

Welcome Letter To Parenthood

Congratulations! You're a new parent. Welcome to the rest of your life. It's okay to be scared. To be a new parent is to take an icy plunge into a turbulent lake of unknown depth. You will quickly surface and tread water.

Becoming a new parent means turning your world upside down. Priorities must be reset: priorities of time, energy, resources. It may take months to rebalance work and home responsibilities.

Indeed, balance must become your new motto, your new striving. Being a good parent is like performing a high-wire act 365 days a year. Between work and home, spouse and kids, family and friends, activities and relaxation, if you can keep your balance more days than not, you're doing pretty well.

Being a good parent also means understanding the whole point of parenting: to guide your children toward independence. The goal is for them to stop needing you. That is the central task of growing up: to develop a sense of self that is autonomous, confident, and generally in accord with reality.

Childhood is like bowling, with parents the lane bumpers. The pins are named happiness, confidence, perseverance, respect, caution, honesty, decency, humility, responsibility, loyalty, and integrity. Success in adulthood results from knocking down many or all of these pins.

Success in parenthood results from keeping our children in the lane and out of the gutters.

The icing on our success as parents is raising an adult you really like. There is no one way to get there. The road from here to your child's adulthood is different from child to child and parent to parent. You don't need to be a perfect mother or father to raise a well-adjusted, independent, likable adult; you just need to be good enough. There is no mythical Good Mother or Good Father out there that you must always live up to, else failure.

Undoubtedly there will be times when you will over-parent, and times you will be overly permissive. Many times you will accuse your spouse – silently or otherwise – of doing one or the other. Many times you will doubt yourself, or each other. This is all normal.

Over-parenting has gotten way out of control in the past generation. While parenting used to mean preparing kids for adulthood, now it means providing our kids with things to do. Children today are more overscheduled than ever. So obsessed we've become with our kids' success that parenting has turned into a form of product development.

However, no scientific evidence exists suggesting that aggressive early learning and professional training creates gifted kids and shapes them into champions. It is almost comical the notion that if babies and children are exposed to enough stimulating edutainment products, taken to enough classes, enrolled in enough activities, their rooms adorned with enough lush playthings, bright children can be invented.

So what to be: a tiger mom or a helicopter parent? Neither. The trick of parenting is to find the sweet spot between permissive, hands-off parenting and controlling, hands-on-everything parenting. Day to day, success should be measured by how well you refrain from doing things for your children that they should be ready to do for themselves.

Failure is fruitful. No matter their age, we must allow our children to get it wrong so they'll work harder to get it right. These are known as "successful failures" – failures your child can live with and grow from. Whether it a toddler taking her first steps or a student taking his first test, you must be willing to let go. Might they fall, or fail? Yes, there is that risk. But if you don't fall, how do you learn to get (and grow) up?

Doing things for them may feel like love, but when you lighten up and let go, they'll fly higher.

Children thrive best in an environment that is reliable, consistent, and non-interfering unless asked. Be present, alert, and always available to guide if necessary. You are the wise volunteer at the museum who waits calmly to be asked, not the tour guide who rushes through the exhibit talking incessantly and not allowing time to meander and question.

The optimal parent is one who sets high expectations but respects her child's autonomy. It's okay to push for her good grades, and be present during her homework time. It's not okay to ghostwrite his essays, or airbrush his long division. It's okay to provide her with enrichment opportunities. It's not okay to smother her every waking moment with busyness.

Children need alone time. Boredom is indeed the mother of creativity and invention. And children who are not allowed to retreat into themselves once in a while are not being allowed to find out what, and who, is there.

Likewise, it is okay to let your child at times suffer feeling scared, sad, lonely, disappointed, and angry, so that they can learn that those feelings are transient, and not catastrophic.

Parents also have to make sure their own lives are fulfilling. One of the most important things we do for our children is to present them with a version of adult life that is appealing and worth striving for. Parents who seem to do the best are those who keep life the simplest.

Finally, it's not so much what you do as a parent – it's who you are, how you live, and love. It's not that you buy your children lots of books, but rather whether you pass on a work ethic and a love of learning. It's not that you express love by constantly monitoring your child's whereabouts and progress, but rather whether you work hard at maintaining positive relationships with your spouse and others, at making compromises and being honest and apologizing openly when mistakes are made.

Again, congratulations. You are entering upon a new beginning. What a glorious occasion. And what a great joy it is to join you on your new journey.

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August 2012