

THE PENDULUM EFFECT:

Striking a Balance in Raising Children

I'm watching my 11-year-old daughter's softball game when a girl strikes out and the parents start clapping with the same zeal usually reserved for at least a single. Fast forward a few months and everyone receives the same trophy, regardless of skill or what place the team finished. I'm left wondering why we are so afraid to let our children experience failure.

This is just one example of an alarming trend in society: overcompensation by parents who want their children to have more opportunities and resources than they did as children or who are trying to make up for lost time, lack of connection, or an abundance of guilt. We shower our kids with praise, attention, stimulation, and material possessions in an effort to differentiate ourselves from our parents' strict, sometimes emotionally and financially sparse upbringing of us. However, we have inadvertently swung the pendulum from one extreme to the other by giving our children more than they need and sometimes more than they even want. We've become too emotionally invested in our children's lives and this excessive caretaking prevents our children from experiencing the satisfaction of learning self-care skills.

WHAT HAPPENED TO RESPONSIBILITY?

Every day in my practice, I see young adults who have not learned responsibility. They are emotionally immature and underdeveloped and feel entitled to special privileges. Some of them have alcohol and drug problems, fail at college, and are unable to support themselves financially. They rely exclusively on their parents to provide both financial and emotional support. Sadly, many parents assume this role, creating a codependent relationship. We are raising self-absorbed children who spend most of their energy justifying their actions to escape consequences rather than figuring out how they have contributed to their problems and learning from their mistakes.

Avoiding responsibility is rampant in our society. You don't have to search very hard to find headlines in the newspaper about people who blame others for their mistakes. A classic illustration is the drunk driver who kills an innocent pedestrian and turns around and sues the bartender with no acknowledgment of his own wrongdoing. It's time for us to accept responsibility for our actions, hold our children accountable for their actions, and not reward inappropriate behaviors by eliminating consequences.

HOW MUCH STIMULATION DOES A KID NEED?

Growing up, I recall having some basic toys but almost no structured opportunities for physical and social interactions. Instead we relied on our own creativity and resources to develop games and challenges to amuse ourselves. Somewhere along the way that changed, and now we run our kids from one scheduled activity to the next. Increased financial resources and technology have contributed to the trend of over-stimulation. With no time left in the schedule for free play, kids have lost the creativity that is the by-product of puttering around. They have a hard time being

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still, relaxing, and reflecting on life and are not comfortable with occasional solitude. Instead, they expect their parents to provide non-stop diversion. They are stimulation addicts in search of ever-increasing levels of excitement. Some will eventually engage in increasingly risky and potentially self-destructive behaviors to get their stimulation fix.

It's time for us to retire the role of cruise director and stop providing constant entertainment for our kids; let them come up with it themselves. In the beginning, it may be necessary to retrain our kids to be creative thinkers. Point them in the right direction, then step out of the scene. When your kids come rushing through the door after a few hours in the yard to report on which of their snacks the ants preferred, you'll know balance has been restored.

WHEN DID PRAISE BECOME SYNONYMOUS WITH LOVE?

I remember growing up with limited praise, attention, and approval. As a result, I sought acceptance and approval through achievement and productivity. This can be good (I am very self-motivated) or it can be bad (I still seek the approval of others). We know today that when children are young and learning new tasks it is important to give them praise to encourage them. But by age ten or so, a child is capable of recognizing which performance is worthy of accolades. What message are we sending when, as in our softball example above, all the kids get rewarded regardless of performance? Will this actually increase their self esteem or will the little white lie that "everyone is a winner" backfire in our faces?

