

# Parents' Development

The Other Half of the Story

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Brief articles for parents,  
parent educators and early childhood education teachers

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# **Parents' Development - The Other Half of the Story**

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## Introduction

I am a developmental psychologist who is interested in the development of young children and their parents, and the development of people who work with them.

I became a parent educator as the development of parents and fostering it grew to be my strongest interests. Taking a developmental point of view, and recognizing different stages, can help you organize your thoughts about the needs of both parents and children.

**Parents' development and children's development are two sides of the same story.**

Children's progress in the first five years of life is truly dramatic and wonderful to witness. Their development from infant to toddler to preschooler, then on to kindergarten has been well studied, as has the education of young children.

Parents' development over the same period is less obvious, less dramatic, yet equally important - and parent educators who foster parents' development are aware of this.

These articles describe parent's development at different stages, the changing challenges they face, the roles they need to play, and the skills they need to learn to be effective parents.

To set the stage, we begin with a "brief refresher" on children's development in the first five years.

Next, we focus on parents' development, concerns and functioning.

Following that, beginning with "The Parent Trip: Riding the Roller Coaster," we focus on parents' experience and adaptation and tools for parents. These tools include: setting expectations, reinforcing positive behavior, effective communication, encouraging your children, handling your anger at your kids and a Problem Solving Guide.

Then, we present the observations of a Parent Educator, proving that "nobody's perfect!"

Finally, we describe how parents and teachers can work together effectively.



## Children's Development: A Brief Refresher

What children do in their early years is truly wonderful. Appreciating what young children do and say and understand in the first five years provides the basis for understanding the challenges that their parents face.

Parents need to develop different skills to meet the needs of infants, toddlers and preschoolers. They also need to learn to take care of themselves and to resist the unreasonable demands that children can make.

The movement from infancy to kindergarten is from dependence, requiring nurturance, toward independence, including challenging authority, then to interdependence, including playing and working and sharing with other children cooperatively.

The Child Development Chart on the following page pictures the development of infants, toddlers and preschoolers over the first five years in five areas: Social, Self Help, Gross Motor, Fine Motor, Language and Numbers and Letters (Age 2, 3+)

***Social Development*** includes response to and interaction with parents, other caregivers and children – from individual interaction to group participation.

***Self Help*** skills include eating, dressing, bathing, toileting, independence and responsibility.

***Gross Motor*** skills include moving about by rolling over, walking, running, jumping or riding. Balance and

coordination are important. Clumsiness for age can be a symptom of a physical problem.

***Fine Motor*** includes eye-hand coordination – visually following objects, reaching for and picking up objects to scribbling and drawing pictures.

***Language*** includes three components: **talking, speech intelligibility, and language comprehension**. Simple expressive communication may be by gestures (pointing), sounds and words, simple or complex sentences. Speech refers to how understandable the child is and how well the child articulates speech sounds. Comprehension or understanding of language, from simple instructions to concepts, is a critical issue. Low language comprehension may reflect a hearing problem or a problem in understanding.

***Numbers and Letters*** – from age two to three years, children show a beginning understanding of quantity, numbers and counting, letters and reading. These are the “readiness skills” we look for in preschoolers as they approach kindergarten age, along with language comprehension.

**Developmental Milestones** - The skills listed in each area of the Child Development Chart are placed in the age range during which children have typically developed these skills (75% of children). For example, 75% of children are walking independently by age 12-15 months, so this behavior sits in the chart in the 12-15 month range.



# CHILD DEVELOPMENT CHART - FIRST FIVE YEARS

Harold Ireton, Ph.D.



	SOCIAL	SELF-HELP	GROSS MOTOR	FINE MOTOR	LANGUAGE	
5-0 yrs.	Shows leadership among children.	Goes to the toilet without help.	Swings on swing, pumping by self.	Prints first name (four letters).	When asked, for example, "What is an orange?" answers, "A fruit."	5-0 yrs.
4-6		Usually looks both ways before crossing street.	Skips or makes running "broad jumps."	Draws a person that has at least three parts - head, eyes, nose, mouth, etc.	Reads a few letters (five+).	4-6
4-0 yrs.	Follows simple rules in board or card games.	Buttons one or more buttons.	Hops around on one foot, without support.	Draws recognizable pictures.	Prints a few letters or numbers.	4-0 yrs.
3-6	Protective toward younger children.	Dresses and undresses without help, except for tying shoelaces.	Hops on one foot without support.	Cuts across paper with small scissors.	Follows a series of three simple instructions in order.	3-6
3-0	Plays cooperatively with minimum conflict and supervision.	Washes face without help.	Rides around on tricycle, using pedals.	Draws or copies a complete circle.	Talks in long, complex sentences (10 or more words).	3-0 yrs.
2-6	Gives directions to other children.	Toilet trained.			Answers questions like, "What do you do with your eyes? ears?"	2-6
2-0 yrs.	Plays games like tag, hide and seek.	Dresses self with help.	Walks up and down stairs one foot per step.	Cuts with small scissors.	Identifies at least four colors by name correctly.	2-0 yrs.
18 mos.	Plays a role in "pretend" games like house or school - mom, dad, teacher.	Washes and dries hands.	Stands on one foot without support.	Draws or copies vertical ( ) lines.	Asks questions beginning with "Why? When? How?"	18 mos.
12 mos.	Plays with other children - cars, dolls, building.	Opens door by turning knob.	Climbs on play equipment - ladders, slides.	Scribbles with circular motion.	Answers questions like, "What do you do with a cracker? a hat?"	12 mos.
9 mos.	"Helps" with simple household tasks.	Takes off open coat or shirt without help.	Walks up and down stairs alone.	Turns pages of picture books, one at a time.	Speaks clearly - is understandable most of the time.	9 mos.
6 mos.	Usually responds to correction - stops.	Eats with spoon, spilling little.	Runs well, seldom falls.	Builds towers of four or more blocks.	Talks in sentences at least four words long.	6 mos.
Birth	Shows sympathy to other children, tries to comfort them.	Eats with fork.	Kicks a ball forward.		Has a vocabulary of at least 20 words.	Birth
	Sometimes says "No" when interfered with.					
	Greeted people with "Hi" or similar.	Feeds self with spoon.	Runs.	Scribbles with crayon.	Follows two-part instructions.	
	Gives kisses or hugs.	Insists on doing things by self such as feeding.	Walks without help.	Picks up two small toys in one hand.	Names a few familiar objects in picture books.	
		Lifts cup to mouth and drinks.	Stands without support.	Stacks two or more blocks.	Asks for a drink or food, using words or sounds.	
		Picks up a spoon by the handle.	Walks around furniture or crib while holding on.	Picks up small objects - precise thumb and finger grasp.	Uses at least ten words.	
	Waves "Bye-bye."		Crawls around on hands and knees.	Uses two hands to pick up large objects.	Talks in single words.	
	Plays social games, "peek-a-boo," "patty-cake."	Feeds self cracker.	Sits alone . . . steady, without support.	Transfers toy from one hand to the other.	Says "Mama" or "Dada" for parent, or similar.	
	Pushes things away he/she doesn't want.	Comforts self with thumb or pacifier.	Rolls over from back to stomach.	Picks up toy with one hand.	Understands phrases like "No-no" and "All gone."	
	Reaches for familiar people.	React to sight of bottle or breast.	Turns around when lying on stomach.	Looks at and reaches for faces and toys.	Makes sounds like da-da, ma-ma, ba-ba.	
	Distinguishes mother from others.		Lifts head and chest when lying on stomach.		Responds to name - turns and looks.	
	Social smile.				Babbles.	
					Laughs out loud.	
					Makes sounds - ah, eh, ugh.	
					Cries in a special way when hungry.	

