

Procreation is not Parenting



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.

It’s been part of my long-term mission in life to spread awareness of the distinction between understanding and implementation, or “education vs. training” as I’ve previously referred to it. People active in the process of “doing” something take pride in the fact that they manage to work hard, regardless of how well their task is actually accomplished. This seems to be a direct correlation to the common practice of equating “hard work” with “a job well done,” the fallacy of which should be obvious to anyone with a mindset oriented toward efficiency.

People who invest their time acquiring a more thorough understanding of something before embarking on a plan of action receive far less social credit for their “theoretical” knowledge of how reality works. This applies, perhaps more than anywhere else, to the practice of raising children. People who have embarked on the path of genetic reproduction will immediately assume an air of accomplishment or expertise. After all, they *have* kids. How could someone who *doesn’t even have kids* possibly have acquired more knowledge than they on healthy principles of raising children?

This is, to me, as crude and ignorant as a man who accidentally loses himself in the jungle bragging about his clumsiness – and taking personal pride in the dangerous circumstances chance brought into his life. What if he, in scoffing pride and disbelief, asked how someone *who isn’t even lost wandering aimlessly through the wilderness* could possibly know anything about how to survive in the wild?

It is the difference between the ability to buy a boat and the ability to sail one. How could someone *who doesn’t even have enough money to buy a boat* know anything about how to sail one? These very people would just as soon claim that they, having purchased a large number of airline tickets in the past, are most qualified to pilot an aircraft. It is easy to see that this type of thinking, when applied to almost any area outside of human child development, quickly dissolves into absurdity.

A wise man will prepare himself for all the foreseeable difficulties and new responsibilities his choices will bring into his life – so that he will accomplish his new tasks as well as humanly possible. He will study the forest and all its dangers before intentionally trekking forth into it. He will study the winds and ocean currents before setting sail. The fool, who lacks meaning in his life, will attempt to inflate his sense of importance by taking on larger and larger amounts of responsibility well before he is ready for them. So long as people equate action or effort with achievement and result, this fallacy will continue to haunt the lives of shortsighted individuals, and hold back the productive progress of mankind.

Parenting is Not Beyond Rational Understanding

Implicit in the concepts of learning or scientific advancement is the premise that reality can be understood by people with powers of observation and rational minds. Nowhere in the fundamentals of the universe is there a hidden clause stating that certain activities or principles of change are exempt from this capacity for understanding. Knowledge and understanding do not come through random and senseless trial and error. If they did, every single action a person ever took would necessarily be viewed as entirely new and distinct from every action prior.

Building an understanding depends upon a working memory of reality and the ability to generalize new experiences with the old, even when they are superficially different. This is why some people can do one thing over and over for their entire lives and never get better at it. For one reason or another, they never integrate every new iteration of the activity into their working model of how that aspect of reality works. Conversely, some people can quickly rise up from novice to expert ranks of performance in a skillset if they are capable of and willing to notice and memorize where the important principles and distinctions lie for that ability.

To say that a person has to be actively involved in doing something in order to understand it is to completely misunderstand understanding. Knowledge of principles serves as a more efficient placeholder for the mere memory of having tried something many, many times. Knowledge of principles is the only thing that allows a person to accurately predict the outcome of any series of actions. There is no exception in the universe to this rule – and claiming that your particular circumstances are unique and outside the scope of the natural flow of the universe is to simultaneously self-aggrandize and mystify reality beyond human cognitive abilities. It is to see yourself as somehow superhuman and supernatural – above humanity and above nature.

Parenting vs. Being a Parent

The word “parent” has come to have two related, but ultimately different, meanings. You are a parent (noun) if you have produced a genetic offspring. You are participating in the

act of parenting (verb) if you fulfill the psychological role in a child's life required by nature to turn them into self-sufficient adult individuals. You can be a parent and entirely abandon your child immediately after birth (or even before, if you are male). You can spend your entire life never reproducing but still parent several others in need of that crucial influence, regardless of their genetic connection to you. This is why we still refer to adoptive parents as just that: parents. This is proof that raising a child is entirely distinguished from the mere ability to produce one.

