

A PUBLICATION OF
The Center for Child Development and Learning
**Jewish Board of Family
and Children's Services**

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thinking children

A NEWSLETTER OF THE **Learning Resource Network**

The Paradox of Attachment

Despite periodic attempts to construct a science of parenting, I think that most of us would agree that parenting is much more an art form than a compendium of scientific research. While we certainly learn from the wisdom of others, from books and articles and from our personal mentors and role models, we all know that there are few answers that fit all children — or that fit all of us as parents. In the end we rely upon our “*parental instinct*,” even if we can’t define it, for both the decisions we make and the worries we have about our children.

There are moments — hopefully, many — when we trust ourselves to understand the “unexpected” in our children and to respond in appropriate ways, but there are also those moments where we find ourselves confused. How should I understand *this* new wrinkle? Should I look for a “correct” answer or should I allow things to unfold a bit? Just how concerned should I be?

In the last issue of *Thinking Children*, we focused on the importance of allowing our children to struggle with the various issues of their lives — a concept that we call *Optimal Struggle*. We probably all understand — intellectually — the need to help our children struggle. And, most of the time, we probably communicate a very appropriate balance between “being there” for them and letting them cope on their own. Communicating to our children that we have faith in their ability to thrive, that we are “there” for them but that they can make choices and decisions on their own should be among our primary goals as parents; however, there are times when we worry that our children are “in trouble” and we can momentarily lose this perspective. It is interesting to consider that what causes us to lose our perspective at such moments is the very thing that makes us so invaluable in our children’s lives and what makes them so precious to us.

It is the power of our attachment to our children that gives us both the self-confidence to feel clear about ourselves as parents, and creates within us those confusing and anxious moments. Our relationship to our children is our single greatest gift to them. Ironically, the *best* of our qualities as parents is also the strongest catalyst for anxiety. This is the paradox of attachment: while it is essential to healthy development it can also get in the way. We care so much, we love so much, we want so much for our children to be happy ... and when something goes wrong, we suffer as much, or more, than our children.

If you have read our newsletter over the past year, you know that we believe in a process of thinking and asking questions rather than jumping to conclusions as to whether something is serious or not. The strengths and vulnerabilities of your child, and the way s/he integrates and internalizes the various situations in life, are the important issues to understand before you can figure out how they can be addressed.

For over 100 years, the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services, Inc. has been at the forefront of providing help and support to New Yorkers in need through a wide range of child and family programs. The Learning Resource Network is one such program, offering consultation and support services to assist parents concerned with child development and learning issues.

If you have any questions or concerns about your child, please feel free to contact us:

Phone: (212) 632-4499
Fax: (212) 584-8484
Email: LRN@JBFCS.ORG

The Paradox of Attachment

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“Our 4 year old daughter Melanie is having bedtime problems. She wants the light on, wants us to rub her back and fall asleep with her. I know it’s not the right thing to do, but if it makes it easier for her to fall asleep....”

“Our 8 year old son Jason has become very clingy. He doesn’t want to go on sleepovers, would rather just stay and play video games — and doesn’t like it at all when we want to go out on Saturday night. Maybe he needs us around more....”

“Our 12 year old daughter Nicole had a best friend until yesterday when her best friend got a new best friend. She’s HYSTERICAL. Maybe I should call her friend’s mother. I’m sure she would be as upset as I am....”

“Our 16 year old high school junior son David is getting Cs in all his classes, quite a surprise given the fact that he’s been in the honor society since 7th grade. I’m not a pushy or anxious mother, but what’s going to happen with college? I better get him a tutor quick....”

All these vignettes have a common theme: *When to intervene*. We worry about our children and we want to protect them. We want to make sure that we are doing our best to keep them safe. Without doubt, our children are very lucky to have us as involved as we are, and that their development is enriched by our protectiveness.

There is a moment, however, when the definition of *protection* becomes somewhat more complicated. *Protection* and *letting go* can be thought of as complementary concepts of parenting. The balanced relationship between the two fosters the development of responsibility and resilience in our children. If, in our protectiveness, we simultaneously communicate our faith in our children’s ability to master difficult moments, we are teaching them the pleasure of protection and the pleasure of mastery. The paradox of attachment is that it contains its opposite: *sensing when to step back and let go*. And, certainly, there are many different ways of dealing with every situation — and, as we try to teach our children the value of developing their ability to make good choices, we also must be kind to ourselves when we are struggling with a “what to do” moment.

We each have different histories and memories of difficult times. We can allow our children to struggle if we are comfortable with our own struggle, with our ability to trust ourselves, and feel secure in our thinking. This gives us the courage to face the unknown and unpredictable in the experience of parenting.



— MARSHA WINOKUR, PH.D.

THE PARADOX OF ATTACHMENT

Questions to Ask

As you confront your child’s struggles, you might find the following questions helpful...

“Am I the only one worried?”

There are many different people who know and care about your child. If you are the only one worried, why might that be?

“Do I fully understand the whole story?”

Are there parts that are confusing? How can you fill in the missing pieces?

