

BEARING FRUIT: ALLOWING OUR CHILDREN TO DEVELOP THEIR POTENTIAL

Nature has its own way of providing us with models and, without laying claim to any agricultural knowledge at all, I would like to extract some of nature's wisdom and apply it to the nurturing of children. The model which I have chosen for this is a tree, which has to go through a process of growth before being able to bear fruit. The same can be said of children and, if we look at some of the stages in the life of a tree, they will teach us valuable lessons about how we can help children to bear fruit.

The Basics

The first element of tree growing which I would like to appropriate is the soil. For a tree to start its life in a healthy manner, it has to be planted in fertile soil which can nourish it. Children need the same nourishment. The environment within which they are brought up needs to be one in which they are able to thrive and develop to reach their full potential. This has implications for anybody who is bringing up children. Besides the basic level of needs which has to be met – hunger, thirst, shelter, warmth, health, and so on – children have more sophisticated needs. One which is crucial to their development, and which goes a long way towards determining whether they will bear fruit or not, is the need to form attachments. Adults bringing up children need to be available for the children to bond with them. To prevent any unnecessary guilt trips, this does not mean being constantly present for children beyond the earliest stage of life. But it does mean providing consistency and stability, with routines which children can grow accustomed to and can feel safe in relating to. It also means being emotionally available to children, focusing love, security, appreciation and care on them.

“Children thrive when they realize that they are loved...”

The fertility of the soil can be contaminated by toxins and, in bringing up children, some immediately spring to mind. The first one is conditional love, “Be good and I will love you”, “If you stop crying, I will love you”, “I don't love you when you disobey”, and so on. While the use of these conditional statements is very often unaware, the environment they create can be one which interferes with healthy development. Children, through these statements, learn that they are only worthy of love if they are or do something. This negates the intrinsic worth which children have by virtue of their existence. Children thrive when they realize that they are loved no matter what and this leaves them with a sense of being lovable which they will carry with them all their lives. If, as adults, they have a sense of self which they can value, they are more likely to be able to live with dignity, taking on their rights and responsibilities but not allowing other persons to take advantage of them. This is the sort of fruit which society wants for its future generations.

A tree cannot bear fruit before it has gone through the stages of being planted and growing from a sapling into maturity. Despite this being obvious, it is something which is sometimes overlooked when bringing up children. The most glaring and condemnable examples are those of children being thrown into later stages of development by abuse inflicted on them. However, sometimes this process is more subtle and children are not allowed to live their childhood through ways which adults rationalize as reasonable. Children need to have the opportunity to play, to be stimulated, to explore, to make mistakes, in other words, to enjoy their childhood. The fast pace at which life is lived today sometimes deprives them of this opportunity. They are urged not to waste time; they are put in front of television to keep them distracted; they are removed from places which are messy; people who are caring for them do not have time to

listen to them and move at their pace, and so on. While it is understandable that today's way of living has required adjustments by all of us, including children, efforts need to be made to ensure that children are still able to salvage the basic enjoyment of this beautiful stage in life. They need to be allowed an appropriate blend of freedom and protection to facilitate their development and ensure an investment which they will carry with them through to adult life. In this process, it might be a good idea for caregivers to join the children in their enjoyment and also allow the child in them to come to life!

Balancing work and play

A tree needs fertilizer and so do children. However, the right type and amount of fertilizer is important too. An obvious "fertilizer" for children's development is education. While the merits of providing children with an appropriate academic education cannot be praised enough and definitely go a long way towards contributing to a more prosperous future, an exaggerated focus on it can be detrimental. Children need to carry their academic responsibilities according to their age and abilities, no less but also no more. It is not healthy for children of a very young age to be burdened with the responsibility of homework, for children with limited intellectual capabilities to be pushed beyond their potential or for children not to have a balance between studying and enjoying leisure time. There should be a time for everything and this should be reasonably negotiated between caregivers and school. In addition to this, children's leisure time is more fruitful if it allows some time for creativity. Sometimes, it is strictly structured by adults to include homework, piano, ballet, catechism lessons, private lessons, football, swimming, and the list goes on. Time needs to be allowed for children to play, to plan their own enjoyment, to do things which do not fit into a structure. They need to reap the fruit of their structured activities by having the time to use their brains and bodies in being creative. Also, the structured activities should be chosen to meet some of the children's physical, spiritual, intellectual and creative needs, but they surely cannot meet all.

Accepting children as they are

Some types of trees survive in more difficult environments than others and the same can be said of children. Children who face difficult situations often become resilient and their coping skills are very well-developed. Bringing up these children offers particular challenges but one cardinal rule is to accept them as they are and understand that their behaviour may be one way of expressing intense feelings they might have which they are unable to express in words. Their resilience needs to be respected and their individual needs assessed well so that they, too, can be provided with the fertile soil within which to thrive.

A lemon tree cannot grow oranges and an orange tree cannot grow lemons. Children all have their own characteristics, talents, faults and virtues. To expect a musically gifted child with no inclination towards sports to play football or a child inclined towards working manually to be academically oriented, to give but two examples, is like expecting oranges from a lemon tree. It would be much better to appreciate the oranges and make orange juice than to lament the lack of lemons. We should appreciate the particular characteristics and individuality of every child. He or she is a unique gift which we, as adults, have the opportunity to enjoy but also the responsibility to nurture.

Patricia Bonello

Service Area Leader, APPOGG Looked After Children and Adoption Services