

Overcoming an Upbringing

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Recently, a mother e-mailed me this question:

How successful can an individual be when trying to parent differently than how they were parented? For example, I have made a significant step from how I was parented because I do not physically reprimand my children. Both my husband and I were hit as children as a form of discipline. We have overcome that but there is so much more to improve upon. What is reasonable to expect? I feel like I'll never get it right and that changing one thing is just a small accomplishment.

This is my reply:

Breaking the cycle of family violence is an enormous accomplishment, one which earns you Best Mommy and Best Daddy pins. An individual can be completely successful in parenting differently from how they were raised. There are a couple of carved-in-stone rules about it:

First, forgive yourself. Until you can do that, by which I mean when you acknowledge what you have accepted, face what you didn't know, couldn't have fixed, and had no power over, until you have forgiven yourself you'll get trapped in the hilariously incorrect idea of 'if only.' If only you knew better then.

If only your kids were better. If only your parents weren't so deranged. If only you didn't live in this culture. If only yada yada yada...

'If only' is information no one has any way of using. It interferes with your ability to see what you need right now, and it interferes with your ability to meet that need.

Second: parents who are suffering, who are not getting their needs met or who are sacrificing what they want and need for their children raise guilt-ridden children who are convinced they have no right to take up air. These kids go one of two ways: contempt for their parents, their parents' rules, their parents' society, and everything their parents wish for them, or; suicide. A child will never say thank you for unrequested sacrifices. Taking care of your children's parents so you can care for them tomorrow is far more important than most people think.

Third: no parents are ever perfect. You can't always know what is best for your kids, and sometimes the only feedback you'll get is how much of a disaster that great plan was. Sometimes the feedback comes too late for it to be obviously connected to what you did, and sometimes the feedback includes what other people have done unbeknownst to you. You will make mistakes ... many ... for sure.

Finally: children need healthy, forgiving, learning and stable parents more than they need parents who don't make mistakes. Children are resilient and can tell the difference

between things (even wrong things) done in love and things (even right things) done in fear, to control, or out of distaste, dislike or hatred. Children will readily forgive incompetent parents who clearly (to the child) love them no matter how egregious the errors, while children will *never* forgive 'ideal' parents who failed to make their love felt.

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It's not easy to change, and sometimes we try so hard not to replicate the mistakes of our parents that we don't notice we are making whole new mistakes for our kids to get over as they become adults. For all parents trying to start something new in their families, be assured: it can be done. It may not be perfect, we may forever be learning from our mistakes, but it can be done.

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