“Do I have a sense of my child’s role in this situation?”

You know your child’s style better than anyone else. What in his or her character might be contributing to the problem?

“Has my child had similar difficulties in the past?”

Many problems repeat themselves, sometimes in different forms. Is there something you can learn from previous experiences?

“Is there a way I can help resolve this?”

Talking things through with others can be helpful. Are the “others” open to conversation?

“Can I learn something from this experience?”

There are lots of different ways of responding to situations. What will you take from this experience to help the next time?

Optimal Struggle for Parents

The concept of Optimal Struggle that was introduced in the last issue of *Thinking Children* was meant to describe a middle range in a child's experience of development. It is a range that can be found between the extremes of insurmountable difficulty on the one hand and an ideal conflict-free adjustment on the other. Our point was that normal everyday developmental change occurs within this range. Parents are advised to not expect an absence of struggle nor should they view all struggles as signs of a breakdown in healthy development.

“Children don't move from the dependency of infancy to the relative autonomy of adulthood in a straight line of growth, but rather in a stepwise process.”

In this issue we would like to expand the concept of Optimal Struggle to include the idea of different sorts of struggles at different times in a child's life. While all part of the overall process of maturation, there are different themes and qualities to the struggles of a three year old than to that of a thirteen year old, or to that of an eighteen year old. This presents an added challenge to parents for which they are not always prepared. It is not enough to be attuned to a particular child's need for help vs. need for independence as we wrote about last time. A parent is also called upon to adjust that perception to the changing stages of development.

Psychologists have long been familiar with the notion that children go through a number of discreet stages in their development. Children don't move from the dependency of infancy to the relative autonomy of adulthood in a straight line of growth but rather in a stepwise process. The classic elaboration of this idea was presented nearly fifty years ago by Erik Erikson in his engaging and influential book *Childhood and Society*. Erikson posited eight distinct stages in the passage from infancy to adulthood. In addition, he suggested that each stage had its own particular struggle. Our concept of Optimal Struggle owes a profound debt to the work of Erikson.

As Erikson first described it, one of the child's first struggles in infancy is to develop a basic trust of the world. The infant swings between feelings of com-

plete security and moments of utter fear. This is an entirely normal range of experience. No efforts by parents, no matter how attentive, can protect an infant from such moments of panic nor should parents feel that they must. In fact as upsetting as it may be in the moment for an infant to feel a sense of danger and insecurity, in the long run it is beneficial to development to discover that such moments can be endured, provided the parent remains physically and emotionally available and that the moments are within tolerable limits: the limits of optimal struggle.

The struggle changes after several years, and the school-aged child who has more or less developed this basic trust and can endure transitory feelings of fear and insecurity is then concerned instead with a different struggle. It is no longer a struggle about survival itself but rather one concerned with learning about the world and mastering the skills of society. The struggle of the school-aged child is between a sense of mastery and a sense of inadequacy. Once again no child can escape moments of inadequacy and it would be wrong to try to over-protect a child from such moments. The optimal balance allows a child to develop the necessary resilience to work through such feelings and persevere in difficult tasks.

The stage of life just before puberty is one that has recently attracted a great deal of attention. Traditionally, the years from about six to twelve had been referred to by developmental psychologists overall as the “middle years” of childhood, or “latency” in the psychoanalytic vocabulary. However, it has become clear that the later part of this period, from around age ten, often has a character of its own, different enough from the earlier few years to be looked at as a discreet stage. This has been further affected by the practice of starting middle school at grade six rather than seven, thus further delineating the “middle school years” as a distinct time of life. The “middle school years” are marked by a particular conflict that has ramifications in both the cognitive and the social areas of development. It is a conflict that comes from

Optimal Struggle for Parents

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the fact that children at this age start to focus on aspects of their future development that they are not yet physically or emotionally ready to engage in. It is a period of particularly acute anticipation of later developments. Not yet dealing with the real physical and hormonal changes of puberty, children during this time try to imagine themselves there and inevitably come up short. We might phrase this as a struggle of “wanting to be” vs. “giving up on ever getting there.” Sometimes demanding access to the activities of older children while at other times clinging to the play of their younger years, the child in the midst of this struggle is often a difficult figure for parents to grasp.

As noted each of these stage-related struggles is part of the overall developmental process of becoming a relatively stable and independent member of society. There is thus much continuity among them. They all involve struggles between security and insecurity or, to put it in a different way, between adequacy and inadequacy. It is the form and focus of this conflict that changes over time. When teenagers enter puber-

ty and their sense of adequacy includes their sexuality, the question of mastery that they struggled with several years before returns but with a new focus.

It is helpful for parents to recognize that working through an earlier stage of struggle does not immunize a child from confronting developmental conflict again in the next phase of life. New struggles will inevitably appear in times of new transitions. It is heartening to know, however, that working through one stage successfully helps a child when confronting the next one. Once again, learning that struggle can be endured, tolerated, and to some extent resolved is the important lesson carried throughout the developmental process.