## Parents' Development: The Other Half Of The Story

We all know that children change dramatically as they grow and develop. Less obvious are the ways parents change and develop as they learn to be parents.

In fact, parents need to change, acquire new skills and play additional roles as their children present them with new challenges, or they risk being left behind.

As parents gain experience, they become aware of the little things that can make a big difference: sensitivity to their child's and their own needs, discriminating what children demand from what they need, their tone of voice, the importance of timing, how to be firm and friendly at the same time, the fact that we all have good days and bad days, the power of patience and the courage to be imperfect. They also come to realize that they are their child's first and most important teachers.

Ellen Galinsky writes about Six Stages of Parenthood, beginning with the Image-Making Stage. In this stage, expectant parents form images of what their baby will be like and what it will be like to be a parent. We focus here on Early Childhood and Early Parenthood, including the Nurturer, Authority, Interpreter, and Consultant roles that parents need to play in relation to their infants and young children,

### **Parent As Nurturer:**

The nurturing stage goes from birth until the child first begins to say "No,"

somewhere around 18 months. In this stage, parents move beyond what they "expected" their child and parenthood would be like to the 24-hour reality of being a mother or father to this child.

They become attached to their baby and seek to learn what the baby needs and how to provide for those needs. They ask themselves, "What is my role? How much time does my baby need? And what about my other responsibilities?" They often have questions about their personal identity as they settle into their new parent role.

D.W. Winnicott, in *Talking with Parents*, calls this the "All Yes" stage. This stage is mostly about "giving" to meet the needs of a dependent child, about providing care, being totally responsible, and ever vigilant. Anne Lamott, in her book, *Operating Instructions*, provides a vivid account of "What it's like" to be a first-time parent with a new baby.

The Challenge: To be an attentive, sensitive and responsive caretaker.

The Question: What about mother's and father's needs?

### **Parent As Authority:**

The authority stage is about toddlers (18-36 months) who are walking and talking - and talking back! In this stage, parents face the task of deciding what kind of authority they will be, what the rules are and when and how they are enforced.



This is the "Yes": and "No" stage.

The central issue is the child's autonomy vs. the parent's authority. Who is in charge? The toddler has acquired new powers and wants to be independent and do things "myself," including roam freely. The child encounters "No" and develops a "No" of his own. And we are off to the races.

The child does something and the parent says "No" and the child persists. The parent tells the child to do something and the child doesn't. And the mother wonders, "Whatever happened to my sweet baby?" and feels a sense of loss. This stage of resistant children includes tantrums and leaves parents feeling frustrated and, sometimes, feeling helpless. What can I do? What should I do? Parents also fear losing control of their children and may over-react.

The Challenge: To be firm, even strict, with your child when necessary. Winnicott says "Small children like being told "No." They like to be told where to get off as well as being cuddled." To kindness, you need to add firmness. Some parents are better at the cuddly part, while other parents are better at making the rules and following through. Children need both structure and affection.

### **Parent As Interpreter And Teacher:**

More than ever, parents of preschoolers (3s and 4s) are teachers in every sense of the word: interpreters, models, moral guides, coaches and preschool teachers. For the preschooler, it's a great big, wild wonderful world in which there is much to explore, understand and misunderstand. This world includes the world of their imagination, playing

pretend games and imitating larger than life heroes. These are magical years that also include some fears.

Parents are the interpreters of what's in the world and the explainers of many things. This stage includes both "Yes" and "No" with the addition of Explanations.

Preschoolers show that they are thinking a lot by the things that they say and the questions that they ask. Parents review what they have been doing and ask themselves what they need to do additionally.

As one mother said "Parenthood has recently changed for me. Now, it's much more than taking care of my son. These days I have to figure out what I think and what I know, so that I can answer his questions and explain things to him."

Around age three children begin to ask the questions "Why? When? And How?"

They also offer reasons for things "Because..." As children observe more and try to understand it all, there are many opportunities for misunderstanding.

Children's understanding grows rapidly in the preschool years. The parent's role is to foster that growth. Children have so much to learn and understand. This includes social skills and values and moral development, along with the development of school readiness skills. For parents of four year olds, concerns about their children's behavior and readiness for kindergarten become major items.

The Challenge: Keeping up with your kids. Remembering to enjoy them despite the challenges they present and

the concerns they create. Being your child's first and most important teacher, including helping them get ready for school.

### **Parent As Consultant:**

You can be a consultant to your school-age (or younger) child if you understand how a consultant works. A consultant first gets to know her client (here, your child) then obtains information about his situation and concern or problem. Then the key to effective consultation is identifying what help might be needed. Here your ability to listen to your child is critical.

Parents often believe that when their child has a problem it is their duty to solve it, usually by telling the child what to do. This is how parents get themselves fired as consultants, by talking when they should be listening, by jumping in before they understand what is going on, et al

Our son, Colin came home from his first day in kindergarten very upset because when his teacher called on him, she mispronounced his name, then "yelled" at him for not responding. Colin was Mad. He had had enough of school, more than enough. He was done with school!

We sat down with him and helped him tell us his story, listening sympathetically. Colin, we asked,

"What can you do to fix this, to see that the teacher gets your name right?" He thought a while, didn't come up with much. We suggested, tentatively, "Maybe you can talk to the teacher and tell her how you say your name?" To make a long story short, Colin's school days were not over.

The Challenge: Resist your temptation to rescue your child when he or she has a problem. Instead, learn what the problem is and give your child a chance to solve it, providing support and encouragement along the way.

Moral: A consultant is a patient person. Patience may be the better part of wisdom.

### **Summary:**

Parent as Nurturer, Parent As Authority, Parent as Teacher, Parent as Consultant! That's a lot to ask. Remember, you don't have to get it all right. Nobody's perfect!

Some things are going to come easier for you; other things will be more difficult. Some things you will really struggle with. Just like your kids. We are ALL in the same boat.