Becoming a parent is not difficult. It requires little more than good enough physical health to impregnate someone else or carry a fetus to term within yourself. Even keeping an infant or child alive, though more complicated than the processes of initially producing one, necessitates again only a fundamental conception of what it takes to provide the basic requirements for sustained human biology. Most of this is provided to us by nature in the form of instincts of self - and offspring-preservation, and is supplemented by a rudimentary understanding of modern economics. The ability to "put food on the table" has only ever been relevant to the act of having a child, but not raising it, which is about equivalent to the difference between owning something and knowing how to use it properly.

The skill of raising a child is one of the most natural aspects of being human - though it is heavily complicated by the unnatural world most of us attempt to perform it in. This is what necessitates taking the effort to effectively practice and study what it takes to interact in the most natural and healthy manner possible with children. The key point I am trying to make, if I haven't yet stressed this enough, is that *you don't have to physically make a new baby in order to practice/learn this*. To do so is foolhardy, shortsighted, selfish, and just plain wasteful as a learning method.

Every bit of information a person needs to know to raise a child well in the modern world (that is not already instinctual in healthy adults) is now freely available in books and other media, or through the personal advice of successful parents. There are already well more than enough babies and children with whom anyone desiring to learn the skill of parenting (verb) can interact and observe the patterns of efficient interaction.

Will it be exactly the same as raising your own genetic offspring from scratch? Probably not. There are too many nuances to capture to completely recreate the experience. But there is a reason we practice a skill in a controlled and limited environment before we throw ourselves out to the mercy of the jungle. Bragging rights and pride should stem from how long a wise person consciously chooses to devote their time to studying the discipline of parenting *before* undergoing the comparatively easy process of making a new human. You'll earn no respect from me by merely jumping the gun and attempting to climb the mountain without packing the right equipment and doing the necessary research ahead of time.

Parenting is Not Emotionally Exclusive

What I'm really proposing is that we stop giving all parents (noun) the benefit of the doubt, and we all stop suppressing the superior knowledge we may hold that causes us to judge the irrational and misguided actions of others. Is it any of our business what other people do with their lives? Of course not. But when has that ever stopped us from having the audacity to observe, deduce, and make judgments about what is and what is not a good idea? Why does the sacred cow of parenthood exist as a subject thou shalt never discuss nor condemn, akin to politics, abortion, and (gasp) homosexuality?

If you refuse to acknowledge that there is such a thing as "good" and "bad" parenting, you shut off that portion of your mind which learns and gains understanding of what works and what does not. Judgment is what makes learning and improvement possible. When you do this, you implicitly relegate child-rearing into the realm of the metaphysical, magical, and imaginary, which minimizes your chances of ever being a truly great parent to your own offspring. A person who does not believe in right and wrong or correct and incorrect cannot ever consciously make progress toward one and away from the other.

Ultimately, you are not just learning the necessary knowledge for teaching a child to think, live, and prosper. You are developing internal emotional and communication skills. This is the aspect of parenting that people with children are so often certain that anyone who *isn't* in their position could not ever possibly understand. You need to spend time around children in order to learn how to react and respond to them in all moments and circumstances. You need to be emotionally prepared to go from laughing, to screaming, to crying, and back again on a moment's notice without ever losing your presence of mind. This is something a book can only make you aware of, but not develop for you.

Generally, the parents who insist you cannot understand what it's like to raise a kid until you have your own are the ones who fail miserably in this regard. Because they never developed healthy emotional coping and teaching skills before having their own children, they assume it to be a physical impossibility that anyone else might do so. This is as absurd as assuming that no one can learn algebra without attending a "real" schooling institution. Close-minded people will always be blind to how the world could ever operate beyond the particular set of experiences they were arbitrarily subjected to, and parenting is perhaps the topic most abused by this fallacy.

Procreation is not parenting, and anyone who gets offended and defensive at the idea that someone could ever rationally and emotionally understand what they might be going through and have something of value to add to their perspective was never ready to be a parent in the first place. Don't be that way if proper parenting is important to you. Begin your training ahead of time, and make it a part of your daily growth as a developing adult human. There is no magic one-step process that transforms a man into a proper father or a

woman into the best mother her kids will need. It's just one more aspect of the ever-changing and numerous principles of your identity.