

From One Parent

No-Fear Parenting

To Another

By Lea Stublarec

I am the mother of two adult gifted daughters as well as a social worker and parent coach. Currently I'm conducting a study of mothers of gifted daughters. So far, I've interviewed 26 mothers and 12 daughters and hope to finish the interviewing process in the next year or so. As part of this study, I'm trying to stay current with the latest "raising your gifted child" books, so I've read a number of books by various parenting experts. Despite the fact that I have two successful (depending on one's criteria) adult daughters, I often feel like a failure as a mom when I read about what I should've done or said differently--as if somehow I screwed up and did something wrong, or at least could have done a much better job. For example, I just finished reading *Unconditional Parenting* by Alfie Kohn, which is a great book with an obviously very important message, but I certainly didn't follow his advice about the best ways to both praise and punish kids.

Unfortunately, it seems to me that, as parents of gifted children, in some ways we're like sitting ducks for parenting experts because the chances are pretty good that we also are gifted and, like many of our children, perfection-

ists. Most likely, we often find ourselves searching for knowledge and advice that will help us become the perfect parent. Therefore, I've been giving this some thought and wanted to share what I believe is a different and possibly more powerful approach to consider as parents of gifted children. First, it's critical that we, as mothers, internalize the truth that we can't do it wrong. To this point, Stephanie Tolan has written an article entitled (appropriately enough!) "You Can't Do It Wrong" that was targeted to parents of the profoundly gifted, but its message may be relevant to parents of all gifted children.

In her article, Tolan states that, in general, our culture believes that it takes lots of rules along with large doses of guilt to keep people (in this case, parents) from doing harm to everyone around them—and that this belief has created a fear-based approach to parenting for many of us. But Tolan proposes a different world view and suggests that we have plenty of time to get it right and if some harm does come because of what we do, some good will come of it nevertheless. We'll have an opportunity to learn from our mistakes, because Tolan feels that even

when we try our best to do things exactly right with the very the very best of intentions, we sometimes do harm, anyway. As a result, you can drive yourself crazy trying to be the perfect parent, because there's no way to absolutely avoid doing harm (especially when raising gifted kids with special needs in an often unsupportive environment). I've certainly found this to be true with my own children because, on those rare occasions when we discuss their childhood, the things I look back on as my biggest errors are things they don't even remember . . . while the incidents they bring up as pretty traumatic, I swear never happened.

In addition, Tolan goes on to state that maybe doing harm is not as horrible as we might think. Although it's not easy to watch your child get hurt or experience pain or stress, we can't save our children from all pain, and it wouldn't help them if we could. We are living in a society, as Tolan points out, where the message is that pain is something no one should have to endure—like we have an inalienable right to be pain-free. However, as we all know only too well, no life is without pain, and in many cases, pain often provides a powerful growth experience. In fact, in studies of eminent people, one common thread from their childhood is that most of them experienced significant trauma growing up. For parents, then, it seems that the key is not to try to shelter our kids from pain but rather to help them figure out ways to cope with it and move on. Tolan concludes that, rather than fretting about parenting “right,” maybe the critical issue is simply that you care about your children and wish to do the very best job raising them. The key is simply in the trying; that's how our kids know we love them, because we're trying—not because we get it right or wrong.

So, if you wake up tomorrow and believe that you can't do it Wrong, it won't mean that you've suddenly quit caring for your children. As Tolan suggests, if you were to act as if every single choice you make for your child is the right one, a heavy burden would be taken off your shoulders. You could then use this energy that you would previously have wasted in worry and angst, rehashing your decisions over and over again, in more positive, productive, and enjoyable ways.

Although I applaud Tolan's outside-the-box message, I wonder perhaps if this dichotomy of right and wrong should even be applied to parenthood at all, because parenting isn't really about producing a product. Instead, it's about joining with other human beings in a dynamic process of growing and cocreating together, sharing love, life, and joy along the journey. As a parent, we are not involved in a mechanical

system but rather we coexist as a family in an organic, living system that defies measurement.

So, here are some of my thoughts on how to get beyond the fear of failure as a parent and to create a family culture that encourages trying.

- I think, as parents, we need to embrace mistakes as simply more information; and when you make a mistake, start talking yourself through the process of dealing with it out loud so your children can see and hear you struggle and learn your problem-solving methods.
- We need to brainstorm different strategies with our kids and talk with them about challenges we're facing in our daily lives including issues related to friends, family members, your job, and your interests and encourage them to discuss different ways to tackle challenges they may be experiencing in their lives.
- We should try to seek out challenges both personally and professionally and show pleasure in the struggle, saying things like, “Boy, this is hard. But what fun!” and develop a growth mindset where you embrace the belief that people at any age can learn, change, and develop skills (despite setbacks) through hard work and perseverance (this is described in Carol Dweck's book *Mindset*). A parent with a growth mindset stresses praising effort and perseverance rather than focusing on results.
- We should model for our kids that it's great to be imperfect and we're proud of it because that's how you learn and grow and develop new skills and build brain cells—that making mistakes means that you're out there in the fray trying, engaged in life and learning.
- And, finally, let's celebrate mistakes and failures—go to a movie with your child, have a tea party, take a family hike. Create a family tradition to applaud a family member for taking a risk and trying and for reminding everyone that that's what being a success is really all about.

By doing this, we will be modeling for our children how to live life as happy, positive, productive, and flawed gifted human beings. This is especially important with our gifted children who tend to be hyper-aware of our every move and keenly tuned into everything we do, think, or feel. As a result, our actions often speak much more loudly than our words. By freeing ourselves from the fear of screwing up or the fear of being less than perfect parents, or even beyond this—by refusing to apply these judgments to

parenting at all—we also will free our children from the immobilizing fear of failure and enable them to be authentically-wonderful, imperfect individuals.

And, finally, all the energy that we spend worrying about doing it right (or wrong) can then be spent on enjoying our parenting journey more and nurturing both ourselves and our children in a more positive and fun way. This will enable us to keep our focus on all the joys a gifted child can bring. As all the mothers I've talked with have said, it Goes by so quickly, and before you know it your beautiful gifted child will be all grown-up and off in the world following his or her passion—hopefully unafraid of and not immobilized by whether or not he or she doing it right.

Resources:

- Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset*. New York: Random House.
- Kohn, A. (2005). *Unconditional parenting: Moving from rewards and punishments to love and reason*. New York: Atria.
- Tolan, S. (1999). *You can't do it wrong*. Retrieved October 15, 2008, from http://www.stephanietolan.com/can't_do_it_wrong.htm

Author's Note

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