

The Prime Directive of Parenting

In Kathy Lynn's world, the prime directive of parenting says that all young have a right to expect that those who bore them will raise them to maturity. For many animals, it's no big deal. Mom lays eggs, Dad fertilizes and the job is done.

But for we humans, it's a different kettle of fish. Our kids take about twenty years to reach maturity and they need us all along the way!

Is Sacrifice and Dirty Word?

One parenting debate I've increasingly been hearing is who comes first? Should parents sacrifice for their kids or should parents care for themselves first? If we give up everything for our kids do we run the risk of raising selfish little brats who expect the world to bow down whenever they want something? If we look after ourselves first and meet all our needs do we run the risk of becoming selfish adult brats who don't figure we should have to waste our time on the mundane and petty details of childraising?

Is there no middle ground?

Sacrifice is part of parenting. It starts the minute a woman discovers she's pregnant. She changes her lifestyle. Suddenly the young woman who loves to have a beer after her soccer game opts for club soda. She is looking after her child first and delaying her wish for a beer, for nine months. While she wishes she could have a drink, she doesn't feel badly, she isn't suffering. She is, in fact, thrilled to be able to make this sacrifice to nurture the growth of a healthy fetus.

Okay, there are those of you who are saying, "But that's different. There's no real choice if you want a healthy baby." All the things we do for our children - hanging out at the park when we'd rather be at home, going to parent meetings at the school instead of catching up on the laundry, using a precious holiday day to drive kids on a field trip' all contribute to raising a healthy child who will become a mature, capable adult.

Kids First

One of the supreme ironies of parenting is that if you look after your kids first, you can look after yourself more easily. When you take a flight on an airline you are told that if the oxygen mask falls you are to put it on yourself first, then look after the others who may need your help. And that makes sense. It also takes only a few seconds.

In other arenas of our lives as parents, taking care of ourselves first means that our kids miss out. Going to the park with my kids when they were little was never my favourite experience. For my kids, going to the park was not only a joy, but important to their growth and development. They needed the exercise, the socializing, the chance to

challenge their bodies and see just how far they could climb, how high they could jump. Staying home because that would meet my immediate need might have been an option, but not a responsible one. I went because it mattered to them. They would never be toddlers or preschoolers again so a trip to the park was the right thing to do then .

But, as it turned out, it did meet my needs. First, I did enjoy watching them have so much fun. I got exercise walking to and from the park, and some probably much-needed fresh air. And, more importantly, when we got home my kids were a pleasure. They were able to settle down to reasonable play, they ate well and slept soundly. So, I did get time for myself!

Difficult Times

There are times when a parent needs more than just a few quiet moments. During a marriage breakdown or when there is a death in the family the question of adult-care and child-care is more fragile.

But, I believe that we still need to put the kids first because they just don't have any of the adult resources or experience to help them deal with the crisis.

When I was a girl my mother died. My father found himself the single parent of four young daughters. He totally organized his life to look after us. He was there after school, he was available for us to talk about our concerns and fears in the evening. Mom was gone, but the parenting continued. Later, I learned that after we were settled for the night, he would go to the home of his best friend and unburden himself. It was an example of amazing parenting.

Needs and Wishes

So, let's get back to talking about a middle-ground. The real problem comes when a parent doesn't look after herself at all. Putting kids first doesn't mean denying yourself the care you need. My dad cared for my sisters and me first. Then he looked after himself.

As I mentioned, when you care for your kids' needs, you will have more time because you will have better-behaved and happier kids. But there is a difference between their *needs* and their *wishes*. My kids needed all the values they got from trips to the park when they were little. They might have wished to gorge on junk food, race around the house wildly or have me catering to their every desire, but it didn't happen. That wasn't a need.

It's all about balance. There will be times when you sacrifice or delay your needs to look after your kids. But the pay-off is happier and healthier kids. And isn't that what we really want?

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