

Thanks for the Trust

A father's observations on learning to follow his children's lead on toilet training, conflict resolution, eating and sleeping.

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I am learning to be a parent the way I believe most parents have learned to parent: through life learning. Admittedly, I tried following advice from the “experts” about parenting, but I am learning to follow the advice of the ones who truly understand what my children need: my children. Since starting to follow their lead, I have rarely been disappointed; after all, in this case they are the experts. This has proven to be true in many aspects of life, including toilet training, conflict resolution, eating and sleeping.

Toilet training

Let me start with toilet training. When one of our daughters starting speaking clearly when she was ten months old, we began to believe that she is a very bright little girl...because she is. Most parents feel this way about their children and that is because children are, indeed, very bright. As adults, we are amazed at what they are capable of doing because what they are capable of doing is amazing. Unfortunately, sometimes we forget how amazing they are and we try to interfere in their development. Let me explain how I interfered with my daughter’s toilet training and then, realizing how dumb I was being, left her alone to thrive according to her own inner guide.

The reason I mention that she started speaking at a young age is that it led others to pressure us to start toilet training her earlier than she was ready. They argued that since she could speak early she should be toilet trained early, which, I now understand is a false connection.

We were uncomfortable with pressuring her, at age one, to do what we believed she was not ready to do, feeling that if she was ready she would have done it; nevertheless, we bowed to the pressure. Fortunately, that lasted a short time and we quickly backed off. Unfortunately, the pressure from others continued to mount. Our friends would tell us how their children were toilet trained and we wondered if we were being negligent in not dedicating the time to train our child in the way that they did. Most of them shared how they sat with their children in the bathroom for endless periods of time and, of course, treats was the method that generated the best results for them.

However, the more we relaxed the better things got. And as we relaxed, I observed a few things about the way most parents in our society deal with this issue. First, do people really believe that without “teaching” children about our bathroom ritual they will not pick it up? Second, while many parents claimed that their children were toilet trained, we later realized they were not; it was the parents who were toilet trained. The parents knew when their children would likely go to the bathroom (after drinking large amounts or at certain number

of minutes after eating) and so the parents would bring the children to the bathroom often and for long periods of time with the hope that their children would go in the toilet and not in their clothes. Third, given this hit and miss approach, the children would often have “accidents.” Fourth, the parents would incessantly and irritatingly constantly ask their child if they needed to go to the bathroom.

We waited until our daughter was ready and until she wanted to go to the bathroom and this is our experience: When she turned three she, for whatever reason, decided that she no longer wanted to wear diapers. She has had only a few accidents and they were mostly within the first few weeks of having decided that she no longer needed to wear a diaper. We do not have to ask her nor remind her if she needs to go to the bathroom, she just does it. That is because she was ready and internally motivated to do it, rather than being coerced or bribed into it by an external authority. At first, the whole process took practice, but we trusted her to figure it out and she has.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this whole process is that the children who were “toilet trained” earlier than my daughter are still having accidents and are still being reminded and harassed about whether they need to go to the bathroom or not. I wonder if these children have internalized that this process is not one that they internally control, but one that adults have to control for them and because of that it will now take them longer to be truly toilet trained than it would have if they were left to figure it out on their own.

Our daughter still wears pull-up diapers on most nights and will stop that when she feels it’s the right time. When she has a lot to drink before she goes to bed, she asks for a pull-up, and when she does not have a lot to drink she tells us that she does not need one. So far, we have only had to change her sheets in the middle of the night once.

Conflict resolution

Conflict resolution requires the same trust that the children will work things out for and by themselves. At first, they may do so clumsily, but in a short period of

time they will learn to deal with conflicts in a way that leads to mutually satisfactory resolutions. Our family's experience shows that children develop their conflict resolution skills by doing conflict resolution on their own without adult intervention. By constantly intervening, adults are telling children that conflict resolution is not something that they have control of, but that it is externally imposed on them by an outside body. This, of course, disempowers children and takes away their own agency.