## Parents' Concerns

In the course of their children's development, parents have many questions and concerns about their child's health, development, and behavior, among other things. They also have questions about what they are doing or should do as parents. Knowing the common concerns of parents of infants, toddlers and preschool-age children helps parent educators and parents gain perspective regarding a particular parental concern. This information can help you appreciate the child's and parent's needs.

Parents are probably as often concerned about what they are doing as parents as they are about what their children are doing - "making messes" and not doing - "not sleeping." In the face of their frustrations, parents sometimes feel helpless and fear that they are "losing it." Here are some examples . . .

"Help. My daughter is driving me crazy. She just spilled milk all over the floor. She did it on purpose. I am about to lose it with her today."

"My child never sleeps through the night. Will I ever get a decent night's sleep again?"

"My four year old is out of control. He won't do anything I ask and he's becoming so aggressive. Help."

The Parent Warmline at Children's Health Center, Minneapolis, is a major source of information about the concerns of parents of infants, toddlers and preschoolers. The Parent Warmline (612-813-6336) is a call-in service for parents of young children that provides

support, information and guidance to parents regarding childcare, child development and behavior and parent-child issues. Some Early Childhood Family Education programs provide a similar call-in resource for parents who are enrolled in their classes.

A second source of information about parents' concerns regarding their young children is research done with the Child Development Inventory (Ireton, 1992). This research established norms for children's development and frequencies of parents' concerns about children's health, development and behavior for 500 one to five-year-olds.

The following describes the concerns of parents who called the Parent Warmline, beginning with concerns about their infants, followed by toddlers, then preschool-age children. It also includes information from the Child Development Inventory study.

**Infants:** Warmline parents are most often concerned about their babies' health (10%), more often about their baby girls than boys. Their child's health is less often a concern for parents of one to five-year-olds. For three to five-year-olds, parents are more often concerned about boys' health than girls.

Mothers of infants are often concerned about feeding issues, including breast-feeding, formula and types of food. This is especially important in the first few weeks and months. Parents are also concerned about sleep problems, often in relation to feeding. Parents usually see feeding and establishing sleep routines as their most important

responsibilities during their child's first year of life.

**Toddlers:** Parents of toddlers continue to be concerned about their children's eating behavior and sleep patterns, but these are less frequently a concern. By the end of the first year, most children sleep through the night.

New concerns emerge for parents of toddlers. These concerns include temper tantrums and aggressive behaviors such as biting and hitting-kicking-slapping-fighting. Disobedience, "Does not mind well," becomes a concern for parents of two-year-olds. Parents of boys raise questions about all of these concerns more often than parents of girls.

Questions about toilet training and readiness for training arise for two-year-olds.

Children's language development and speech articulation also become a concerns for parents of some two-year-olds, more for boys.

**Preschoolers:** Questions about toilet training and concerns about wetting, soiling and constipation are most common in this age group, more commonly for boys.

Disobedience, limit testing and oppositional behavior continue to be issues between preschoolers and their parents, more often for boys.

Four-year-old boys and girls both are frequently described as "overly aggressive." For the first time for girls, a significant number of parents ask about hitting-kicking-slapping-fighting. Temper tantrums are also a concern.

For preschool-age boys, high activity level and disorganization "messy" become concerns, especially for four-year-olds (17%). This is seldom a concern for girls.

Unhappiness, social isolation and fearfulness are other concerns parents have about their preschool age boys.

Language development and speech articulation continue to be concerns for this age group, more often for boys. Stuttering-stammering become a concern for preschoolers of both sexes, especially for four-year-olds (18%). Language comprehension (understanding) is also a concern for this age group, although less often than how well children are talking. Concern about understanding is most common for four-year-old boys.

Preschoolers' sexual behavior "sexual exploration-masturbation" is a new concern for parents.

**Parents' Concerns About Their Own Functioning:** Please notice that the above descriptions do not include concerns about how parents are doing. They do not provide information about how often parents are concerned about their own functioning, about how often they feel stressed out, stuck or even overwhelmed. Parent Warmline volunteers are sensitive to parental distress, know how to listen well and provide emotional support. Unfortunately, there is no system for recording their emotional status or functioning, except one item "End of the rope." (Exhaustion/crisis).

## Parents' Functioning

When talking to parents about their children, you can learn a lot about how they are doing as parents. You get a sense of how much they enjoy their child or how frustrated or discouraged they are. When trying to appreciate how well a parent is doing, it is wise to avoid "diagnosing" their difficulties. Instead, try to appreciate their efforts and strengths as well as recognize their difficulties. You need to know how parents are doing to help them and their children.

Consider the following:

- Parent's level of functioning
- Parent's Concerns, Questions, and Anxiety Level
- Parent's Energy Level and Workload
- Support Level and Father Involvement
- Self-care and Self-esteem
- Cultural Background and Primary Language
- Family Circumstances

### Parent's Level of Functioning

How experienced is this parent? Is she a first-time parent or does she have a lot of experience caring for children? Lack of knowledge about children and limited experience with childcare are typically accompanied by some self-doubt and anxiety. How well is she doing as a parent: satisfied, or feeling overwhelmed? Are personal or relationship problems interfering with her functioning? Information, support,

and guidance need to be geared to the parents' level of experience and confidence. Always encourage parents and commend them for their efforts.

### Parent's Concerns, Questions, and Anxiety Level

Ask the parent, "What questions or concerns do you have about your child at this point? Also, "How concerned or worried are you about this?" Sometimes you need to ask, "What do you think is wrong?" and listen carefully to feelings as well as the words. Also, knowing parents' ideas about what needs to be done to remedy the situation is critical.

### Parent's Energy Level and Workload

How tired is this parent? Remember that fatigue is the norm. Take a good look at the parent for signs of undue fatigue, underweight, overweight. And ask, "How has your energy level been lately?" The parent's negative comments and emotional flatness may indicate extreme fatigue and/or depression.

How busy is this mother? How much does she have to do between taking care of children, working outside the home, caring for relatives, et al?

### Support Level and Father Involvement

How much assistance and emotional support does this mother receive from others – partners, relatives, friends, and childcare professionals, et al? Raising children successfully depends on the availability of other people who are willing to provide physical assistance and emotional support to the parent. The parent's partner, parents, siblings, in-laws, friends, and neighbors may be a source of support and energy or a source of criticism and conflict. Parents

with minimal personal support are at high risk. They need to be helped to develop relationships with people on whom they can rely. Remember to identify professional support systems as well as personal support systems.

Is the child's father with the mother? Does she have a partner? How involved is he and in what ways? Is he a source of help or harassment? Commonly the father is the forgotten parent. Break the unwritten rule that mothers are the primary or sole caretakers of children. Ask the mothers to have the father/partner accompany them to school meetings. Information regarding serious problems should be presented to both parents together – so the mother is not alone with her anxiety and does not suffer the additional burden of having to explain things to her partner.

