

The Many Ways You Program Your Children



Send him mail.



"Insight for the Young and Unrestrained" is an original column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found [here](#). IYU-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Nobody needs to be told that raising a child from birth is going to be a helluva job. For starters, you've got to keep them alive, which is not always as easy as it sounds. Then, you've got to teach them the information relevant to keeping themselves alive (or risk perpetual dependence on you or someone else). But there's another factor of parenting.

By raising a child, you are literally programming how it emotionally interprets the world. You are determining to a very large degree if he will become the type of person who reacts with fear and anxiety to situations he should be totally comfortable with. You are a major influencing factor on whether they will be nice to a fault, or an overall anti-social jerk. It is because of you that they will either be able to experience the entirety of the spectrum of human emotion, or experience none of it at all.

The Two Types of Parenting

It seems like most parents believe in taking either one extreme or another when it comes to parenting: either totally laid-back, hands-off, and even negligent, or an almost obsessive level of interest and control over what their kids do. We live in an age of hyper-parenting, and if the parents don't do it themselves they hire a school to do it for them.

Parents who take this approach have their hearts in the right place. They just don't trust that children will grow up right without constant intervention in their development. They don't really seem to trust the natural process of human growth.

Their fears are not without warrant. We live in a very unnatural world, and that really takes a toll on children. But there's a limit that is quickly reached if *too much* pressure is put on children to correct the destructive impact of the world. It should be a major priority for every loving parent to find where this balance is in their relationships, and then develop the patience and emotional skills needed to act on it daily.

When to Yell

Being around children or teenagers can require patience, but this doesn't mean embracing total pacifism or emotional neutrality. It just means knowing when it is warranted to use anger to influence a child's behavior. Anger, like any other emotion, is merely a tool in your box as a human being. Most parents will unconsciously choose to use anger in every occasion that a child does something they don't approve of. This is like using a hammer to dust the fine china.

In most cases where a child's behavior rightfully requires correcting, there really isn't any pressing sense of urgency. Think about it. When is the situation ever *really* urgent? Basically only when someone's body or property is in immediate danger. Generally any other time, another emotional tone could be used to correct the situation and convey a lesson without also creating the collateral damage that anger carries.

The only advantage unique to anger is the sense of *urgency* it carries. So go ahead and yell when little Johnny is moments away from sticking the fork in the electrical socket, or stepping into oncoming traffic, or knocking over your priceless violin. This is a primal emotional response, and it works more effectively than any other approach to get the instant attention of your child and prevent catastrophe. But whenever you have more than half a moment to actually stop and assess the situation, ask yourself if raising your voice is really the best way to approach the situation.

Allow Them to Emote

Children are *extremely* sensitive to the emotions you project onto them. They see it in your body, your voice, your words, and how you touch them. They are affected by your emotions far more than you might realize, and you'll easily see it if you learn what to look for. Kids get good at masking their emotions when they are told it's not safe to show them. Look for signs that they are suppressing something traumatic inside.

Amazingly, one of the most effective things you can do to instantly improve your connection with your children is to simply give them the permission to show their emotions without inhibition. If you catch them choking back tears, or covering cries with false laughter as children commonly do, stop them. Look them in the eye, hold them, and tell them that whatever they are feeling is perfectly okay and they are allowed to cry in front of you (or scream, or whatever it is they need to do to get their emotions out). This permission will instantly shoot their level of trust and respect for you higher than ever before.

You Shape Their Baseline

Without this freedom of expression, they will develop emotional blocks over time, and can

gradually become closed off. An emotional block is simply any psychological tendency toward difficulty expressing an emotion that would be present under natural, healthy settings. Whatever barriers they put between themselves and the world now will be exponentially more difficult to remove later in life, so please, parents, do everything you can to make sure they never arise.

Parents acknowledge the truth of this when it comes to major emotional events. They understand that physical abuse or the emotional trauma of a parent's death will certainly leave long-lasting scars. But what about the day-in and day-out reality you create for them? Children who learn from birth that the world is *not* safe will have a very difficult time fully expressing themselves later. Only parents and other close older figures can provide this feeling of safety for a helpless infant or child.

