

Positive Affirmation: Parenting in the 21st Century

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Many parents today are concerned about preparing their children for life in our turbulent and rapidly changing world. They worry about the detrimental influence of such societal maladies as consumerism, sexual promiscuity, alcohol and drug abuse, the nuclear arms race, violence, social injustice, easy divorce, rising unemployment, and a growing trend towards social apathy and self-focus.

Fearing that their children will grow up anxious and confused, unsure of themselves and their abilities, some parents are looking for new ways to approach their task of parenting. They want to better affirm their children's sense of self-esteem and self-worth, so that their children develop inner security and confidence. They want to encourage their children, fostering independence, self-reliance, and a realistic acceptance of personal strengths and weaknesses.

Some parents, however, are unsure of how to go about doing this. In the past, the biological fact of parenthood was oftentimes the most important qualification thought to be necessary for successful parenting. Today, our social order is much more complex and less clear. Many people are beginning to realize that education can help them become more effective and affirming parents.

"Affirmation" comes from the Latin word "affirmare", which means "to strengthen or make firm." When applied to the parent-child relationship, a parental attitude of affirmation helps children develop positive self-respect and self-esteem. It encourages them to establish security within themselves, as they come to acknowledge and accept both their strengths and their weaknesses. Affirmative parenting communicates to children that they are good and loveable; it instills in them a sense of worthiness and belonging, and creates an attitude of personal competence and adequacy.

Affirmative parenting is grounded in a parent-child relationship of mutual respect and equality. "Equality" in this sense is easily misunderstood; it does not refer to equal attributes, authority, or responsibilities, but rather, to human worth and dignity. Affirmative parenting, therefore, assumes that each person in a family -- mother, father, daughter, son, oldest child, youngest child -- is entitled to equal respect.

This respect is communicated in a myriad of ways. Parents can provide opportunities for children to make their own decisions -- within appropriate limits -- and then allow their children to be responsible for the outcome of their decisions. This type of

guidance is called "natural and logical consequences."

In situations of conflict or concern, parents can learn to distinguish between problems that involve them and their children, and problems that involve just their children. In the latter case, affirming parents offer -- but do not force -- their assistance. Affirming parents realize that their children, and not they, are the ones responsible; they are thus able to free themselves from making their children's difficulties and disappointments their own. In doing this, parents may not only experience relief, but they also encourage their children to develop self-confidence and responsibility.

Respect is also facilitated by the type of communication utilized by the parent. Effective communication listens and invites a response, encouraging dialogue and honest sharing. It expresses love and approval, as well as anger and disappointment; the latter without blame or accusation. Effective communication does not assume to know what is being felt or thought by the other; it waits to hear what the other has to say. Communication of this type is effective because it implies valuing each participant -- parent and child -- as an individual worthy of love and respect.

To help parents in their struggle to become more effective and affirming parents, many psychologists today offer parent education classes through psychology practices, hospitals, churches, and schools. Parenting classes offer parents a practical set of concrete guidelines and principles to help them meet the challenges of raising children today. Classes are usually conducted in small groups, because groups have been found to be an effective method for parent education. In a group, parents provide encouragement for each other. They share concerns and soon learn that their problems are not unique. Through readings and discussions, they realize that their own reactions and attitudes may have influenced their children's unacceptable behavior. Parenting classes help parents to learn more effective ways of relating to their children. By clarifying the purposes of children's behavior, parenting education shows parents how not to reinforce their children's unacceptable behaviors and how to encourage cooperative attitudes. Through class presentation, readings, and discussion, parents discover something else of great value: they learn that they are not necessarily the total cause of the difficulties with their children. When this burden of guilt is removed, parents are freed to function more effectively and experience greater satisfaction and fulfillment.