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Media article:

Tools for good parenting –International Day of Families (15 May 2006)

Monday 15 May is International Day of Families. This United Nations initiative reflects increasing awareness of family issues worldwide. It recognises the importance of supporting families and of bringing about positive changes in the family unit and extended whanau, and of helping parents raise their children into healthy, well-adjusted, responsible and caring adults.

Having worked with many families over the last 25 years, I can fairly confidently say that most parents have the best interests of their children at heart and are trying to do the best job they can with the background and knowledge that they have. But few feel totally confident about their parenting, and many feel even less confident about asking for help and support.

Most of us parent in the way that we were parented - that's what we've learned. Unfortunately, some have adopted the attitudes of their parents, that the harsher the punishment, the better the child will turn out. Where did this strange idea grow from? Prisons full of violent offenders and the third highest rate of child deaths and abuse per population don't seem to be proving this theory right. Or we go to the other extreme, especially if we were harshly punished, and are overly lenient with our children, or put nothing in place at all, because we don't know any other strategies to use.

Shouldn't we then use this International Day of Families to reflect on our parenting and to think about the sort of parents we want to be and the sort of childhood memories we want to create for our children? Or how best we can support and encourage our neighbours', friends' and relatives' families?

Recent research tells us there are six key principles to raising happy, responsible and caring children and that you can apply those principles at any age. Naturally, it's far better to start at birth because the first five years of a child's life are the formative years when you are laying the foundations for your relationship with your child and for their future behaviour, attitudes, values and beliefs.

Firstly, children need lots of love and affection. If you form a close loving attachment with your children early, it makes difficult times so much easier to work through later on. Show them you love them. Cuddle them, spend time with them, tell them how special they are and let them be with you. Be positive towards them and notice when they are doing things well or behaving appropriately. Tell them "you've made a wonderful job of picking up those toys" or "you stroked the cat so gently, well done". These are the behaviours we tend to ignore in favour of pointing out what children have done wrong. Unless it's a dangerous or really inappropriate behaviour, just ignore it. We are trying to encourage the good and suppress the not so good here.

Secondly, listen to your child. They know so many of their own answers if only we would listen to them. Acknowledge what they say and listen to the feeling behind what they say. "You sound really sad that you broke Mummy's ornament when you fell onto it. Do you have any ideas about what we could do to put that right?" Talk to children and seek to understand how they feel about things. Communicate clearly. Tell them what you do want them to do, not what you don't want them to do. Building clear, open, honest communication will pay off in the future. Don't expect too much of children. If necessary get some information about development stages and understand why they have those 'no' phases. It's not to get the better of you that's for sure.

Remember you are the role model for your child. They will always learn more from watching your behaviours and responses than by what you tell them. We don't teach children not to hit or shout at others by hitting or shouting at them, when we are angry or frustrated. If you hit or yell at your children, they may stop doing the behaviour out of fear but no learning is internalised. They learn 'don't do it when Mum or Dad are around, or if you get caught lie, or you'll get hit'. It takes much less energy to teach children other ways of dealing with situations, so that they have choices the next time something goes 'wrong'.

Fourthly, children need limits and boundaries. Sit down and work out what those are and stick to them. Nothing makes a child more insecure than no rules but don't have rules for rules sake. You don't need too many -only enough to keep everyone safe and healthy, and teach respect for people and property.

Consistency and consequences come into the mix as well. It confuses children greatly when one day they can jump all over the furniture and the next day they get punished for it because you aren't in such a good mood. Tell children what will happen if they break the rules, so they have time to consider if that is the choice they want to make. Children need consequences for their wrongdoings, but consequences that are related to what they have done wrong and are applied in a respectful way, no shaming and blaming, no humiliating in front of others. Children will continue to respect you if you treat them with respect during this process.

Finally, think about how it is from their view of the world. Put yourself in their shoes for once. Of course they are tired and irritable when you have to shop at 9 pm at night, and of course they have tantrums when they only have the capacity to say 10 words when they really want to say "I'm thirsty and I have a sore head and I don't understand why my water bottle is empty". Could you get through the day using the same ten words to get all your needs met with no control over anything?

You now have the tools to make a difference to the community you live in. Go out and use them as a mark of respect for this International Day of Families.

ENDS

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