### **Self-care and Self-esteem**

Does the mother remember to take time for herself? To take care of herself? This is related, in part, to self-esteem. Is the mother optimistic, or discouraged? Depressed?

### **Cultural Background and Primary Language**

What is the parent's ethnic and cultural background? Is their primary language English, or some other language? How able are they to express their concerns and to understand explanations and recommendations?

### **Family Circumstances**

What are the family's stresses, strengths and sources of support? How adequate are the family's resources for meeting basic needs and for providing quality of life experiences, such as recreation? What about the community in which the family lives?

## **Coping with My Demanding Child . . . Now**

Heidi Vader

The nine months of morning sickness should have tipped me off. Or the twenty-nine-hour labor followed by a C-section. My first child would be a handful, make that a dump truck full. But let's not even talk about potty training.

My son was born perfect. When I first laid eyes on him in the recovery room, he was squeaky-clean and even had on a little cap. He stayed flawless for twenty-two days.

Then one evening, my perfect baby commenced wailing and wouldn't cease. He did this every night. We took him on vacation to Hawaii and he still cried. How ungrateful!

As he entered toddler-hood, I unwittingly encouraged my no-longer-perfect child's ungratefulness. I let him get his way too often. I tried to solve his problems for him. By the time he was two he took over the household.

Things got even worse when my husband and I separated. My son started acting out with other children. I had to keep an eagle eye on him. I felt embarrassed and ashamed at times. He woke up ten times a night demanding my presence – I thought I would lose it. I rationalized my son's behavior as due to the separation. Some of it was, I'm sure. He could sense my stress. He was confused. But that didn't make it any

easier to fix. If anything, it made it more difficult because there were so many factors involved.

What made this child so demanding and powerful, while his younger brother, born into the same household with the same parents, could be so happy and gentle? I believe it's almost all innately in his personality.

I believe that babies are born with their own distinct personality, which is then shaped further by their environment. If raised in a stable, loving family, easygoing babies will grow to be easygoing adults. Easy.

But what if your baby isn't born easygoing? Certain personality traits can make it harder to get along in our society. And they definitely make it harder for parents: extreme shyness, obstinance, short-temperedness, being demanding.

Since I have little experience with shyness, I'll stick with my specialty, the demanding child. While every demanding child is unique, there are some generalizations that I believe.

Demanding toddler boys possess qualities valued by our society. They tend to be physically and intellectually ahead of their peers. They are often first born. They are leaders or at least want to be. They can be very creative. The



downside is what they do with these advantages. They can bully other children, or their parents. They need to be first all the time. They can be overbearing and disruptive. They want their way. Their moods swing wildly. They can drive us crazy.

How do we regain our own sanity and help these children level out? By doing our job as parents. But what exactly does that mean? How come I never received a job description?

Our jobs as parents are multi-faceted. While we excel in some aspects, we can falter with others. Though I think I've done a fine job from day one being a loving, nurturing mother, I found I needed to learn new skills to succeed. My job as a parent, I finally figured out, is to be the boss.

Parents, not children, need to be in control. Easier said than done for some of us. It's so much easier to give in to our children in the short run, the very short run. We all learn that soon enough if we didn't know it at first. Once I learned to be firm and set limits, my son's behavior improved. His sleep problems were set to rest. I encouraged him to solve his own problems and do more things for himself and he became happier and more independent. When he started school, the structure helped. So did the reconciliation between my husband and me.

Seven years into my tenure as mother, things are looking a little brighter. My son is acing first grade. He's much happier and he's almost manageable now. Almost.

## The Parent Trip: Riding the Roller Coaster

Welcome to the great big, wild, wonderful world of childhood and parenthood. This world includes delight in your new baby, sleepless nights and fatigue, toddlers who get into things and magical preschoolers who sometimes mind. In this world there is a lot to smile and laugh about, also a lot to cry and worry about.

This article is about parents-about what it's like being a parent and about what parents need. It can help parents and parent educators look at the emotional heart of parenting-at parents' emotional journeys-moment to moment, day by day, and over the years. Through parents' eyes, we look at "what it's like" being a parent, at "what it means" to be a parent and at "how parents cope" with the many demands of raising children.

It focuses on parents' expectations, parents' experiences and parents' emotional reactions to their children and the things that children do. Learning from your emotional reactions to your children is a major theme. Learning from personal experience and the experiences of other parents is a related theme. Helping parents learn from each other's experiences is a major challenge for parent educators.

Some say, "Experience is the best teacher." Perhaps, if parents can learn to stop and look and think before acting, rather than just reacting. Then they can create new ways of helping and teaching their children. As parent



educators talk with parents about their experiences with their children, including their expectations and frustrations, parents learn to use their commitment to their children in more constructive ways. In the process their effectiveness and confidence increases.

To be successful and satisfied, parents need to learn more than what to do and what to say to their children. There is an emotional learning that needs to occur for parents. This includes sensitivity to their own needs as well as their children's needs. They also need to learn to discriminate what children demand from what they need. Parents need help developing a clearer understanding of

their expectations and values for their children and for themselves as parents. Understanding this, as well as their reactions to disappointment and frustration, gives them the emotional tools to deal with issues and difficulties in ways that benefit both children and parents. Parents need to be able to be strong and firm with their children as well as sensitive and responsive. Among other things, parents need to be able to “relax” and enjoy their children.

### **Riding the Roller Coaster**

As parents and parent educators you have a lot to enjoy and a lot to do. Parent educators who work with parents of young children (first five years) talk with them about their “joys and concerns” for good reason. Having children and raising children puts parents on an emotional roller coaster ride that takes them places they never expected to go and probably didn’t want to. Parents’ emotional journeys with their children include many highs and lows. Parents’ joy and delight in their children is accompanied by many anxious moments, fatigue and frustration, disappointments, discouragement, guilt and self-doubt then back up to satisfaction and renewed optimism. For those parents who have a child with a disability or major health problem the journey is more like an odyssey.

When anticipating their first child, parents’ expectations are usually rosier than the everyday reality they encounter with their baby. Most parents say, “It’s harder than I expected it would be.” Parent educators need to focus on parents’ initial expectations, subsequent experiences, and their emotional reactions to their children and the things that children do.

Parents tell me about these things by

answering questions such as the following:

*Before your first child was born, what did you expect it would be like...your baby/child?*

*...yourself as a parent?*

*What is it like for you, being a parent? Please describe your experience, including your feelings.*

*How are you doing with it all?*

*What are your expectations/values for your child? for yourself as a parent?*

### **Great Expectations**

Expectant parents, especially first time parents, create images of what the baby’s birth will be like, what their baby will be like and how they will behave and feel as the baby’s mother or father. Remember what you expected? The less experience people have with children the more idealistic and unrealistic their expectations will be. Mothers have told me about the sweet, quiet, contented baby they expected to cuddle and nurture. Then they discover that babies begin life in the larger world by crying, continue to cry a lot, and often continue crying despite their mother’s devoted attention and good wishes.

