

Living life well – On the well-being of children

“Home is where we start from.” This is the title of one of the books of D.W. Winnicott, a psychoanalyst who studied and worked with children. We come through our parents, and through who they are and what they present us with, we make our beginning, we establish who we are. Parents are our first important makers. This makes them very powerful in our lives because they form us.

Educators, who are in contact with both children and adolescents must be sensitive and sensible just like parents. Parenting/educating is not only about equipping and providing the necessary skills but also about making children emotionally and psychologically capable of dealing with life and the situations it present. Often in our understanding we segregate the individual's personality into parts: parents provide for the physical needs, teachers for the cognitive development; both seeking to give moral advice. For us to be successful in this process, we need to understand the unique individual that we are making contact with to the best of our abilities and as much as the situation permits. Such contact involves both giving and receiving – a process from which we learn a lot. If we just stop for a while to give ourselves time to be more aware of what we give and what we receive, we would surely be more attentive to our imprint on others.

Laying the foundations

Constructing foundations involves equipping children with experiences that make them capable of being and giving, confident in themselves that they are full participants of the world they live in. In my work as psychologist and psychotherapist, and especially so at Agenzija Appogg, we meet people having personal conflicts and difficulties. Many speak of lack of self worth; they see themselves as not important and so behave as if the world out there does not need them.

How do we build a warm inviting place for our children? It must be a place where the relational stress is not too much. Too much relational stress includes repeated experiences where the child feels fear and rage. Reasons include a parenting style that regularly involves shouting, lots of orders, criticism, angry facial expressions and attitude. The stress level for children is too much for their capacities to contain. They feel threatened and unsafe most of the time. They are traumatized because their capacities cannot manage the internal feelings set up. They feel unable to have control over their world; their world becomes a scary and unsafe place.

What a difference to being provided with lots of early experiences of loving and calm relating to others; where you are looked after, while having the space and opportunity to be curious and explore; listened to when you reach! How different to find a parent who is interested in you, has the time for you, makes you feel wanted and special, by being there for you with a calm body and mind. Warm physical contact, as in hugs, cuddles, strokes, resting on and falling asleep in the arms of a parent, works miracles for their children.

However, this will be difficult if the parent is anxious or tense. This kind of positive contact helps the child to feel calm, safe and warm inside. The child is more likely to be able to enjoy life – to savour, stay and go with the moment. The child will also be more resilient to deal with the pain and stress life brings.

Building for the future

When raising children, parents would like them to be happy, free and achieving their potential. They want them to be able to function well, be successful, able to be themselves and to get where they want in life. Children are capable of dreaming and following their dreams, have the capacity to grow into generous persons, are capable of self-worth and are also able to be creative. All this involves energy for motivation, drive, endurance and stamina. To achieve this, parents should stimulate their children's curiosity from a young age.

Curiosity is the interest in something, the sustained motivation and the directed purpose to strive for and achieve your goals. Achieving life goals is very much linked to having long-term satisfaction. There are many adults who are satisfied with having a safe and secure life and life-style; they are satisfied with fitting in and being like others. But what about the desire of the child who wants to build a magnificent sand castle? Or the adolescent who asks his parents to give him cash gifts so he can save up to buy the best electric guitar? Or the adult woman who in spite of wanting to care for her family, also wants to venture abroad and study to become the professional she wants to be! Behind that desire there is the belief, the energy, the going beyond the easily accessible. There is a dream and a plan that one can be and do.

Curiosity in children can grow if parents and educators cultivate a good environment that provides children with space to be curious, as well as giving children a chance to express themselves. It is also important to listen to a child and enable him/her to express him/herself; to lovingly teach them by showing; by being firm and explain; by not dismissing, by staying calm and by asking for support and containment from the right persons.

Let's play

What about going to the countryside where there is access to soil, water, dead leaves and twigs, stones – there we can climb and gather and explore! What about gathering pebbles and shells and colour them or arrange them into a collage! What about pulling out pans and packets and tins and make a city!

Let's paint, let's invite friends and make coconut balls, come and help me cook, what about you choosing a game for us!

Play is exploration and make belief. Play is inventing, using imagination where reality does not exert its limits. In creative play a broom can become the spaceship with which to fly to the moon. Children can go looking for elves and actually find them. The dog becomes the faithful companion that saves the child from the monster.

Parents, teachers and caregivers can inspire children by providing them with ideas, with a dose of enthusiasm, with “toys” that can transform into anything the child sees in them. When we were young, we used to play with softdrink bottle tops – we had loads of them and we used to build roads and buildings and walls and castles. Then we used to bring in toy soldiers and use marbles to drop bombs and joyously scatter everything, making a mess. And through rough and tumble, become a mess ourselves. I still remember those hot idle summer holiday moments in the entrance of our house behind the “*hasira*” through which a gentle breeze flowed.

Providing figurines and toy models can enable the child to switch on their imagination and build up fantasy stories. Art, modelling materials and sharing some activities are other forms of expressing oneself, actualizing one’s inside in the outside. Inspire the child, then, step back so that he/she can find his/her own way.

A child’s urge to play, to create, to be curious, is killed if rather than provided with an enriched environment, the child is isolated, feels insecure, fearful or angry. Criticising any kind of mess and disorder inhibits the child because it creates disapproval. Don’t allow children to get bored for long periods of time, give them ideas, show them ways. Do not expect children to be quiet, converse. Give them some quality time and attention on a one-to-one basis. Do not let them get entrapped into making television or the computer their main source of entertainment. Neither pack their leisure time with so many activities that you end up running from one thing to another without having the time to stop, reflect and savour the experiences. Finally don’t ever shame or discourage a child’s natural creative tendencies to find out about the world.

Schools and teachers must also practice this preference for play and joyous learning. If children come to school already looking bored, they will be closed to learning, unable to manage their inner being and will be all over the place; so how can the school and the teacher give them a second chance to be curious and open up again to new learning? Does this happen by speaking to them from the heart with an emotion that fosters interest, does this happen by encouraging them to play and explore freely; or does it happen by trying to fit the child into tight assessment schedules and rule-bound tasks, thinking that through control they can become model students?

The greatest gift we can give our children is our clear selves

Taking care of children and raising adolescents is a hard commitment. You need energy, patience, you need to give a lot of yourself. It is for these reasons that you must take care of yourself, giving yourself time and space both to do the things that nourish you and make you more able to give and be there for them, and also the time and space to reflect on your own growth. This is the time where you look inside you and reflect and review yourself and what you learnt and could have done better. Otherwise we keep going through life blindly without taking stock of our usefulness and effectiveness. If we are clearer about who we are and how we behave, we can give others, especially children, more what they truly need.

References

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