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How We Treat a Child?By Ruth Hungerford

My children are growing up. I now have an eight- going-on-18 year old who stamps her feet and says "leave me alone", and a five going on six year old who still climbs on me in the morning and says "I love you Mummy" and "will you play Guess Who with me for the millionth time?"

My world has shifted from pregnancy and breastfeeding and nappies, to reading and writing and maths and emotions and constant requests to play cards, read books, provide food, and "can we build a hut in the lounge, and do you need the clothes pegs 'cos we need them for the hut?" and wondering whether I should teach my children table manners and if so, how.

One of the things that remains unchanged though is the inherent humanity of my children. As Jan Hunt puts it in her book *The Natural Child: Parenting from the Heart* - "children are human beings who deserve to be treated like human beings." Treating children (and babies) like the little people they are, rather than as some other kind of alien being, simplifies a lot of things. Like sometimes when I am struggling with the day to day stuff I come back to the 'golden rule' for living with other people "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." If we all treated everyone else how we wanted to be treated then things would no doubt be a whole lot nicer in the world!

It doesn't mean that I am the perfect parent who is always calm and considered and handles every situation with dignity. Far from it, as many of my friends will attest to. I do my share of losing the plot and yelling and saying stuff I wish I didn't. But I do try as much as I can to consider why my child is doing what she's doing and how I can help her manage her overwhelming emotions.

Time out is something that is often given as an alternative to smacking or punishment. But, actually it *is* punishment. I know of a mother who (this is 100% true) cleaned out a broom cupboard for use as the "time out" room for when her less than two year old baby was "naughty". I found this very disturbing - the thought of being shut in a dark enclosed cupboard was very scary.

I actually do use 'time out' - for me. If I feel that my emotions are getting out of hand and I am not coping with how my children are behaving, I am known to march myself off to my room to calm myself down. I usually stay there a few minutes or so, just to get over myself, and figure out how to manage the situation in a way that is not going to involve me saying or doing things I may later regret. Then I can go back to the situation and hopefully be more understanding and less confrontational.

Interestingly, my older daughter, also takes herself away from situations now. She has realised that she sometimes just needs some space to calm down before she can clearly discuss what is upsetting her.

I have to smile when I remember my sister in law praying for patience when her children were young. She was worried that she was so impatient with her children, so she began asking God to help her be more patient. A well-meaning friend explained to her that what would happen would be that God would just increase the number of situations where she needed patience and this is how

she would learn to be patient. My sister in law was not impressed - she was kind of hoping for a divine injection of patience.

Whether you believe that God or the universe or whatever, is involved, it is my experience that our children do help us learn patience. I have undoubtedly (and even my better half would agree here), become more patient since having children. I have learned to 'breathe' and 'listen' and 'patiently' wait and then react (or not) to the daily issues that arise with children. I have learned this because having children greatly increased the number of times that my patience was tested,! Eventually (and it did take a while!) I developed a greater tolerance and more patience.

I also do my share of apologising. I know that many parenting manuals (and certainly the ones that were available back when I was a child) probably don't encourage apologising to children, but I find it works for me. I do make mistakes and say the wrong things to my children, and they deserve an apology, just like any other person that I hurt or upset or say the wrong thing to.

I am also conscious that my children model their behaviour after mine. One of my father's favourite sayings was "do what I say not what I do" which of course was just ridiculous. We were always more likely to copy his behaviour than listen to him tell us to do the opposite. It's just human nature for children to copy other people - it's how we humans learn stuff.

So I guess for 2008, I'm going to try and do more positive stuff so my children model my good behaviours and maybe we'll have less 'whingeing' (from me) in the household! I think I also might meditate on how to teach table manners in a way that doesn't involve lots of negative "you eat like little piglets" kind of statements as that has not really worked that well in the past!

I'll leave you with this poem ... which I think sums things up quite well.

A Life in Your Hands....

If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.
If a child lives with hostility, she learns to fight.
If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy.
If a child lives with shame, she learns to be guilty.
If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient.
If a child lives with encouragement, she learns confidence.
If a child lives with praise, he learns to appreciate.
If a child lives with fairness, she learns justice.
If a child lives with security, he learns to have faith.
If a child lives with approval, she learns to like herself.
If children live with acceptance and friendship,
they learn to find love in the world.

Dorothy Law Holte

About the author: Ruth Hungerford is a mother of two girls, both born at home as planned, and a self employed social researcher and the editor of the Waikato Home Birth Association Inc. News magazine. She lives in Hamilton, New Zealand.

References

1. Jan Hunt *The Natural Child: Parenting from the Heart*, available at www.naturalchild.org.