The world and its influence on your children will always be too big for you to control. Even the best of parents have only so much influence. But what you can do is, at the very least, construct a micro-environment of love and comfort where they are instilled with a foundational sense of security in life. This means that you have to *become* the embodiment of these virtues. While negative emotions serve their place in times of momentary emergency, you have to remain in control of yourself enough to return to a baseline of unconditional acceptance.

Other People and the Opposite Sex

You're not just teaching them how to feel comfortable being themselves. You're teaching them how to interact with other people. From you they'll learn how to make friends, participate in an economy, and (perhaps most importantly) treat the opposite sex. We are *designed* for sex, as much as many parents might want to avoid the inevitability of it for their children as long as possible. It's your duty to do everything you can to make sure that when the time comes they will have a healthy view of sex and relationships.

Young women learn to interact with men primarily from their fathers and brothers. Fathers, the way you treat your daughters creates a template in their minds for how all their future male relationships should unfold. Become the person you want your daughter to marry. Think about how your sons observe you treating their mother and talking about women in general. Your children are *always* observing your actions and *always* learning from them. You don't get the luxury of just turning a false persona on and off whenever the kids are around.

But if you teach them to be comfortable being themselves and dealing with others from a young age, they'll grow up to become far more capable of treating others well. If they don't believe that social bonding is easy and natural, they will be prone to staying closed off from the human race for fear of being hurt or betrayed. If they don't know what a sustainable

and loving relationship between two people can look like, they'll have a very difficult time replicating it themselves. We all unconsciously build our lives around the patterns we inherit.

Curiosity and Silliness

Kids are constantly hungry for new experience and information during their growing phases. Concerned parents should take note of this and seek to fill this natural hunger with enough physical, emotional, and intellectual stimulation. However, they absolutely should *not* force-feed information or activities. This accomplishes the exact opposite of what it is intended to do. You need to take a step back and wait for them to seek before you fulfill. This doesn't mean you cannot guide them in their quest for new experiences. It just means you have to learn how to inspire them.

A lot of parents can never understand why their children are obsessed with zoning out with video games. Video games provide the greatest amount of stimulation for the smallest amount of physical work. They are pretty *amazing* when you think about it. Kids have the ability to instantaneously enter into another world with its own physics, politics, and reward incentives. This is a powerful tool for expanding the imagination and exercising many components of the mind. Like a great movie, it can condense a plethora of otherwise inaccessible experiences into the span of just a few short hours. With immersive games, you can live many lives over the course of a single day. Can you really blame a kid for being so drawn to such an opportunity?

In a world with this kind of hyper-stimulation available everywhere, your best defense against too much of a good thing is to fill your child's lives with so many other amazing and stimulating experiences that they are never left hungry at the end of the day. Don't chastise them for being hungry. The desire to beat a challenging game set in a rich interactive environment is a major sign of ambition. They just have to learn to act on that ambition at some point.

Treating Children like "Children"

So how *should* you treat your son or daughter? Probably however he or she acts. Get rid of the idea that there is a certain way they are supposed to be acting, or a certain social role they are supposed to be fitting into. All that crap was made up by people just as dumb as you and me. You can invent a new social role *any time you want*. And you can instill the confidence in your children to do the exact same thing. You do an enormous disservice to them if you ignore what is *actually happening* with them right in front of your eyes and insist on projecting an illusion because it's easier for you to deal with. You should be proud beyond measure that your kid doesn't act like just another "kid."

They will be similar, but not identical to you. Don't take this as an insult, and learn to adjust

your parenting techniques accordingly. This is evolution in action. Two old traits combine together into a new one, and that's how the magic happens. There will come a time when their growth surpasses your ability to watch over them completely. When that time comes invest what is necessary into other mentors with skills and perspective you lack, and do everything you can to prepare them to figure the world out on their own. They are the legacy you leave to the world, but they are also entirely their own people. If there were anything truly worth doing well, it is this.