

HELP CHILDREN; HELP THE WORLD

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<http://www.freedomfromform.org/helpchildren.pdf>

Introduction

Our time on earth is temporary, and most people - well-meaning people - would like to see things improve. We all want to have a legacy, and if we can do our part to contribute to the future, we truly will have led good lives.

To achieve this goal, probably the most important thing that you can do in your life is to help children. However, and although it is of course extremely laudatory, and which you should definitely pursue, I do not mean helping individual children who face difficult life circumstances: who suffer poverty, or live in war zones. Rather, I'm driving at something else. You should help children, to feel good about themselves.

There are many, many people who act poorly, if not with outright evil, but one thing that they all share is deep inside they do not feel good about themselves. Even people who have prospered fantastically from their wrongs, who rule countries and have unimaginable bank accounts, understand only too well, when they lie awake at night, that they are shit. Every living human, outside of the clinically mentally deranged, has a conscience and knows right from wrong.

When children, and then adults, suffer from poor self-esteem, they project. They think, I'm not a good person. This is my identity: to do wrong. I'm not good, so there's no point even to try. I'm one of the bad people, so to hell with it, I refuse to control what I do. If I want something, and the only - or quickest - way to get it is to do wrong, then so be it.

Most if not all of the real criminals around the world learned to think poorly of themselves as children, which identity they now act out. This is well documented with the victims of child-abuse, who regularly become abusers themselves, but it extends much more broadly. Political, religious and economic tyrants all share this past.

On the other hand, children who have a positive self-view avoid doing wrong, because it conflicts with who they are.

Good how?

If we want children to feel good about themselves, we have to define what we mean by good. In modern society, children are inundated with messages that they are good if they are pretty, or rich (meaning that they have rich parents), or smart, or athletic. What underlies all of these is the idea

of competition - that life is a competitive game - and that to feel good about yourself you have to win.

This simple influence, more than anything else, guarantees that most children will not feel good about themselves. Under society's rules, there will always be many more "losers" than winners. Indeed, you have already lost if your parents are poor, or you have pimples, or an average IQ or musculoskeletal structure. Life under this design is "determined" if you do not have the correct advantages, since as a child there is little that you can do about it.

This is in fact the world - the society - that we inhabit. For example, in America it used to be straightforward not only to migrate around the country, but through hard work and saving to enter a higher economic class. Now, though, class mobility - not to mention the ease of relocation, is greatly reduced. Correspondingly, wealth inequality is broaching new and unprecedented levels.

It's not winning

The way to help children feel good about themselves is not through teaching them that winning is everything, including - and most parents will find this odd - through doing whatever you can to see that they win. Such parents are only raising the next generation of hustlers, who down deep will be unhappy with themselves and their lives, including notably through an inability to attract a loving partner.

Instead, children need to be taught one simple thing: that their real personally selfish goal, and in a sense it's not even truly selfish, is to develop themselves, not as a tool of competition, but to be everything that they can be. In effect this is teaching children to compete with themselves, but what it actually reflects is self-cooperation. When you work hard to expand yourself this is not a form of competition. Instead, you are working to understand your limits, and then within those limits to find a way to make them grow, if not - for real personal discovery - to break free and accomplish a complete redefinition. Further, as your ability to cooperate with yourself increases, this will also enhance your sensitivity - and ability - to cooperate with others.

The value of work

An embedded and extraordinarily harmful value in society is that "work" is unpleasant and something that we should try to avoid. Work, including education, is a necessary evil. There is no good reason to go out of your way to do a good job, or to learn, other than that if you don't you might be fired, or fail.

This holds in all cases with one exception: working to defeat someone else. Working hard to win over others is glorified.

Our society, therefore, is predicated on the idea that to develop yourself is a negative. And, since most children unknowingly follow society's values, including at the behest of their parents, they end up not advancing themselves, certainly anywhere near their full potential, with the consequence that they feel poorly about their lives. They recognize that they have missed out, and that life - for them - is not everything that it could be. This leads to resentment - a negative emotion, which in turn triggers all manner of destructive thoughts and actions.

Work, in a broad sense, is in fact the most valuable thing that you can do. While it does take some effort, and adult prodding, to develop good work habits as a child, the rewards are essentially limitless. When you work, and learn, you grow. There is no more satisfying feeling - other than from directly helping others, than by doing, or thinking, something new.

Be a teacher

This brings us full circle to the question of how you can help children feel good about themselves. The answer is to help them learn, starting with the fact that learning itself is not only rewarding, it's fun. Like anything that is worthwhile, this is an acquired mindset, and the younger children establish it, the sooner they will come to think of themselves, and other people, and life, in a positive way.

