

"Every child is gifted. They just unwrap their packages at different times."
—Anonymous



Looking at a shelf of parenting books in the bookstore recently made me wonder how parents today decide how to raise their children. One could become *The Confident Parent* or listen to *The Secrets of the Baby Whisperer* while trying to remember that *Baby Knows Best*. But how do you know what's best? Is there a right or wrong?

For the first-time parent, it helps to have in place a basic philosophy about personal values, because the entrance of a child into a family is life-changing. Parents naturally become quickly devoted to the safety of their offspring and develop a strong desire to do the right thing. The learning curve is huge—no matter how many books we read!

Doing Our Best

We want to do what's best, in the best possible way, so that our child will be the best. But what does "the best" even mean? How does one measure *good*, *better*, or *best*? It's reassuring to know that your child is resilient, and that having your heart in the right place and your feet on the ground will make you a "good enough parent" as defined by pediatrician and psychologist D.W. Winnicott. *Good enough* parents do not strive to be perfect parents and do not expect perfection from their children.

My best might differ from your best, and the result may be the same or better or simply different. Can I ever be certain of the variables at play? How can I know that my approach is right for anyone other than myself and my child? How can I reconcile my beliefs with another's? My parenting style with my second child was very different from how I parented my first—is that because of me, my child, or both?

A Lifetime of Comparisons

How much does it matter if your child is the shortest or tallest in the classroom? Does it really matter if he reads at age four or six, so long as he learns to read and comprehend? We seem to compare constantly. Rarely does a parent turn a blind eye to what "the Jones' kid" is doing. It's easy to believe our parenting skills are at fault when our children are less than perfect, and we worry that our children will fall behind if we allow them to naturally progress without prodding.

Comparisons are regularly thrust upon parents and children alike. Be aware of the effects, both positive and negative. The pediatrician might say that your child is in the 89th percentile in height, but only in the 45th in weight at the well-baby check-up. You beam with pride at the first number. The second number, however, makes you question if you are feeding your baby adequately. Are those numbers significant if your child is healthy?

Loving and Respecting the Unique

Consider how our children differ from one another, and enable them to be individuals. This approach does not mean we are "hands-off" parents, but rather that we want our children to learn and grow at their own pace and develop their talents and personalities naturally. Dr. Montessori discovered that multi-age classes fit the needs of children so they can learn when they are ready, without pressure or comparisons. Every child is unique.

We need to let go of predicting future careers for our offspring. Not everyone needs to attend an ivy league school. Children naturally learn, grow, and develop when they're exposed to a relatively free and enriching environment, negating the need for tutors and special classes for preschool and elementary children. After-school programs need not offer more *enrichment*—they can simply be *fun*.

Let Children Be Children

Maria Montessori's philosophy by no means negates the importance of early childhood learning. Are we following our child's unique developmental path, or projecting our concerns about the present job market onto the unknown future? What we know for sure is that things will change and we want our children to be able to adapt. With this in mind, children must develop their unique strengths.

We can help by understanding basic child development markers. Young children learn through their senses and by moving and manipulating objects. More didactic, conscious learning begins around age three or four, and abstract thinking develops even later still. Just because your five-year-old really likes baseball or seems to have a good musical sense is no reason to train him now for a future career. Time will tell and your child will lead the way.

Let's slow down and let our children become themselves. In the process, we parents can just be who we are, too—parents who are learning as we go.

"A lot of parents will do anything for their kids except let them be themselves."

—Banksy, *anonymous street artist*

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