You thought you bought a ticket for a ride on the Merry-go-round and you wind up on the roller coaster. And you are having a wild ride, hanging on for dear life. Maybe you want to get off?

### **Parents’ Experiences**

The everyday reality of caring for a baby or guiding a young child can leave parents feeling drained, disappointed and discouraged. Granting the joys that are a part of parenthood, fatigue and business are probably the norm and time is too little and passes too quickly. There is never enough TIME and parents are often “on the run.” Multi-

tasking is a word that was probably invented to describe busy mothers in action.

There is also a lot to worry about in relation to children's health and safety. "Should I call the doctor?" Will she ever learn not to run into the street? Fatigue and frustration can lead to anger and yelling at our children, then feeling guilty about hurting them or their self-esteem. When we are attempting to influence our children "Do what I tell you. MIND," and they turn a deaf ear to our words we can feel inadequate and helpless as well as angry. Sometimes parents feel really stuck, confused or even overwhelmed. It is not only children who sometimes feel like running away from home. Through all this, most parents continue to enjoy their children, appreciate how special they are, and even, sometimes, delight in the chaos that children create.

### **Reviewing Your Expectations**

We only learn what it really means to have a child and be responsible for that child by doing it. When REALITY strikes parents find how much there is to do and how difficult caring for a baby or dependent child is. As one mother said "They are there...all the time. They are always there." Another mother said, "In the first year, you don't sleep. In the second year you sleep with one eye open."

Parents need to come to terms with the real needs of a real child, review their expectations for themselves as parents, including their limitations and needs for help and emotional support. One mom said, "I expected to be a great mother, to do it right, to be perfect." Fortunately this mother learned to challenge her perfectionism, set aside her grand long-term goals and "take one day at a time."

Parents are so busy providing for their children that they seldom take the time to check on themselves.

### **Dealing with Your Disappointments**

Parents are not supposed to be disappointed in their children and probably feel guilty if they are. So this is not talked about. In one painful comic sequence a father turns to his son and tells him "Son, you are not working out."

Parents are also disappointed in themselves as parents and sometimes in how their partner behaves as a parent. So we have "misbehaving" parents as well as misbehaving children. As parents we have to have "the courage to be imperfect," to accept mistakes as a fact of life, and learn from our mistakes. Less obvious, we need to have the courage to have imperfect children, especially for those children who have a lot of rough edges. Parents of children with disabilities or major health problems suffer even larger losses of their dream child. They need to grieve their loss even as they work harder than most parents to meet their child's special needs.

### **Encouraging Our Children And Ourselves**

The ups and downs of raising children, plus the physical and emotional work that is involved, mean that parents need lots of support and encouragement. There is no more important subject for parents, children and families than encouragement. Learning how to be less critical and to appreciate our children and our own efforts as parents is an ongoing process.

For more on Encouragement, see the article *Encouraging Our Children and Ourselves* on page 23.

## Great Expectations and Simple Rules

### **Expectations! Frustrations!**

### **Disappointments! Resentments!**

As parents, we often start out with high hopes and great expectations for our children, and for ourselves as parents. Commonly, we are disappointed. One psychologist has suggested that most of the world's troubles have to do with unrealistic expectations. Perhaps.

It is important that you review you expectations for your children and for yourself as a parent. Are you too demanding, or do you expect too little? How realistic are your expectations? How much breathing room do you give your child and yourself? Do you run a tight ship where no one enjoys the cruise, or are you all at sea, with everyone suffering from confusion?

You need to be clear in your own mind what your expectations are, both for your children and for yourself as a parent. If you are clear, than you can be specific with your children. It is important to be specific with your child when you tell the child what you expect. Children need to get specific messages so they can behave accordingly. For example: "I expect you to be home by nine p.m.," (not "Be home early.") "I want you to clean up your room, including . . .item, item, item, etc."

Being clear and being specific are closely related. You have to first be clear in your own mind. Children who are presented with vague and inconsistent expectations will constantly test the rules to determine what the limits are and to see how far they can go.

Parents need to establish some order and consistency for the sake of all the family members. Children need their parents to be predictable. Unfortunately, getting angry is sometimes the most consistent thing a parent does, and children may act to produce that consistency. If a parent can become consistent in just one or two behaviors, he then becomes a reliable person in the child's eyes, and the child can then afford to abandon many of his testing behaviors. For older children and adolescents, it is important to gain their cooperation by including them in discussions establishing the house rules.

Getting started: Establish one or two rules and follow through one hundred percent. Initially, the child may test the rule by breaking it. If you are firm, without being punitive, and stick with the rule, the child will usually stop testing it. A good rule is clear and specific (including time limit), is reasonable (within the child's abilities), and is enforceable. A rule is enforceable when you know, directly, that the child has broken the rule and you can follow through and see that she completes the task. One simple example is a child who has agreed to take out the trash before bedtime. If she fails to follow through, you can gently, without anger, wake her up and guide her toward completion of the task. This form of follow-through is more effective than nagging, criticizing and punishing.

**While great expectations may fail you, clear expectations can serve you well.**

## Catch Your Child Being Good

As responsible parents, we believe that it is part of our job to criticize and punish children when they misbehave. Often, without realizing it, we become very aware of our children's misbehavior, preoccupied with telling them what *not* to do, and busy criticizing and punishing them for misbehaving. At the same time, we may not notice their good behavior and fail to recognize them when they are cooperating.

The result of all this is that we wind up with a "double-negative" give-and-take with our children in which they get a lot of attention for misbehaving and are often ignored when they behave. We mistakenly believe this works because, when we criticize them, they usually stop misbehaving *for the moment*.

Unfortunately we often find ourselves dealing with the same problem over and over again. We then holler louder and that *seems* to work. And what have we learned? To holler louder. Is it any wonder that we behave in some ways at home with our children that we do not out in the world? **We have been trained by our children** to holler and scream.

You can teach your children to behave by the same principle that they train you, by the principle of **reinforcement**. Reinforcement simply describes the fact

that when a child, or adult, behaves in a certain way and they get a lot of attention, they will probably do it again. This may be true even if it is negative attention, especially if they do not get positive attention for positive behavior.

While it is sometimes necessary to penalize children when they misbehave, your best chance of gaining your child's cooperation is to "catch the child being good." In other words, be on the lookout for good behavior and acknowledge the child for the positive things he or she does.

It is amazing how well this works, once you train yourself to be watchful for good behavior and to be positive toward the child when he or she is behaving. In doing this, it is important to be clear and specific about what you expect or want your child to do.

Learn to resist your first impulse, and to stop simply reacting when your child is misbehaving. Act according to your plan about how you are going to behave when your child is behaving in a certain ways.

Last, but not least, remember to catch yourself doing well as a parent. Recognize your own efforts and commitment to your children.