In practical terms, there are four separate life challenges that you want to help children approach in a purposeful, disciplined fashion. These are physical challenges; ethical; emotional; and intellectual.

For the first, it is possible for children to offset not having Olympian genes. As a friend who was a special forces soldier once told me, probably half of the successful special ops aspirants made it not through innate advantages but rather a determination to succeed. If you refuse to give up, you too can do almost anything. All it takes is work, and time.

Physical skills

The basic physical challenge is to be fit, and healthy, to do anything that you want in life. In the first instance, then, children need a good physical education, beginning as early as possible. Infants should be encouraged to walk as soon as they are able, and then to walk for longer and longer stretches. This very first learning process (along with language) teaches the child that he or she can grow. Moreover, if it is coupled with positive parental reinforcement, this demonstrates to the infant that learning itself is fun.

Young children should then be encouraged to run, and to develop better coordination and physical strength. One of the best feelings that anyone can have is to feel physically strong. With the right introduction, any child can be helped to be strong, starting by learning that they are able.

Indeed, children should be exposed to a wide variety of physical activities - different sports, and also dexterity challenges such as arts and crafts - at an early age, certainly starting by five (if not three or four). This way their growing brains and bodies will register the different physical and coordination tasks with which people are faced, and put them on the fast track to learning them.

You should further encourage your children to be active with you, to help you do or make things. In the process, you can instill in them the idea that they personally can be creative.

Finally, their efforts, and your positive reinforcement, should of course be supplemented with a nutritious diet. A healthy body needs good food. This is an excellent time to teach the benefits of hydration, fruits and vegetables, and protein supplements. It is also a good time to introduce the negative mental and physical consequences of tobacco, alcohol, and “recreational” drugs.

Ethical knowledge

For ethics, the basic challenge is to be good, including learning to evaluate in a given situation “what” is good. Children need to be taught that they can make a positive contribution, and that they should avoid causing problems. They can help cure the world’s ills, not add to them.

They therefore should be introduced to the idea of ethics as early as possible, and this begins with explaining - and demonstrating - that actions have consequences, and that there is a difference between right and wrong. Ethics are also learned behavior. Everyone learns them from social conditioning, even if they don’t follow them - also perhaps due to such conditioning. By the time we are adults they constitute a complex set of rules, guidelines, and associated incentives. However, this is where it begins, with the idea that what you do effects the world, and yourself; and, that you want to have a good impact. Children need to learn to think about the consequences of their behavior carefully, before they decide what to do.

If children are taught like this, they will want to be good. Further, they will develop the problem solving skills that they need to accomplish it. Consequently, their personal impact will be positive, and through all of this they will feel better about themselves.

A related ethical starting point is for a child to develop his or her sensitivity. As we just saw, to know that something is right or wrong you have to understand its impact. Ultimately, of course, ethics derive from a set of principles - you can determine what is right in a given situation just by thinking about it. But for children, ethics are most easily demonstrated by considering the consequences. If you do something, how will it effect others - other people, and also the natural world? And, how will these others feel about it?

Concentrating on the issue of sensitivity will also make it easy to explain to children why they should treat others with respect, including through having good manners.

Even more, learning what other people, and beings, think and feel, takes the focus off them. They will begin to grasp that they are not the only people in the world, and that they will not always get what they want. There are other people, and species, and they want things, too. Sometimes you will get what you want; other times you won't; and still other times there will be a compromise.

Finally, while there are many, many different ethical principles that you should pass onto children, two basic ideas are worth a mention here. You should teach children that they should do everything they can to reduce their personal impact on the natural environment; and, that they should evaluate people on the basis of their individual behavior, and never prejudge them because of characteristics which are innate.

Ethics can become amazingly complicated, reflecting our incredibly complex modern world. But, when teaching children these are the fundamentals. With this type of grounding, any child should be able to learn to make good behavioral choices, no matter their situations and challenges. And, knowing that they are good will give them a valuable psychological defense for those times when their circumstances, either personal or family, are difficult.

Emotional stability

The next life challenge deals with emotions. Put simply, we want to be happy. Related to this, we need to have a stable mental balance. Every single person alive - even the wealthy and powerful - has to deal with pain and suffering. We all need to be able to handle these circumstances, including rejection, injury and illness, and the death of loved ones, without breaking down.

Children need to be helped to develop their own mental strength and resilience. Fortunately, we appear to be hard wired for this. Kids, even in terrible circumstances, such as refugee camps, seem to have no problems - if there is no immediate danger - having fun and being happy.