We need only watch the American Idol auditions to find out the answer to that question. How many times have we seen the shocked expression of a kid, deluded his whole life by parents who praised his every breath, upon hearing the truth from Simon Cowell. The kid doesn't believe it. After all, his mother always told him he was a great singer. No matter what the experts say, the kid belligerently persists in denying reality. He's so addicted to praise, he can't imagine someone withholding it. This is a perfect example of someone who has never learned to discriminate between good and poor performance because they were praised for *doing* rather than praised for *doing well*. Admit it, don't you sit there cringing into the sofa, wondering why this tone-deaf kid's parents brainwashed him into believing he could be the next American Idol?

This is what happens when misguided parents confuse love with praise. To express their intense love for their children, they lavish them with incessant praise when it would be much healthier to teach them that there can be satisfaction in pursuing activities for their own pleasure even if their skill isn't sufficient to result in the pleasure of others. Get them lessons if they're interested, tell them you love them no matter what, but don't lie and tell them they're great if they're not. In the absence of excessive external praise and recognition, our children will develop internal affirmation, self-esteem, and confidence independent of others' approval.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE FOR CHANGE

If you recognize yourself in the examples I've outlined, don't fret. It's never too late for change. Children are highly adaptable. Try incorporating the following tips into your everyday life to restore balance in your family.

THE PENDULUM EFFECT: STRIKING A BALANCE IN RAISING CHILDREN

PROVIDE STRUCTURE AND CONSISTENCY

Children crave structure and routine even if they appear to resist. This provides stability and security for them in their lives.

- Set a consistent mealtime and bedtime schedule.
- Assign chores for each day and have a written grid that clearly shows your expectations.
- Establish consequences for incomplete chores and rewards for completion.
- Provide a reasonable allowance at the end of each month or week based on task completion, and dock their pay for an incomplete job.
- Award age-appropriate responsibilities and privileges, such as preparing their breakfast/lunch, waking up to an alarm clock, and staying home alone.
- Be consistent with rules and discipline even when it's not convenient.
- Praise specific behaviors to reinforce them.
- Model self-worth, responsibility, and healthy relationships.

As you make changes in your family, remember to take time out for yourself. Children need to know that while very important, they are not the center of the family. Parents are the leaders and children are the followers and learners. As such, children need to see you nurture yourself by taking time away from them without guilt or promises to “make it up” to them.

EXPECT ACCOUNTABILITY

Great businesses know that the only way to remain successful is to expect accountability from their employees. They provide training and support, conduct performance reviews, compensate good work, and provide coaching when improvement is required. Family life should be no different. Yet, parents often assume an all-or-nothing approach, either by micromanaging through over-protectiveness or providing no direction and then being intolerant of failure. Seek moderation in your style and approach. This paves the way for children to mature, gain self-confidence, and have an appreciation for the consequences of their actions.

- Hold family meetings twice per month to review goals and objectives and discuss family issues that create conflict.
- Provide constructive tools to achieve conflict resolution.
- Teach your children how to save money so that they can make a special purchase and rely on their own resources to achieve a reward.
- Take away privileges or toys for inappropriate behaviors to teach them that for every action there is a reaction. Be sure to take away something they value and choose an appropriate time-out location that has limited stimulation.

THE PENDULUM EFFECT: STRIKING A BALANCE IN RAISING CHILDREN

VALIDATE FEELINGS

All emotions are good; the goal is to learn healthy and appropriate expression of them. We can't protect our kids from the realities of life, but we can arm them with coping skills that will result in resiliency.

- Allow your children to experience negative emotions, such as disappointment, sadness, hurt and anger.
- Give them healthy ways to express and resolve their feelings instead of absorbing or squelching their emotion.
- Validate their emotions through acknowledgment and acceptance even if you don't totally understand why they may be experiencing these feelings.

ENCOURAGE OWNERSHIP

We all have a desire to be involved in our children's lives but sometimes take it too far. Too much involvement in our children's lives can lead to less investment on their part for success.

- Allow your children to come up with the idea for the science project and provide only direction and support.
- Watch their self-confidence soar when they complete projects and homework on their own.
- Let them know that their achievements are a result of their efforts. Internal confidence lasts forever!