Coming to view parenting as a periodic readjustment to the stages of a child's struggles is a way to internalize and apply these ideas. Parents who view the process this way are less likely to be caught off guard when the next conflict appears, which in the normal scheme of things, it inevitably will.



— DAVID LICHTENSTEIN, PH.D.

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CHILDREN: Questions Anyone?

After reading this issue of *Thinking Children*, we thought that you might have some questions or thoughts.

Whether you are concerned about your struggling child, or perhaps your own struggles arising from being a parent, we invite you to call us.

We are dedicating four hours from 1pm – 5pm to answer questions specifically geared towards these issues. On Wednesday, March 2nd, all of our psychologists will be answering questions via phone or email.

Here's how to contact them:

Phone: (212) 632-4499 or (212) 582-9100, ext. 5804

Email: LRN@jbfcs.org

The Meanest Mom

“... when you are told by an impassioned child that your own inclination is contrary to that of ‘everyone else’s parents,’ you can feel plain lousy.”

It is a given that parents want to make the best decisions for their children. As a parent — and as a child psychologist — I know this common wisdom to be true. But, not only is it hard sometimes to judge which decision in a given instance will lead to the best long-term outcome; it is also very hard sometimes not to go with the easiest decision at the moment, even tougher if you are an only parent. And when you are told by an impassioned child that your own inclination is contrary to that of “everyone else’s parents,” you can feel plain lousy. If you have never been called the meanest mom or the strictest parent of all, then it is likely that you are in for this treat at some point. It’s a tough job to buck the peer pressure of your kids’ friends’ parents, but many of us do it. I probably volunteered for that job more often than some parents did and likely, more often than was necessary. Three instances of having sat in that hot seat come to mind, and they are all probably typical of what has gone on and will go on in homes all over town.

First, I want to say that I was never an extremely strict parent. My kids watched plenty of television, for example, and I rarely even looked at their homework unless I was asked. But I have ideas about kids’ wanting and having and getting — both in the realm of things and privileges — and I like to think that I remain true to my values in the face of pressure. When my son was in elementary school, Nintendo games were a new rage. Everyone had one and of course my son had one too. He and his friends played with those things night and day. When they weren’t actually playing with them, they were talking about them. Then, all of a sudden, Super Nintendo, the next big thing, came along, and the original was no good. My son’s friends’ parents agreed with me that the new ones were a waste of money, and that we would draw the line at not buying them in spite of the pressure that our boys put on us. We would model resistance to the power of heavy marketing; we would demonstrate financial restraint. You guessed it: One by one, my

peers gave in to their sons and my son, the little capitalist, capitalized on that. I was a mean, depriving mother.

In middle school, the right to travel alone was an issue of overriding importance. It represented, of course, a big step toward independence. For city kids, as mine were, there are choices in manner of travel. There is walking, there’s public transportation, there are taxis and private cars.

For young adolescents, though, there are only two choices: with you or without you. On this issue, unlike the Nintendo, they were bound eventually to break me in, but as before, I was not the first parent to let go and therefore was the Meanest for a time. It started gradually, with leaving my daughter (the older child, and therefore the one who had to work harder at training the parents) at the corner and peeking to watch her walk the remaining block to school alone. It probably culminated some years later with giving her cab fare for use in traveling home late from parties. I quietly suspected that she kept the money and used the subway. No one else’s parents, it seemed, felt the need to protect their kids from the scary city as long as I did.

Bigger kids, bigger worries. In high school, a frequent source of conflict in my home was the issue of attending parties in other homes with no adults present. To an adolescent there is hardly anything more ghastly than having your parent call another parent to ask if any adult will be present during the party. No, there is actually something more ghastly, and that is, forbidding your youngster to attend a party if the other parent says something such as, “We’ll be at a movie theater nearby. It’s not a long movie.” Or, “My other son, a senior, and his girlfriend, will be here.” That old trust versus mistrust issue is often thrown on the table over the question of unsupervised parties. It is painful to be told, “Why don’t you trust me? Everyone else’s parents trust their kids!”

The Meanest Mom

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The problem is, there is no one right answer in any of these common situations. Each parent or set of parents needs to struggle with such decisions. Sometimes safety is an issue as well as principle, but I believe there is always an underlying principle for parents vis á vis their kids, such as how to spend money, when to travel in a group, or how to refuse an unwanted offer. When talk with our kids is deadlocked, it is useful to talk to other parents and the school. Even then, though, we don't all agree. Sometimes, we just have to make the choice to be "mean" and to stick with it.

Or not. I think it's important to be flexible, to model flexibility when you can, and most important, to pick your fights. Fifteen years later I'm wondering if being the only kid without Super Nintendo had a negative impact on my son. When asked, he shrugged his shoulders. He doesn't remember anything about it. My daughter, it turns out, knew I was peeking around the corner, and laughed at me. When it came to un-chaperoned parties, they both remember their discomfort and agree that I was stricter than many other parents. But, they admit that sometimes my refusal to let them go helped them save face by not having to refuse a difficult situation themselves. Go figure.



— LESLEY KOEGEL, PSY.D.

THINKING CHILDREN

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