## Consequences: Experience is the Best Teacher

If only my child would listen to me, and do as I say, then everything would be O.K." When our children do not mind, we feel it our responsibility to make them mind, to nag, scold, blame and punish them when they don't.

If you are getting tired of trying to make your children mind, perhaps you are ready to try a different way? There are other ways of gaining their cooperation by letting them learn from the consequences of their actions.

Teaching by **Natural Consequences** involves the following: When a child does something wrong, you do not scold or hit him, you simply *do nothing*. As the situation grows worse, the child becomes uncomfortable and *sees for himself* that the situation has become ridiculous. Then, he makes changes on his own. He changes because *he experiences the discomfort* resulting from his action.

Here are some examples: The mother of a child who is a poor eater decides to stop nagging and simply let the child leave the table when he chooses. Later in the day, he becomes hungry. She responds to requests for food by simply saying when the next meal will be.

A child stays up beyond bedtime and is

simply ignored. Next morning she is groggy and tired. Mother says nothing.

Teaching by **Logical Consequences** is a little more involved. It requires an understanding between parent and child of what is expected from the child and of what is to happen if the child does not perform as expected. What happens then must be a logical consequence of the child's misbehavior.

For example: A child is being disruptive in the living room where the parents are reading. The child is told, "If you are quiet, you can stay in the living room, if not, you must go to your room." Notice that the child is given a choice, and that the parent speaks firmly, but not out of anger. If the child is noisy, the child is sent to his room and told, "You may come back when you are ready to play quietly."

Teaching by consequences instead of by punishment involves a basic attitude of respect for the child. The parent's responsibility is to teach a sense of order and mutual respect to the child in a way that demonstrated what you are trying to teach. It takes time and patience to cultivate the attitudes and skills that are involved in helping your children to learn cooperation, consideration, for others, and mutual respect.

## Communication: Learning to Listen Up and Speak Up

One of the most common complaints we hear is that others do not listen when we complain. Parents talk about children being “parent deaf,” and children complain that their parents do not understand them. My proposal is that we have a “right to complain” and, less obvious, that we have a “right not to listen” when others complain, if we choose.

First, let’s look at how a complaining child affects its mother or father. When a child complains, for example, “This is yucky food, you don’t love me, etc.,” a parent usually will feel disappointed, tense, guilty or angry. In our wish to please as parents, we often get “hooked” when our child is displeased or unhappy about something. We then deny the child the “right to complain” and send him messages that he doesn’t, can’t, or shouldn’t feel that way. Without realizing it, we create obstacles to parent-child communication and fail to provide support to the child in dealing with issues that are frustrating him.

But what about our own needs? We too have a right to complain. We also have a right not to listen, a right to withdraw from our child’s outbursts and complaints, if we feel this is realistic for a particular situation. It is perfectly acceptable to respond to a child’s attention-getting complaints with such poetic phrases as “my feet hurt,” if our judgment suggests this.

My main point is that if we grant ourselves and others (our children and our partners) the “right to complain” and the “right not to listen” (to withdraw), then we can avoid power struggles and make choices of what we will do in a given situation. When we grant these rights, we are then more free to concentrate on the business of “how to listen” and “how to complain” more effectively.

“Active Listening” is one means of focusing on the feelings of another person when they are upset. The difficulty in listening to another person is due to the fact that we are usually too busy “listening to ourselves” as we “evaluate” what the other person is saying and prepare our reply. Active listening involves listening to the other persons’ feelings, more than the words, and actively feeding back to the person the feelings you are hearing. It sounds like those peas taste pretty bad to you,” “You are unhappy because you think I don’t care about you.” This is a difficult skill to learn, but worth the effort.

O.K. That sounds good for the kids. But what if I’m unhappy with what they are doing and I have a complaint to make? Most of us complain by criticizing the other person and/or giving him orders about what he should do. This form of complaining involves “you-messages” such as “You . . .dumb, selfish, thoughtless . . . How could you . . .?,”



You do what I say or else . . .”

These “you-messages” put other people on the defensive, undermine relationships, and often do not get us the relief or cooperation we seek. This style of complaining feeds right into the power struggles that are so commonplace between parents and children.

Suppose we stated our complaints as non-blaming “I-messages,” which describe our needs. “I am very tired. I can’t rest when you make so much noise. I am very busy and I need your help.” The techniques of “active listening” and sending “I-messages” are beautifully described in Thomas Gordon’s book, Parent Effectiveness Training.

Complaining children are often powerful children who are skillful at making their parents feel guilty, drawing them into power struggles, and defeating them. If parents can challenge their guilt feelings and grant the child the right to complain, they can choose to

listen or not, depending on the needs of the situation. Then the child can no longer make his/her parents solely responsible for his unhappiness or happiness.

Recently, I talked with a five-year-old girl and her parents about the child’s unhappiness and complaints about her mother working two days a week. The mother, naturally enough, felt guilty in the face of her daughter’s complaints. In many ways, she told her daughter that it was not O.K. to complain, while at the same time feeling compelled to listen.

I talked with the girl about complaining to her mother in the clearest way possible. I suggested that we make a sign stating, “I don’t want my mother to work,” and suggested that she hang it on the refrigerator for all to see. Two weeks later, the mother reported that her daughter was no longer complaining about her working and that she now felt less responsible and guilty about her child’s various complaints.

## Encouraging Our Children and Ourselves

Let's start with my favorite story. It's about our formerly "messy kid," Bridget. The scene: My wife, our three children, and myself are sitting around the breakfast table. Our dog, Sabrina, is sitting at Bridget's feet, where the food most often fell to the floor. Bridget is busy spooning Cheerios into her mouth willy-nilly and making quite a mess. My wife and I both look at Bridget with disapproving frowns. Bridget interrupts her feeding frenzy, looks up at us, beams and says "Nobody's perfect."

"Nobody's perfect." I looked at Bridget, returned her smile, and said "Thank you, Bridget for reminding me of something I often forget."

Encouragement is my favorite subject, far and away. Why? Because being truly encouraging to another person or for yourself provides the energy and determination it takes to persist in the face of difficulty-especially when someone is discouraged.

Being a parent is sometimes discouraging, especially when you are under slept and overtired. The words on *Encouraging Our Children and Ourselves* on the following page are for you to think about and revisit every so often. I also want to highlight a few thoughts.

Because it is natural for you to focus on your child's needs more than your own, let's start with your child's needs. **Children** need nurturing, kindness and love, of course. Less obvious, they need their parent(s) to enjoy them, to enjoy getting to know them and to express their enjoyment to them (Acceptance and Affirmation). They also need recognition for their efforts and achievements. They also need "thanks"

for their helpfulness (appreciation). Sometimes they need help; sometimes they need to do it themselves.

