

A Parent, Not Necessarily!

by Karen Spring

What does it mean to be a parent?

We all love our kids. That's obvious. We share vulnerability as parents, an innate need to protect our children. Most of us say that we want our children to be happy. Less overtly, we hope our children will be successful, and of-course, good citizens. So, our goals are comparable. **Apparently**, our ways are not!

Parents perceive their roles differently. Look around you and that becomes obvious too. We parent as products of our own parents. We overcompensate for their weaknesses and try to copy their strengths. I see the stark contrast among parents in their discipline styles. Parents clearly set different priorities for their children. But mostly, I see parents scrambling to figure out how to "parent" in a high-tech, indulged, over-achieving, and scary reality of the 21st century.

Our friends and co-workers often become role models. A friend of mine takes for granted that she knows what she is doing and comments, "*how complicated can it be? I turned out okay.*" Another friend micromanages her child, thinking that every decision that she makes is paramount to her child's future. The "experts" offer parents many differing viewpoints. So, what **IS** the role of a parent?

I remember when my daughter Lindsay became a toddler. I rushed home from work, relieved our nanny and immediately got down on the floor to play blocks with her. I played dolls, talked "baby talk" and followed her around her playroom. Never mind that I needed to prepare dinner. Never mind, that the laundry piled up. Lindsay, this cute, bright eyed girl with dark ring curls, appeared to be happy and smiling.

I learned soon after I enrolled in my Montessori school that I am not my child's friend. I'm not her playmate. I am her parent. What did that mean? My toddler needed to feel safe. She needed love. She required basic physical needs. I needed to treat her with respect and give her the opportunity to gain experience. It isn't about playing blocks and dolls and acting like a 2 year old with her. The important point is for me to show my child who is in the lead.

I attended every parent education class offered by my school over the past 8 years. My role became more and more evident. The more I learn, the more I realize that my husband and I can only do so much to ensure our children's future. But, it's a lot! We must step up to the plate and do our best. And, we must learn from and laugh at our mistakes because parenting is about the whole picture, not just one interaction.

My tenants of parenting still apply today as they did when my children were toddlers. I lay out the appropriate choices and set up the boundaries for Lindsay and Matthew. Act as a role model and steer them back on track when they veer off. Provide them with new experiences and let them process life's obstacles. My husband and I agree that this is our job as parents. Here are a few of the "pearls" that we've picked up through my Montessori learning and experience.

Children need to feel safe

Children feel safe when parents are grounded. The adults around your child need to show a united force. They can't be wishy-washy. Parents that project a sense of control over their own emotions, thoughts and actions, create a healthier environment for the child. We don't need to be perfect. We DO need to be reflective and prepared to face different situations with maturity.

The Montessori philosophy often acts as a grounding force for me. I remember a parent, an acquaintance of mine, venting her frustration and feelings of helplessness because her 4 year old child woke her up every night around 3am. The mom felt exhausted and perplexed. *"Why won't she sleep all night?"* The mom said flatly that she refused to allow her child to cry herself back to sleep. In probing it, I learned that she still kept a baby monitor in her child's room.

I thought about what the Montessori philosophy teaches us, *"what message are you sending your child?"* A 4-year old child knows the purpose of a baby monitor. She knew that the monitor tells her parents when she wakes up at night. It reinforced to the child that she isn't capable of sleeping through the night and that she wasn't capable of falling back to sleep on her own without her mom. The significance of the monitor left the child feeling unsafe in her bed. Clearly the mom needed to remove the baby monitor and say to her child, *"you are a big girl now and it is time for you to sleep through the night. We do not need the baby monitor anymore."* Take the lead!

Children Need Appropriate Choices

I think this is a difficult task in today's world. The media bombards our children with inappropriate choices. How do we know what to allow at what age? Who do we listen to for advice? How do we stand firm with our decisions?

Recently, my 9-year old son asked me to take him to see the movie King Kong. Matthew loves animals and saw the previews on television. A couple of his friends told him that they loved the movie. *"I really want to see it Mom! When can we go, tomorrow?"* Matthew asked me daily.

I pride myself on making good choices for my children. I know that I don't want them growing up too fast. I know that I want to protect them from exposure to inappropriate material. I read extremely positive movie reviews. I spoke to a few other moms of boys

Matthew's age who said their sons loved the movie. *"I loved it too!"* one mom said. Another mom commented in answer to my concerns, *"well, yes, maybe a bit scary and violent."*

My gut told me that my son wasn't ready for that movie, and there was the PG-13 rating and a 3-hour time commitment to consider. Instead, I "went along with the crowd and didn't give the decision too much thought. I took Matthew to see King Kong on a Sunday afternoon. His excitement was contagious and we both sat down in the theatre full of anticipation and wonder.

The reality soon set in. I peered over at Matthew whose hands covered his eyes throughout many scenes. He looked so petrified when the aboriginals reveal themselves. These creatures with their bulging eyes and creepy faces, so life-like but yet with no resemblance to humans, I also found, really scary. A 9 year old has no reference for an uncivilized island, (where King Kong and every other pre-historic creature lives). This movie, on many levels, scared the daylights out of my 9-year old son and ultimately he had to leave the theatre.

I felt like the "worst mother" for making that choice for my son. I knew better. He doesn't like scary shows. I acquiesced to my child. I listened to my peers. And, I ignored my own instincts. No real harm done - we do make mistakes and need to move forward. My learning? Know your own child. Make decisions based on your values, instincts and knowledge. Remember, it is okay to go against the flow. Be proud to show your child that you make your own decisions. He'll learn by your example too!

Children Need to Process Life's Obstacles

I recall when my children were born that I thought they were perfect. I had a rude awakening a long time ago when I realized that they are not! In fact, all children must overcome their own issues and obstacles in different ways. It gets to down to coping and overcoming resistance. And, resilience, I'm afraid, a child learns, only while processing life's experiences.

Consider our society. Our child catches a cold; we immediately give him cold medicine. A child is bored; we run to the closet and pull out games or toys to solve her problem. Our innate need is to protect our children from discomfort. We go against our natural tendencies if we allow our children to process uncomfortable feelings. But, we need to resist stepping in! Your child needs to experience boredom to become resourceful; loneliness to know how to be inclusive; failure to appreciate accomplishment. I could go on and on. . .

Next time your child complains he's bored. Say what my friend says, *"only boring people get bored."* Your child over time will reach out and think through a solution. Keep in mind, a strong academic record and a list of accomplishments mean nothing if your child can't cope with life's constant struggles.

I feel grateful to my Montessori teachers for helping me build a foundation to raise my children. I know what my job is when I think of raising Lindsay and Matthew. My job is not to entertain them. It's to guide them. My job is not to appease them. It's to set boundaries. My job is not to guard them from all discomfort. It's to let them process life's experiences. My job is not to save them but to give them wings.