

A LINE ON LIFE

Parenting — The World's Most Important Job

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Each April, the "*Week of the Young Child*" observes the continuing responsibility of all people for the optimal development and well being of all children. What could be more appropriate than celebrating this by giving some hints on **parenting**?

When parenting is effective, both parents and children benefit. When parents fail to give their children a good start in life, everybody suffers — the parents, the children and society as a whole. What does it take to be a good parent?

Much of the answer can be found in two key areas of parent-child relationships — **communication** and **discipline**. This article will discuss communication, while next week's article will cover discipline.

When clear communication is maintained between parents *Between Parent and Child* (1965), Dr. Haim Ginott — a child psychologist — indicated that it is essential to make a distinction between a child's *feelings* and a child's *behavior*. Since children — and adults too — do not choose how they feel, it is important to allow free expression of feelings.

A child, who learns to regard some feelings as "*bad*" or unacceptable, is being asked to deny a very real part of his experience. Ginott encourages parents to teach their children that all feelings are appropriate and only actions are subject to disapproval. Many parents are unaware of how often they block communication and expression of feelings in their children.

Ginott gives an example in his book:

Son: "I am stupid, and I know it. Look at my grades in school."

Father: "You just have to work harder."

Son: "I already work harder, and it doesn't help. I have no brains."

Father: "You're smart. I know."

Son: "I am stupid. I know."

Father: (loudly) "You are not stupid!"

Son: "Yes, I am!"

Father: "You are not stupid, stupid!"

The father has missed the point that the son *feels* stupid. It would have been more helpful, if the father said, "*You really think that you are not as smart as others, don't you? Do you feel this way often?*" This gives the child an opportunity to express his emotions, and he feels more understood. That father could end the conversation with, "*Son, to me, you are a fine person, but I realize that everyone feels a little stupid at times.*"

Communication with a child can also be the basis of effective discipline. Dr. Thomas Gordon (a child

psychologist who founded a program called Parental Effectiveness Training or PET) offers a useful suggestion Ñ parents should send "I" messages to their children instead of "you" messages.

For more effective communication, replace "you" messages with "I" messages.

"You" messages take the form of threats, name-calling, blaming, accusing or lecturing. Generally, "you" messages tell children what is wrong with them. (You can be sure you are sending a "you" message, if you have the tendency to *point at* the other person.)

An "I" message tells children (or anyone) what effect their behavior has on you. To demonstrate, let's consider an example.

After a hard day's work, a mother sits down to read. She begins to relax with a newspaper, when her five-year-old son starts banging loudly on a toy drum. Most parents would respond with "you" messages.

"You go play outside this instant." (bossing)

"Don't ever make such a racket, when someone is reading." (lecturing)

"You are really pushing it today, aren't you?" (accusing)

"You're a spoiled brat." (name-calling)

"Do you want me to swat you?" (threatening)

Gordon suggests sending an "I" message like, *"I am very tired. I can't read and I feel upset when there is so much noise."* This pushes the child to accept the responsibility for the effects of his actions. If this doesn't curb the misbehavior, the consequences can be stated in another "I" message. *"If you keep banging on that drum, I will have to put it away."* If the child makes more noise, then *he* has caused the toy to be put away. If he quits or takes the drum outside, *he* has decided to do so. Both the parent and child have maintained a sense of self-worth, and a needless clash has been averted.

Only two additional points on communicating with children (and others) need to be noted. They are: *"Listen more than you talk"* and *"Live the message you wish to communicate."*

If you are interested in gaining more information, you can consult Dr. Ginott's *Between Parent and Child* or take a course in communication, parenting or PET, whichever are offered by your local college.