Children do not need all that they demand. Spoiling and pampering may feel good but actually does harm. It's your job to discriminate what children need from what they demand. Children do not need to be in charge. They need for you to be in charge (firm, strong, strict...call it what you will). They also need for you to keep your head while they are losing theirs (having a tantrum). Finally, they need you to have faith in them and in their ability to cope with difficulties . . . with a little help from their friends (their parents).

**Parents** (what about parents?) need to be kinder to themselves and not so self-critical. They need to credit themselves for their commitment and courage in doing a difficult job and for the times they "get it right." They need to have the courage to be imperfect and to take one day (one moment?) at a time. They need to take time for themselves (hah!), compare notes with other parents (look, we are all in the same boat), and ask for support. They also need to teach and expect their children to be helpers so that there are no freeloaders in the family.

Also, be sure that when you talk to physicians and teachers about your children that you are really heard and respected.

Don't expect yourself to be consistent in any of these things.

Finally remember that a sense of humor and a sense of the absurd can make a big difference.

# Encouraging Our Children and Ourselves

Harry Ireton, Ph.D.

**NOBODY'S PERFECT:** Begin by granting yourself the right to make mistakes.  
Treat mistakes as opportunities to learn.

Accept your child "as is" rather than waiting until she "succeeds."

Recognize participation and effort more than achievement.  
Involvement will lead to progress.

Focus on your child's strengths.  
Have faith in his ability to handle difficulties,

Attention, affection and love are what children thrive on.  
Listening shows love.

Express appreciation to your child for his help.  
Remember to say "Thank you."

Affirm your child as a special individual.  
Tell your child how you enjoy her.

Remember that children need firmness as well as affirmation.

Learn to be patient with your child and yourself.  
Be forgiving when things do not go well.

Each day check your level of energy and optimism,  
or frustration and discouragement.

Make time for yourself - to rest, to play, to be alone, to be with others.

Ask your partner for support. If you are on your own, ask others.

Talk to other parents.

When you talk to professionals about your child,  
be sure your concerns are heard and considered.

When you need help, see that you get it!

Do not expect yourself to be totally consistent in any of these things.

## Handling Your Anger At Your Kids

Raising children is a difficult, demanding, sometimes frustrating responsibility. Although we care about our children, we are sometimes too tired to enjoy them, or we are too frustrated and angry about their behavior to get satisfaction from them. Sometimes we get very angry, when we are attempting to influence them and feeling that we are getting nowhere.

This article helps you take a look at your anger and other feelings toward your children and can help you handle these feelings in a constructive way.

**Let's start with some questions:** What does your child do, or not do, that upsets you?

How do you feel when your child misbehaves? And what do you say to yourself?

What do you do when your child misbehaves?

What are your "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" for your child?

When your child misbehaves, how do you feel about yourself as a parent?

How does your child hook you emotionally?

**We all get angry at times** - sometimes at our kids, sometimes at our partners. Sometimes . . .

One movie hero famously said,

*"I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!"*

This is a man who clearly intended to do something, but what? Beat his child? Tear the house apart? Take action to solve the problem he saw?

Here are some **keys to understanding your anger** and using anger constructively

When do you get angry? What do you get angry about - your kids talking back? Dragging their feet when you tell them to do something? What?

**Before you act, take time to look at what you are feeling.**

When you are angry, what's it like for you? How does it feel...in your mind.... in your body...and what are you saying to yourself?

When you feel angry, what other feelings are you also experiencing - disappointment, anxiety, and confusion?

**Did you know that anger is not a primary emotion?**

Anger is always preceded by some other emotion. Sometimes we are disappointed, and then we get angry. Sometimes, we are scared, and then we get angry. Sometimes we feel frustrated and helpless, and then we get angry. Sometimes we feel inadequate and guilty, and then we get angry with ourselves. Get the picture?

It is these primary emotions that we really have to deal with even more than anger. Some people, especially men, are quicker to anger. They go directly to anger and are less aware of the emotions that precede their anger.

Our values and expectations, our “shoulds” and our “shouldn’ts” for our children, set the stage for our getting angry with our children. When we get angry, one of our values has been violated and we respond to that threat by rising up in anger. If you look at your child’s “misbehavior” and compare it to your important values, you will see two sides of the same story.

When our children test us, resist or rebel, the battleground is usually our cherished values. Honesty? Kindness? Education? Hard work? You name it.

**We all talk to ourselves.** What we say to ourselves in the middle of conflict can fuel the flames of anger and rage or help us step back “Wait a minute, Charlie,” and take time to look at what is going on.

Ask yourself, “How am I getting hooked emotionally by my child’s misbehavior?” Understanding how you get hooked and pulled into the battle gains you the freedom to pull back, think and withdraw, or reenter from a different position.

Children know which buttons to push to get a reaction from their parents. Which subjects are your hot buttons and what emotions are triggered in you?

Some parents feel compelled to act because they have fearful fantasies “mental pictures” about how their child will turn out badly-- “have no friends” “become a criminal” - if they do not correct the behavior in question.

Parents’ self esteem is a related issue. Many of the things that children do, and fail to do, leave parents feeling at a loss, confused, helpless and inadequate. There is nobody who can make a parent feel more inadequate than a child.

Your answer to parents’ eternal question – “Can I handle it?” varies from day to day and incident to incident. If your answer is “Yes,” you feel good about yourself and what you are doing; if “No,” you feel bad.

Before you can deal with your upset child, you have to first handle your own emotional reaction to the situation.

Our children need to know when we are unhappy and angry at what they are doing. They don’t need to be attacked.

Remember, especially when you are feeling bad, that “**Nobody’s Perfect**” and that “**Good Enough is Just Fine.**”

## **Problem Solving Guide for Parents**

*The following list of questions is to help you review how you and your children are doing. Also to encourage you to try some of the ideas described in the articles on expectations, communication, reinforcement, consequences and encouragement.*

### **Frustration**

What does your child do that upsets you?

And how do you feel when your child misbehaves?

### **Discipline**

What do you do when your child misbehaves?

And how does it work?

How did your parents discipline you?

### **Expectations**

What are your expectations for your child?

How realistic are they?

What about your expectations for yourself as a parent?

### **Discouragement**

How hard are you on your child, or on yourself, when things are not going well?

**Reinforcement**

Do you reinforce undesirable behavior by giving your child a lot of attention when he or she misbehaves? What could you do instead?

Do you “catch your child being good” and reinforce positive behavior? How does she react?

**Encouragement**

How do you play with your child?

When do you remind yourself and your child of the child’s positive qualities?

When do you take time for yourself, and ask others to be supportive of your needs?

**Communication**

How do you express affection in words and actions to your child?

Do you really listen to your child? When?

Can you express anger to your child without putting your child down?

**Cooperation**

Can you avoid power struggles with your child? How?

Can you let your child know that you need and appreciate his help? How?