With good adult guidance, this inherent ability is easily reinforced. Pretty much everything in life requires self discipline - the aforementioned desire to work hard. We need to teach children that an associated skill or attribute is mental discipline and emotional control. Using positive reinforcement, children should be encouraged to control their strongest emotions and most wayward thoughts. They should be taught that if they don't get something that they want, or if someone doesn't like them, they should not become uncontrollably angry, or driven to tears. Moreover, they should be taught to become sensitive to their own thoughts, starting with introducing them to the idea of their stream of consciousness. In difficult circumstances, everyone can fall prey to hateful if not violent ideas. One of our most important emotional skills is learning to recognize these thoughts when they occur, and then to cut them off with mental discipline. This is yet one more skill to which even very young children can be introduced.

You should further encourage children to live by the following adage, when they are facing the hard times of life, and which again I learned from a special forces soldier.

Tough! Deal with it! Adapt and overcome.

And, if they are about to get hit, that they need to brace for impact.

And finally, if they are in a fight - of any type - that they should prepare their block, and counterattack.

With all of this emotional education and skills-building underway, most if not all children should have few problems developing into happy and well-balanced individuals. Having good self control, and a strong and positive self-view, will be inevitable.

Mental achievement

The last challenge of life may be termed intellectual, although it has many dimensions. Fundamentally, this begins with learning about, and trying to understand, the experience of life itself. Life is sometimes full of pain, and fear, and suffering and uncertainty. For instance, for the last we don't understand what happened when we were born, nor what happens when we die. We don't have any basic knowledge of the universe, meaning how and why it came into existence. We don't know if there is a god, responsible for the universe, and if we are playing a part in some grand, universal plan. At an essential level, it is even possible that we don't "know" anything.

The fact that our unknowns are so profound can be overwhelming. This basic condition of being alive on its own can lead to great mental distress.

Children need to be introduced to this uncertainty, again at an early age. But, the introduction should be coupled with the thought that while perhaps we cannot know anything, we certainly can - and should - try to understand. Probably our greatest challenge in life is to understand it, and make peace with it. Children should be encouraged to devote themselves to understanding life and the universe, first, because of the benefits - including to self-esteem - that they will gain from the effort; and secondly, from the spiritual peace that the quest for meaning yields, which on its own will also enhance their mental stability. This is the best defense that they can develop to the most pernicious thoughts of all: feeling worthless and useless. If a child devotes him or herself to understanding life, the likelihood that he or she will ever fall into despair is greatly reduced. Furthermore, children should be told repeatedly that they have the ability to discover, and to be original and unique.

A good way to introduce children to the spiritual challenge of life is to teach or otherwise expose them to the many different ways that people throughout the ages have responded, including through the major organized religions. However, and this is a strict departure from social

convention, children should be taught that they should not feel bound to the set of beliefs - the faith - of their culture and even their parents. The deepest intellectual adventure of all is to establish one's own place and views relative to life and the universe. Children should in no way be forced to ascribe to a particular set of views.

Language

For other educational areas, there are a number of additional and critical points. The first of these areas is language, our interface to other people and the world (as well as our own thoughts). Language skills are therefore of unprecedented importance. Children need to be given every opportunity to increase their ability with language. Indeed, research has shown that an infant's brain responds to language while it is still in the womb, through hearing its mother's conversations. This actually represents an opportunity to jump-start a child's language education, prior to birth, simply through systematically and loudly exposing the child to the sounds of the mother's native tongue, if not others as well.

Further, an infant's brain is hard-wired to learn any of the languages that are used on earth, as nerve cells grow and group together to recognize and interpret literally any sound that it is possible for a human ear to hear. Countless children have already demonstrated that we can learn two or even three distinct languages from birth. However, if the child is forced to wait until years later, learning a new language becomes much more difficult. Such later learning involves a different part of the brain; it is not assigned as high a priority. Therefore, one of the best ways you can help your child is by introducing him or her to two or even three different languages from birth, including through using tutors if need be. Multilingual ability will certainly enhance their self-esteem, as well as their ability to prosper in our increasingly interconnected world.

Also related to language, research has shown that the number of words an infant hears, from engaged adults - not the TV!, just the actual number of words spoken, is the best predictor of future personal achievement and happiness. You should talk to your children continuously, and encourage others to talk to them as well, especially during their first few years. This contact fulfills the child's emotional needs, and teaches them that the world is a fun and loving place.