I noticed this with my two daughters. They are now just over one and just over three years of age. I embraced the trust in them being able to solve conflicts on their own before my wife did. We noticed that when I was with them, there would be fewer conflicts between them and that they would resolve them on their own within seconds and without appealing to me to mediate. Whereas, when my wife was with them, the conflicts would be more frequent and longer, and the girls would run to her to resolve them. Once we noticed this, I suggested that my wife try to trust our daughters to deal with the conflicts on their own and not immediately intervene. Within a short period of time, the children realized that they were their own problem solvers. The result was that the number of incidents went down and the time the conflicts lasted was reduced to seconds.

This morning, the 16-month-old was playing with a pair of shorts, when the 39-month-old suddenly ripped it from her hands. I was shocked and immediately felt like reprimanding the eldest for her inappropriate behavior. Luckily, I resisted and my daughters were the better for it. You see, all the eldest needed was time – time to think about what she had done, time to witness her sister's reaction to what she had done and time to realize on her own that what she had done was not right. Then, she apologized and handed the shorts back to her sister. Now, if I had intervened, all that contemplation and reflection and the resulting self-correction would have been lost to my overbearing presence and distrust in the power of allowing children to resolve their own conflicts.

You may be thinking that this lesson was at the unfortunate expense of my younger daughter's tears and that ethically it ought not to be allowed to happen. You may be thinking that as her parent I should protect her because she is young and vulnerable. I want to suggest that this example shows that she is not vulnerable but powerful and that she, too, benefited. She came to understand that she has a voice and that if she does not like something she has the power to protest and to change the situation. She also learned about compassion as her sister modeled for her the proper course of action.

The way these two little girls resolve their conflicts is very interesting to observe. Sometimes the eldest one gives in to the younger one, sometimes vice versa and sometimes they find a way to share. As adults, I think the best my wife and I can do is simply to model good conflict resolution strategies between us, so that the children can learn the strategies in a similar way that they learn to walk and talk: by observing, by listening, by asking questions, by trying it themselves, by succeeding and by failing and by any other way that we are not sophisticated enough to understand.

Eating

All this is not to say that my wife and I think we are perfect parents. We often lapse into moments where we recognize that what we are doing is not the best approach, but yet we carry on anyway because we are fatigued, frustrated or whatever. Sometimes, this happens when we lose trust in our children's abilities to make the best decision for themselves, or at least to learn from their mistakes. Perhaps the area where we have most difficulty is in trusting that our children will eat the right foods. For this lesson, we learn best from my parents. The girls spend a lot of time with their grandparents and they mutually adore each other's company. When it comes to food, my parents will never deprive our children of any food that they want. We have a hard time with this because we fear that if given this liberty on a regular basis, our daughters would choose always to eat unhealthy food. In fact, they eat healthier overall when they are with my parents for a few days than they do when they are with us!

One explanation for this might be that we create a hierarchy among foods and make an issue of it. By depriving them of some foods, we make those foods more attractive and enticing for them and so they play the game along with us and naturally want those foods that are forbidden. However, when they are with my parents, food is food and they can have any food they want anytime. The result is that they end up eating a greater variety of foods and many of them are healthy. Some of the foods they eat there, they will not eat at home. We are slowly realizing this and are trying to implement change. Again, the operative word is trust and we are learning to let go and to trust in them more and more. And the more we trust them, the more they take responsibility in their own

