

PARENTING

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When parents allow children to learn from their mistakes rather than try to fix things for youngsters, they help to build a ...

Sense of Security



Sandra Sunquist Stanton

Editor's note: Occasional columns on Dr. Brain's Basic Eight, which are things that every brain needs, will appear on the Parenting pages. Dr. Brain is a character created by the Eau Claire County B.R.A.I.N. Team. The writer, Sandra Sunquist Stanton, is a team member and a former counselor at Eau Claire and Osseo-Fairchild schools.



Amy Harmer of Eau Claire, with son Jacob Mithuen, 4, threw a ball to her other son, Josh Mithuen, 2, and the boys' father, John Mithuen of Eau Claire, during a Music and the Brain program at the Family Resource Center for Eau Claire County. Children flourish when parents show they are responsive to their needs.

Now what? We have waited and planned for this new baby in our arms, but what do we do next?

Even a toaster comes with an instruction manual, but where is the really important one we need now?

Parents work hard to provide a safe place for children, but security means much more than shelter, clothing and proper nutrition.

I recall telling my daughters, "You can't spoil a baby," when I wanted to hold my newborn grandchildren. It is true.

When parents respond to babies' cries by meeting their needs, babies learn that the world is a safe place. They begin to feel some sense of control over discomfort. When their cries repeatedly are ignored, some babies learn to stop trying. Daniel Goleman explains early emotional development in his book, "Emotional Intelligence" (Bantam): "Critical experiences include how dependable and responsive to the child's needs parents are, the opportunities and guidance a child has in learning to handle her own distress and control impulse, and practice in empathy."

"One of the most essential emotional lessons, first learned in infancy and refined throughout childhood, is how to soothe oneself when upset," he says. "For very young infants, soothing comes from caretakers: a mother hears her infant crying, picks him up, holds and rocks him until he calms down. This ... helps the child begin to learn how to do the same for himself."

Children need rules

Children flourish when parents say what they mean, mean what they say and aren't mean when they say it. Security for many children means they understand the rules, parents consistently enforce them, and they know that they are loved no matter what happens.

They learn to count on the same people, places and familiar things to support them as they grow.

Ruth Wallace of Eau Claire understands children's need for security. The Eau Claire Interfaith Hospitality Network took shape in 1995 as a result of her vision and coordination.

Operation Classmate is a recent expression of her passion for children and their needs. Eau Claire County students responded with caring and generosity to children affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Ruth and her husband, John, accompanied the semitrailer loaded with donated items and \$65,000 that went to Louisiana's Rapides Parish School District, the Diocese of Alexandria, Catholic Mission Schools and the American Red Cross of Central Louisiana.

Wallace shared her understanding of childhood security: "Upon birth, a child learns to trust the environment and the people in it based upon a gradual, nurturing exposure to new experiences while old patterns are maintained."

Sometimes, a twist of fate can destroy a child's adjustment, she said. "Children then reach out for a source of stability. This need for security leads homeless children to clutch a treasured teddy bear or blanket to armor themselves with the familiar in the fight against fear and uncertainty."

Operation Classmate was based upon this understanding of children's needs. The hurricanes caused Gulf Coast children to be removed abruptly from their homes and way of life and to follow their caregivers to unknown places filled with unknown faces.

"The campaign provided materials the families needed to regain their dignity and resources for preparing children to transition back to school," Wallace said.

"Small yet precious gifts carried the fingerprints of the Wisconsin students who, though miles away, could feel the pain of their peers," she said.

"Perhaps the most moving of all contributions were the messages written by Eau Claire County students. Through their words of compassion, hope and encouragement, they stretched their hands out across the nation to hold those of so many children in need."

The nation responded to Louisianans' physical needs, but Operation Classmate helped restore children's emotional security.

Memories and emotions

The mechanics of the brain may help us understand how this process works. Memories and emotions are the building blocks of security, as they take shape within the brain's limbic system.

The emotional tag attached to each memory acts like a gateway, warning us to steer clear of dangerous experiences.

Revisiting a situation sometimes floods us with feeling even before we recall the specific experience that created the strong positive or negative emotion.

We know how we felt when something similar happened earlier. Our reaction is automatic.

Most things pass through our brains without conscious reaction.

We return to the things that made us feel good, and turn away from the ones that left us uncomfortable.

Trying new things can be scary, and making mistakes can be worse. When children feel safe, they are free to explore and make mistakes.

Parents can help children learn from their mistakes by talking together about what happened, how it worked for them and how other choices may have worked better.

All children want to be good and do their best, even if that doesn't always seem to be true, says Ruth Sidney Charney in the book "Teaching Children to Care" (Northeast Foundation for Children).

Books on child development can help us understand behaviors that fit children's maturity levels and avoid frustrating children.

Laughing at our foibles shows children that mistakes aren't final or fatal. Scolding children for making mistakes teaches them not to trust themselves and builds fear of trying. Extra effort and patience turn mistakes into learning experiences.

It's always a good idea to spark children's experiences with fun and laughter, especially when something might be challenging or not motivating.

Building confidence

Well-meaning parents want to make life less difficult for both their children and themselves.

"Helicopter parents" who hover and fix children's struggles may not realize they only are postponing the lessons their children need to learn.

Allowing children to think for themselves and learn to deal with consequences of choices provides growth opportunities.

Nothing builds confidence like tackling something that seems impossible, especially when we succeed. Learning to tie shoes, read or ride a bike are examples of confidence-building triumphs.

Even if success isn't part of the outcome, the struggle itself is a gift we need to give children. It's easier for them to learn from their mistakes than from someone else's tales.

Kids' behavior messages

Young children constantly "tell" us what they need through their behavior. Tuning in to "hear" their messages goes deeper than listening to words, especially before they learn to use language.

Children need to sense that they can control some things that happen. For example, they may "hide" under blankets believing they made themselves invisible.

They also need to know parents are in charge. Pushing parents with misbehavior is often their way of finding out limits.

T. Berry Brazelton says in "Touchpoints: The Essential Reference: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development" (Addison Wesley) that self-discipline comes from trying out limits by exploration, teasing to evoke from others a clear sense of what is okay and what isn't, and internalizing these previously unknown boundaries.

Adults concerned about children's behavior often say, "She's just looking for attention." Yes, she is looking for attention because she needs it to learn.

Our attention is an effective tool we can use to teach children that they are important to us, and that they can be successful.

Reading List

Here are recommended books on child development:

■ Daniel Goleman's "Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ" (Bantam).

■ T. Berry Brazelton's "Touchpoints: The Essential Reference: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development" (Addison Wesley).

■ Chip Wood's "Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom" (Northeast Foundation for Children).

■ Ruth Sidney Charney's "Teaching Children to Care: Management in the Responsive Classroom" (Northeast Foundation for Children).

Helping Kids

Dr. Tim Robertson, a Luther-Midelfort Child psychiatrist, suggests for parents these ways to attend to children and reduce negative attention-seeking behavior:

■ Regularly spend time with your children doing things that they enjoy.

■ Involve them in active problem solving when problems arise.

■ Empathize with their feelings and perspectives.

■ Understand their unique temperaments.

■ Interact with them at their skill and knowledge level.

■ Have reasonable rules and limits.

■ Supervise them at an age-appropriate level.

— Sandra Sunquist Stanton



Presentations and publications to help schools, businesses, families, and churches support our brains.

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