Music

Research has further shown that an infant's brain can process the patterns in our most complex and sophisticated music. A child's brain is reflexively dominated by curiosity. It wants to understand everything to which it is exposed. Consequently, you should introduce children to as many different things as possible, as early as possible, including foremost among them music.

Music in turn is not only a delightful experience in its own right; it also plays a unique role in education. Fundamentally, you can say that we learn through words, sounds, numbers (which I will cover next), and, of course, experience. Music conditions the brain in its own special way. The brain undergoes a distinct type of learning, as it seeks to interpret musical patterns.

However, such learning can carry over into other fields as well. Exposure to music disciplines the overall intellectual brain. This has been demonstrated by the research that evaluated the wide-ranging benefits of playing young children classical music. Additionally, with music - unlike language - you do not have to be personally engaged with the child. They just need to hear it, again starting in the womb, and then in the rooms where they spend their time and sleep.

Finally, a child's brain performance is turbocharged if he or she is also taught to play music, not only appreciate it through listening. Learning a musical instrument forces the brain to develop nerve cell groups for the skills that are required, such as the finger control to play a piano, guitar or violin. While this of course develops yet another form of physical coordination and dexterity, it also makes its own contribution to overall intellectual performance. In summary, if you expose a child to a lot of different things in life, he or she learns about the life experience more quickly. Similarly, if children learn many different types of intellectual skills, their total or composite mental performance improves as well.

A classic example of musical excellence was Mozart, who at the tender age of five was already composing small pieces for the piano. His excellence is traditionally attributed to genetics, that he was a genius. But what about nurture? To compose music Mozart first had to listen to it, be taught to play the piano - this started at age three, and then be encouraged to create. All of this came from his parents, and their extraordinarily positive approach to childhood education.

Mathematics and science

A final essential area to which a child should be exposed is mathematics, and more generally science (starting with the scientific method). Probably the greatest fallacy and tragedy with the modern educational system is the belief that children should be taught such subjects in a slow and measured way. We have completely underestimated the speed with which a child can learn.

An infant's brain, certainly once it absorbs some basic language, can respond to almost anything. Children can therefore be exposed to mathematical concepts at a very early age. This can be done in the form of fun to play games, such as using blocks to teach counting, addition and subtraction. Even more important is the kickstart that a child's brain receives from geometric or spacial games, which require the perception of hidden patterns. Education - essentially - is the discovery of new patterns. Indeed, much advanced mathematics now focuses on what are broadly termed geometric patterns (e.g., topology). We need to help children develop their pattern-recognition skills as early as possible, since the sooner these skills are established the stronger they can become. For example, some extremely accomplished mathematicians were introduced to the concepts of calculus as early as the age of ten, by their parents who were themselves mathematicians. One might conclude, as people believe with Mozart, that they had a genetic advantage, but in fact the greater factor, once again, was probably nurture. Their parents thought to give them an opportunity that is denied to almost everyone else.

One way to grasp such learning is with what are called “magic eye” pictures, where concentrating on a complex and abstract image reveals an embedded three dimensional figure. When the image composes itself in your brain, you get a sense of revelation. For math, we want to give young children the opportunity to have their own revelations, when their brains are best programmed to achieve them. Returning to calculus, one of its core ideas is the concept of the “limit.” If you - or someone who knows calculus - explains it to a child, at some point they should have their own “aha” moment and get it: the idea will be revealed. At that point, they will have taken one of the most difficult intellectual steps of all, years before what is considered “normal,” and a whole new world of understanding will open up before their eyes.

Conclusion

If you can help a child on the voyage of discovery, about physicality; experience and ethics; emotions; and language, music and math, he or she will of course benefit from the acquired knowledge, including, fundamentally, that learning and personal development is one of the most satisfying things in life. Even more, though, it is a given that the child will have positive self-esteem. This is not even something that you will need to think about as a separate issue. One follows the other. Children who receive an honest and comprehensive introduction to life have no problems feeling good about themselves and doing well. You can help set them on the way.

The only proviso to all of this is the question of children who are not your own. Nowadays, parents are very wary if not fearful of other adults interacting with their young. If you are a parent and have become overly protective of your children, you should understand that you are only hurting them through doing this. Humans are social animals, and for most of our history we lived in villages. Children in a village interact with many other children, and adults. This gives them the broad social experience that they need to develop properly, and it also introduces them to many different teachers, on different subjects. By consigning the education of our children to schools, and by limiting their other adult contacts, we are actually making it more difficult for them to learn, and to feel good about themselves. There are risks with “strangers,” of course, but these are manageable, and not every adult should remain one. Don’t deny your children the education, including the life experience and human interaction, that they need to grow and prosper.