Do you respect your child’s need to have some independence, to make choices, and to be in control at times? In what situations?

Can you be firm when you need to be?

## Confessions of a Parent Educator

Kristi Hanson  
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“What do you do with *your* kids?” a mom in a parent group asked me recently. The question sent shivers up my spine and most certainly left a look of fright on my face. Every head in the room turned toward me, waiting, holding their breath for the supreme authority to pass the final word on child rearing.

I think it's time to lay a few things on the table, make a confession, get it off my chest. Are you ready? Come closer, so no one else will hear. Here it is: I'm not a perfect parent, not even close. I make mistakes with my children, probably on a daily basis. I yell, criticize and correct, swear when I drop something and say one thing and do another, otherwise known as “inconsistency” (gasp!). I'm a real person with shortcomings like everyone else.

There seems to be a certain expectation from parents in my groups that I am somehow exempt from the everyday drudgery and dilemmas everyone else is subject to. Toilet training is not a breeze for me because I'm a licensed parent educator. My children don't say “Yes, ma'am” and “No, ma'am” or keep their rooms clean or even brush their teeth every night before bed. When I mention a few of these things in class as illustrations, I get various reactions from people ranging from surprise to disbelief to, most commonly, relief as if somehow as long as my children are less than perfect, theirs can be too.

It makes me very nervous that others use my children and me as some sort of gauge for their own lives. I just want to

be a parent to my children.

As a group leader, I'm often put in the hot seat to give the magic answers, formulas, step-by-step guides and how-to's of parenting. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. I think so-called parenting “experts” do parents a serious disservice when they make it appear simple.

I firmly believe that parenting is more of an art than a science. I contend that being a renowned artist is easier than being a parent to a three-year-old who has just announced she's never wearing clothes again. There have been many times when I had a better chance of recreating a masterpiece than getting my child to eat peas or take a bath. But is that really what parenting is about anyway?

There was a time when I thought using a formula or a procedure with a child would yield the desired results. Usually cooperation and obedience were the goals – input x and out comes y. Perhaps, control is the real issue between parents and children - they struggle to gain it, we struggle to keep it. Maybe that's why I chose my profession. I can be a third party observer, offering support and insight. Then I go home after work and wonder why I can't always take my own advice. I admonish myself for being a hypocrite or inadequate as a mother.

Those are the days I must remember that each child is a masterpiece, a work of art with the artist standing in the background, wondering which mix of colors and strokes to try next.



## Parents And Teachers: Working Together

Parents and Teachers are committed to the development and school success of their children. They both know that success in school is the main pathway to success in adult life. Also that school failure is a strong predictor of other difficulties in school, such as behavior problems, and in later life.

These days, parents and teachers are more concerned than ever about children's school readiness and success in school. While teachers know more about child development and the education of children, parents know their child best and are "the experts" on their child. Parents' and teachers' observations, questions and concerns, taken together, provide the soundest basis for appreciating young children's development/learning and educational needs.

### **Parent-Teacher Conferences**

provide parents and teachers with an important opportunity to compare notes, raise questions, enjoy the child's progress and talk about any concerns that the parent or teacher has about the child. Parents and teachers both wonder whether they are "on the same page." Conferences are a source of anxiety and apprehension for parents, and also for teachers, as both may be uncertain about how well it will go.

Traditionally, parent conferences have tended to be heavily child-centered and teacher-driven as the teacher discloses all she has learned about the child. Involving parents in a more balanced discussion of their child can create a parent-teacher collaboration that better meets the needs of both parent and child.

Teachers have their own ways of doing things, as we all do. Ongoing periodic communication between parent and teacher establishes the relationship. Then conferences can clarify things and create a more complete picture of the child based on parent and teacher observations, questions and, sometimes, concerns.

I have had the good fortune as a psychologist to work with early childhood teachers who have been open to new ideas. One such idea is having parents complete a questionnaire before the conference. The Child Development Review - Parent Questionnaire (CDR-PQ) that I developed briefly asks parents to describe their child and report any questions or concerns they may have. The teacher then knows, before the conference, what is on the parents' mind and can better prepare for the meeting. Also, completing the questionnaire helps parents organize their own thoughts about their child before the conference.

Kathy Ofstedal, former early childhood program director and now St. Cloud State University faculty member, has made very creative use of the CDR-PQ and done some research with it. She has learned things from parents that might otherwise have gone unspoken.

In one family, a four-year-old boy was doing well at school, but was driving his mother crazy with his misbehavior at home. Happy ending: Kathy brought information to the conference for the Mom that helped her effectively modify the child's behavior. Kathy has many such stories about the benefits of being better prepared for her parent-teacher conferences.

Research with parents of three- to six-year-olds in her preschool program revealed a range of parent concerns. Parents of these preschoolers were most often concerned about their children's behavior and discipline - 43 percent of parents! Less often they raised questions or concerns about their child's adjustment to preschool - 15 percent.

Speech and language problems were the commonest concern about children's development - 15 percent.

They also used the questionnaire as an opportunity to ask for advice regarding - how to promote my child's self-esteem; help my child overcome fears; among other things - 8 percent.

These parents were *asking for help* for a number of common parent concerns. And Kathy was there for them, providing needed help and directing them to additional help when needed.

For Kathy, the questionnaire and the questions parents raised became an integral part of the way she related to and worked with parents.

People, it's all about process. The tools that we use work well only when they are part of a thoughtful ongoing process. Having said that, here, finally,

is a summary of Child Development Review -Parent Questionnaire (which also includes a Child Development Chart on the back and is available from [ChildDevelopmentReview.com](http://ChildDevelopmentReview.com).)

The questionnaire includes six key questions and a Parent Concerns Checklist.

### Instructions:

Your observations of your child and your questions and concerns about his/her health, development and behavior provide important information for us to talk about at our conference.

**Please describe your child briefly?**

**What has your child been doing lately?**

**What are your child's strengths?**

**Does your child have any special problems or disabilities? What are they?**

**What questions or concerns do you have about your child?**

**How are you doing as a parent and otherwise, at this time?**

PARENT CONCERNS Checklist		
	Health problems	Clumsy, walks or runs poorly (2 or older)
	Growth	Clumsy in doing things with his/her hands
	Eating Problems	Immature, acts much younger than age
	Bowel and Bladder Problems	Dependent and clingy
	Sleep Problems	Passive, seldom shows initiative
	Aches and Pains, earaches, stomach, etc	Disobedient, does not mind well
	Energy Problems, tired and sluggish	Temper tantrums
	Seems to have trouble seeing	Overly aggressive
	Seems to have trouble hearing	Can't sit still, may be hyperactive
	Does not pay attention; poor listener	Timid, fearful, or worries a lot
	Does not talk well for age	Often seems unhappy
	Speech is difficult to understand (3 or older)	Seldom plays with other children
	Does not seem to understand; is slow to "catch on"	Other?

