Job of Parenting

If you want to practice law or medicine in this country, you need to have a license. The same holds true in most places if you want to cut hair, give facials, or do manicures. And under most circumstances, if you want to become a teacher you have to complete a teacher preparation program at a four-year college and then obtain a state issued teaching license. There are no licenses required, however, to become and be a parent.

It is somewhat paradoxical that parenting, perhaps the most important job there is, has no required prerequisites. How then does someone learn to be parent and perhaps even more importantly, learn to be a good parent? How do we learn to positively nurture and foster the development of our children? For many of us, who we are as parents has been mostly influenced by the parenting we ourselves experienced growing up. That doesn't mean, however, that we always want to be just like our own parents. In some cases, people are very aware of the fact that they are trying to parent in ways that are different than the parenting they themselves experienced. If we are honest with ourselves, sometimes we are trying to be like the parent we feel we didn't have.

Sometimes generations of parents are influenced by particular theories or books that are popular at the time. For many years, parents were influenced by Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose book, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, sold more than 50 million copies. Spock's book provided information about developmental milestones and suggestions for how parents could respond to the common issues they face when raising children. Today you can visit a local bookstore and find any number of books written for parents about the challenges of raising children. The truth is, however, that it's just not possible to totally parent and raise a child "by the book." Every child and family is different and there are very few formulas for raising children that apply to all families and all situations.

We can also learn from and be influenced by other parents. These may be an older sibling or friend who had children before we did. We may learn from them through observation or in some cases from "direct instruction" - there are some parents who are not at all shy about sharing their words of wisdom. Some of what we see and hear may be very helpful but in some cases how these people parent are based on their circumstances and values which may be different from our own.

We can also learn from our own trial and error. Parenting, after all, is really a case of living with and relating to another human being. It is an ongoing process and how we parent is likely to change as our child grows and develops. Our style and approach to parenting may also change as the family itself grows and develops. It has often been said, and it is probably true, that when there is more than one child in a family, each child had a different set of parents. We may not be the same parent to our second child as we were to the first - as we will be reminded by the firstborn when her younger sibling is allowed to do things earlier than she was.

Parenting is a dynamic process, one that can include both difficult challenges and great joys. No license is required but it does demand intensive and continuous on-the-job training. As a parent, we don't have any bosses or end-of-year evaluations nor do we get any merit pay increases for a job well done. And ultimately, we know we have done well when our children don't need us anymore and we are out of a job.

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