



## Effects of your own childhood on your parenting

“My 6-year old is disrespectful, cheeky and demanding”, “My 12-year old is ungrateful for all the support I give him”, “My 9-year old has terrible rages that I can’t control”, “My 10-year old becomes very wound up about little things”, “My teenager won’t do anything I ask and rejects me” – parents often ask us for advice about how to manage these and other parenting dilemmas. They have tried the strategies they know and, while some things work for a while, the problem remains.

The fact is that children don’t come with a manual. So how do we find ways to teach them how to manage themselves, contribute to a household, cope with disabilities, be thoughtful of others, or fulfill their potential? Most of the strategies we have in our “parenting toolbox” come from our own experiences of being parented, in our families of origin. It’s important for parents to think about their experiences of being parented. A parent can think about one thing they think their parents did well as parents, and one thing they think their parents did poorly. From this information they can get important clues to their own parenting style, and then think about alternative strategies and identify obstacles to parenting effectively.

Parents tend to either continue or avoid the patterns that their parents set up. So, a dad might talk about how his father worked such long hours that he didn’t attend many school sport events or take an active role in his sports interests, and how disappointing that was for him. As a result, he makes a particular effort to take an active interest in, and be present at, all of his son’s sporting activities. When we ask the son about his father’s involvement in his life, he complains that his dad is always on his back about practicing and taking part in competitions. What may be happening is that the dad is trying to ensure that his son doesn’t suffer from the neglect he suffered at the hands of his own father, and has ended up being overinvolved and pushy with his son. He doesn’t know where to draw the line between being involved and being intrusive – and how would he? He knows that he doesn’t want to be uninvolved like his father was, but he has no model of how to be an involved dad and, as a result, he tends to go to the other extreme. In another case, a dad talks about being severely physically punished when he was a boy and how this “didn’t do me any harm and taught me the rules”. This dad may perpetuate the cycle of physical abuse in the mistaken belief that it is the most effective way to socialize children. The fact is that he may have no other strategies in his “parenting toolbox”.

In another example, a mum tells us how she admired the way that her parents instilled strong family values in her, and recalls how her close-knit family supported each other when her mother died of cancer at a relatively young age. She remembers family times together in her family of origin, and therefore deems Saturday nights to be “family night” with no exceptions allowed. The family play games or watch a video with treat-type foods. She also likes to have the children accompany her to visit extended family on Sunday. When we ask her 13-year old son and 16-year old daughter about their family life, they complain that they aren’t allowed to socialize with their friends on Saturday nights or just “blob out” on Sundays. They have sporting and other commitments on Saturdays and feel resentful that they have little time to do what they want in the weekend. In this case, the mum is trying to ensure that her children have the same degree of family commitment that stood her family in good stead when they were in crisis. However, she only has one model

of how to do this – the model provided by her family of origin – and doesn't know how to adapt that model to the needs of her growing family who may never have to face the crisis she did. In another case, a mum describes her parents as overprotective, never allowing her to experiment with social or physical experiences. As a result, she pushes her children to try new experiences and encourages independence when they may not be mature enough to cope with these challenges.

Even when parents know about effective strategies, they may have considerable difficulty implementing them, finding conflict too distressing to tolerate long enough to be firm and consistent. Sometimes these parents report that there was either significant unresolved conflict in their family of origin or conflict was not allowed at all. Living with parents whose arguments are unresolved or who do not allow any argument or conflict to take place, makes children anxious about conflict. Since there has been no model of conflict being allowed and being resolved, there is considerable distress associated with conflict – it is feared, elicits intense negative reactions and a feeling of helplessness. These parents find it particularly difficult to manage conflict with their children. This may be because their own childhood distress and feelings of helplessness resurface when confronted with the intense emotions associated with a child who is having a tantrum or who is verbally or physically abusive. Often, these parents are unable to be firm, fair and consistent in their management strategies and either withdraw or give in, thereby avoiding the conflict and its painful emotions. Alternatively, they may become verbally or physically abusive themselves, producing a “fight” response to the perceived danger of a child out of control.

Alternatively, parents may struggle to implement effective strategies when they have experienced the same kinds of difficulties as their children are experiencing. For example, a parent who suffered learning difficulties or bullying will find it difficult to tolerate these problems in his child. His reactions may be to become angry (as he felt when he faced these issues as a child) or to overprotect his child (in an attempt to spare his child the distress he felt). Unfortunately, a child who is being bullied needs empathy and problem-solving rather than anger and overprotection.

To summarise, there are at least two problems that get in the way of effective parenting. One is the influences of our own parents and the models of parenting they gave us. We may slavishly adhere to those or reject them completely, leaving us without a flexible model to cope with our own families in the current era and circumstances. The second is the reactivation of our own childhood distress that prevents us from being able to stand back from our children's despair and provide a calm, firm, and unafraid container for their distress. The solution to these two problems is first to recognize the contribution of these influences in our parenting, and second to think out (or ask for ideas about) more flexible parenting strategies that take into account our own child's needs rather than our remembered needs as children. Understanding and managing our own reactions to our children's behavior makes us more effective parents.