

Getting the Love You Want



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Imago Center for Relationships
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Conscious Parenting

By Betsy Bergquist, Imago Therapist

In rearing their children, parents need to be able to distinguish the difference between who they are and who their children are - and not try to relive their childhoods through their children.

Children grow up in the psychological space between them and their parents. In their excellent book on parenting, *Giving the Love that Heals*, Harville Hendrix and Helen Hunt refer to that space as a "partnership in the service of the child's well being."

This means that parents must be in tune with the child, seeing children for who they are and understanding their points of view and being emotionally attuned to their feelings even though their points of view and feelings may differ.

This also means that parents need to become conscious, that is to say to learn about their own childhoods so they don't confuse their children's growing up with the way they - the parents - experienced their childhoods or wish their childhoods to have been.

This is especially important if the parents' own needs were not met as children, in which case they tend to see their children unconsciously through their own wounded lens rather than through their child's own experience.

Another piece to such "unconscious" parenting is the assumption that one's children ought to feel and think the way they - their parents - do, and that bringing their children into alignment is part of their job as parents.

This unconscious dimension of parenting is likely to have subtle consequences for children. Children need above all a sense of connection with their parents, and in order to get recognition, attention and connection, they may adapt - either very readily or perhaps after some form of rebellion, and at whatever psychological cost - to their parents' system of beliefs, their perceptions, their values, their reactions, and their way of living day-to-day. They will unconsciously give up their wants and follow the wishes of their parents.

The further consequence is not only that they give up parts of themselves, but that they are also likely to begin to believe that what they want is the same as what their parents want!

So effectiveness for parents means not only meeting children's needs for physical well being, appropriate boundaries and information. It also means continuing to stay tuned to how their own upbringing may stand in the way of more consciously meeting these needs - through listening, understanding, validating, and being empathic - no matter how difficult this may seem in moments of reactivity.

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