

What are your goals for your child?
Here is an approach to achieve your goals
by Ginny Cusack

Did you ever ask yourself the question: "What is it that I want for my child when he/she becomes an adult? I have often asked parents this question and received answers like: "well-adjusted, independent, secure, good self-esteem, and happy" and similar words to express these same concepts

These goals are more difficult to reach with children today than in the past, due to the nature of our present society. The sign of good parents today are those who do for their child, and those who give to their child (often they are the things that they as parents did not have growing up). This is all well and good. We are not talking here about neglecting children, but about what it means to help children become well-adjusted and independent adults, able to function in today's world.

Studies have shown us that as societies become more advanced and technology soars, there are fewer significant and meaningful relationships with people. A colleague once expressed this condition very well by saying: "In the future the rich child will have a teacher in school, and the poor child will have a computer." Today children have less and less opportunity to relate to adults on a one-to-one basis than ever before in the history of mankind.

Since the means to these goals necessarily involve relationships with people, how do we attain these goals? A man by the name of Stephen Glenn began a study during the Carter administration to find out why children who graduated from high school from 1963 until now, were less prepared to meet the challenges of life than any other previous generation. He found that the culture had changed significantly after World War II. That change affected how children were raised. Previously the culture included elements that are no longer found in our environment. He identifies these as "the significant seven". They

are factors that, if present in the home environment, help a children develop so that they become well-adjusted, independent, happy, and self-motivated individuals.

In this article I will outline these seven elements and give examples of how we may implement them in a home environment.

These "significant seven" include three perceptions and four skills which the child must incorporate into his/her being. The parent's role is one of a teacher or facilitator. I prefer the word facilitator since the word 'teacher' can often imply telling. A facilitator is a more accurate description, because it implies that the parent's role is one of a facilitator who creates an environment and conditions necessary for the child to learn. Learning comes from experience of the learner. The facilitator processes the experiences.

Therefore, the first task of the adult is to set up an environment that provides experiences for the child from which to gain three perceptions of him/herself. The first perception is one of *capability*: "I am capable." In Dr. Montessori's words, "I can do it myself". This is the first phenomenon that one experiences in a Montessori classroom. Everything is set up for the child to work independently of the teacher. The experience of being able to do activities without the adult's assistance is what allows the child to feel capable. It is even more important for the child to experience this at home with parents, the primary educator. However, all we have to do is go to the grocery store to observe the opposite. Words or phrases such as "You are too young"; "Let me do it for you"; "It is too heavy for you to carry"; "Let mommy do it"; are all explicit ways to say "You are not capable." Each small encounter and exchange with children add to one's perception of oneself.

The second healthy perception is a perception of *significance*. This can be expressed in the belief that 'I contribute in significant ways to my family', i.e. I am important. Letting children only play and not have any meaningful role in the family fosters the feeling that one is not important. All people need to feel needed. Parents forget that need applies to children as well as adults. Take away the feeling of being needed and there

are real problems for a person. Yet, this is the first generation in which children are not needed in the family. If anything, they are a liability. It is the parent's role to encourage participation and to communicate that children are needed.

The environment should include experiences for the child that foster the third perception: "*I can affect what happens to me.*" The world of therapy today is filled with people who feel that life happens to them. They have no part to play in how their life goes or has gone. They are "victims". This perception happens in childhood. We can teach children that there are ways to change what is happening. We can give children options and choices so they can deal with events in life. For example, if there is a child who gets hit on the playground, the tendency is to comfort the one hit and reprimand the hitter. To certain children, this reinforces the victim mentality. A better way to deal in order to help the one hit would be to ask what happened and then explore other kinds of behavior which may be alternatives to being hit again. This exploration of other possibilities says to the child that there are choices and that one can make these choices to affect changes in what happens to him/her.

In addition to healthy perceptions, the child must also possess people skills. Again the role of the parent is to provide situations and the time to practice skills.

The first one is for the child to know what his/her own feelings are, and then to *separate the feeling from the behavior*. Today, people are more aware of talking about feelings. But, sometimes it stops there. The child needs to move further and be able to see that there are choices for behavior and that they have the ability to choose an appropriate behavior. Glenn describes this skill as "intrapersonal". An example of this is when the child gets angry and hits another person. It is O.K. to say "You seem very angry". However, it is important not to leave it there. The processing could go like this. "I understand that you are very angry. What caused you to choose to hit Johnny?" This causes the child to separate the feeling from the behavior. After that exploration, the parent can further say, "What other kinds of things could you have done, or can you do in the

future when you are feeling angry?" This helps the child to choose appropriate alternatives in the future.

A second skill is the *art of listening, conversing, and dialoguing*. This is very difficult for children to practice today in a world full of TV, VCR, and Nintendo. How much do we as families talk and communicate? Parents often use advising, lecturing, judging, praising, ridiculing, interpreting, giving false reassurance, attacking, and avoiding in their communication with their children, which cuts off any communication.

A third skill is one of developing *responsibility, adaptability, and flexibility*. Glenn calls these "systemic skills". There needs to be an environment in which there is clear feedback to the child about the things the child does. It is critical that the feedback be about the behavior rather than the person. If one day it is "cute" to do something, and another day it isn't, there is not clear feedback. Parents, at times, find it difficult to give feedback about behavior and still maintain respect and dignity for the child. Humiliation has no place. For example, forgetting one's homework or lunch is a problem for most children at some time in their lives. However, how it is handled could discourage responsibility if done poorly. An example could go like this, "I feel bad that you forgot your homework. I am unable to bring it to you because I have other things I need to do today." Then, when the child gets home, it is good to continue processing it. It could go like this, "What happened? I'm sure you felt bad. I've had that happen to me before. Let's try to come up with some other alternatives to ensure that it won't happen again." With this attitude, a discussion can occur and can really help the child move from one space to another.

A fourth skill involves the child sharing in the process of *decision-making* within the home. This increases gradually as the child gets older. For example, as a child moves into elementary age, he/she is able to know the reason for certain rules, whereas, the child under five isn't ready to know. So, too, when the child is a teen, he/she can express what are reasonable as rules, whereas an elementary child wouldn't have as much experience.

From the discussion of the above perceptions and skills, it is obvious that parenting is an awesome task. These are skills that adults also need to have in life. We can't give what we don't have. The best part of parenting is having a chance to grow and learn these skills and share them with the most important people in our lives. There is so much more to learn an impossible to completely address in one article. You may want to read *Raising Self-Reliant Children In A Self-Indulgent World*, by Stephen Glenn, and *Positive Discipline*, by Jane Nelsen for further ways to implement these ideas.