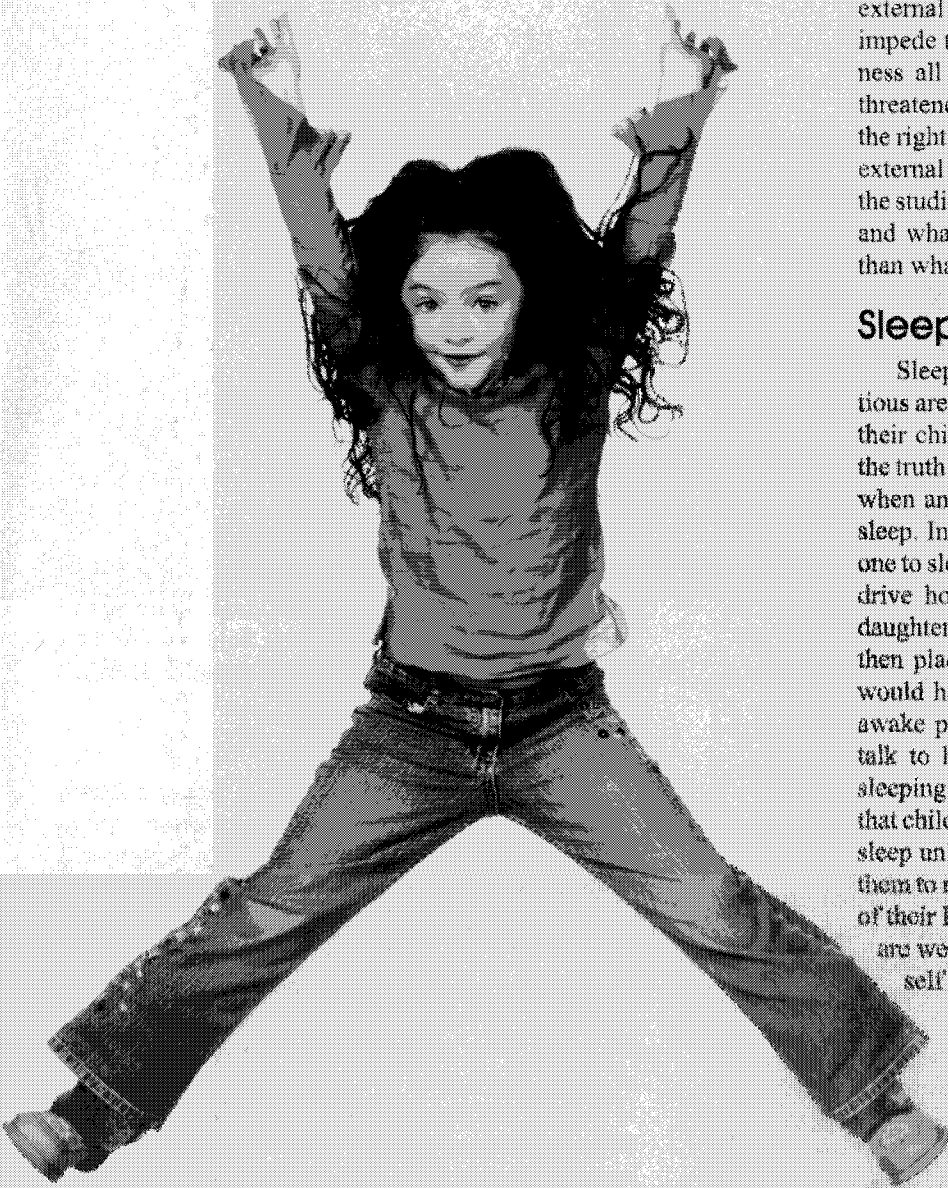


lives and the healthier they grow.

Few people thrive in oppressive and controlling environments. These types of environments, I believe, are ethically inexcusable. In addition, what does overly controlling what children eat do to their ability to listen to their own bodies – to their ability to decide what they need to eat, when they need to eat it, how much they need to eat? Is there a connection to our increasingly high obesity rate? In my mind, if children are not allowed to listen to their own bodies and are dependent on external cues to guide their eating habits, then it must impede their ability to rely on their inner guides. I witness all too often children strapped into their chairs, threatened and detained until they are force-fed all of the right amount and types of foods as determined by an external authority. When I watch this, I am reminded of the studies that consistently reveal how our portion sizes and what we believe they should be are much higher than what they should be.

Sleep

Sleeping is another hugely contestable and contentious area. I often hear parents say that if they do not put their children to sleep they would never sleep. Again, the truth appears to be that if we trust that they will sleep when and where they feel most comfortable, they will sleep. In fact, it would probably be easier to put someone to sleep than to try and keep them awake. Once, on a drive home, my wife and I tried to keep our eldest daughter awake for a few more minutes so that we could then place her in her bed at home, believing that she would have a sounder sleep there. Trying to keep her awake proved humorously impossible. After trying to talk to her and lightly nudging her, we learned that sleeping is not something children resist but something that children do. So why this belief that children will not sleep unless we force them to? And if we always force them to rather than allow them to – as with other aspects of their lives, what collateral unintended consequences are we creating with respect to children's agency and self empowerment?



“Parenting can be difficult, yet it is made easier when we trust that our children know what is best, rather than overparenting them.”

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