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Parenting with Wit and Wisdom

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

Speaking from more than 40 years' experience, Barbara Coloroso summed up an essential message: "Children need us to believe in them, to trust them, to hear and listen to them, and know that they are cared for."

Parenting is not a time-efficient enterprise, she warned at the outset of her presentation, "but all the time and energy you spend on your child is worth it –always." She stressed the value of having one-on-one time with children, especially to convey to the child, "You're worth my time."

Children need to be heard and to know you're listening. "When they talk, listen to them right then." Parents complain that they ask children about their day and receive only one-word answers. Coloroso said she didn't accept that. "Talk to me," she'd say to her teens, "I'm interested!" If they were still reluctant, she'd offer, "Let me tell you about my day!"

Offering Choices

Among the most valuable gifts parents can give to their children is a sense of agency, that is, faith in their own ability to make decisions for themselves and to take responsibility for their actions. Parents can do this by giving children choices in all areas of their lives from the earliest ages. In fact, this learning can begin as early as two years of age, with a question, "It's time for bed: do you want to wear the red pajamas or the blue pajamas?"

By giving children choices every day ("Here are three choices, which do you want?") and holding them accountable for those choices, parents demonstrate their trust and expectation that children know best what they want and can make sound choices. Over time, youngsters gain confidence in their decision-making ability and assume responsibility for the natural consequences of their actions. This self-confidence enables them to embrace new situations throughout their lives.

Moreover, Coloroso explained, this self-confidence enables youth to respond with compassion to others in need of support. "Your child can be the one to welcome the new student finding his way, or offer friendship to the classmate who doesn't fit it," she said.

Three Styles of Parenting

Coloroso described different approaches to parenting and their impact on children's development of self-reliance.

Brick Wall parents display an inflexible and judgmental approach to their children, often employing punishment to correct negative behavior rather than allowing children to experience the natural repercussions.

Jellyfish parents rush to do too much for their children and "rescue" them from the consequences of their actions. This approach compromises the development of children's ability to make their own choices and undermines self-reliance.

Backbone parents trust their children to make their own age-appropriate decisions, to make mistakes, and accept responsibility for them. This in turn helps children learn to trust in themselves. This approach, however,

is not “hands off.” “Let your children know that you encourage them to handle the situation, but are right there to help if needed.”

Indeed, it’s important that children know they can seek help with any problem they feel they can’t handle. “You can come to me with anything--good, bad, or ugly,” she advises parents to say. When a major problem arises, let children know, “We can do this together.”

At the end of the day, Coloroso concluded, “No matter how loving and caring you are, you cannot control your child. Each is his/her own life looking to find itself.”