How to Parent Successfully Now So Your Child Will Thrive in the Long Run[1]

By Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D.

As a parent of five as well as a parenting author, I know how breathless the experience of parenting can be. Parenting time is often consumed with moment-to-moment decisions made on the fly – and this is true whether your children are infants or adolescents.

If your baby cries should you feed her, put her to bed, or just hold her? If she is having trouble getting to sleep, should you let her cry? Should you let your cranky one-year-old have the bottle you are trying to help her give up? How do you respond when you turn your back for one minute and your three-year-old hits your one-year-old (or your one-year-old knocks down the Lego city that your three-year-old just spent half an hour constructing)? What do you do when your two-year-old melts down in the supermarket just as you reach the checkout counter? What do you say when your five-year-old swears she didn't eat the candy she wasn't supposed to have before dinner but there are wrappers all around her? How do you respond when your six-year-old won't practice the piano? What do you do when your seven-year-old knocks over the checker board because he is losing and stomps out of the room? What is the correct response to get your ten-year-old to do her homework? How can you get your adolescent to help out more around the house, keep to the curfews you have set, and let you in on what is going on in her life?

These very few examples don't begin to capture the multiplicity of dilemmas and choices that confront parents at every moment. But they do illustrate that day-to-day parenting can become entirely about achieving short-term goals: getting the baby to sleep, getting the toddler dressed, keeping siblings from provoking each other, keeping grammar school children on top of their homework, keeping adolescents safe and productive, and so forth. Parents' concerns tend to be short-term as well: is my baby sleeping through the night, rolling over, sitting up, walking, and talking at the right time? Shouldn't my two-and-a-half-year-old be toilet trained? Why doesn't my three-year-old want to separate from me at preschool? And so on.

Once in a while, though, it is helpful to step back from the whirlwind of actions and reactions that envelope parents' daily lives and to reflect on our long-term goals as parents. The reason for this is twofold. First, reconnecting with long-term goals can put short-term concerns and problems in perspective. Second, focusing on long-term goals offers a whole new way of conceptualizing short-term

[1] Adapted from a talk given in Oak Park, IL, October 18, 2005

parenting decisions, helps parents gain confidence, and makes it much easier to build a close, positive relationship with your children and to enjoy the time you spend parenting.

Most people would agree that the long-term goal of parenting is to raise an independent, caring, responsible, competent adult who will also grow up to be a close friend. With no one looking over his shoulder, this adult will take active responsibility for caring for himself, will be honest and productive at work, and will show compassion, loyalty and dependability to others.

We can never emphasize this reality too much: It seems when you are caught up in the process of parenting that it will never end – that your child will be childish forever. But the day will come when your child is living on her own and at that point you will have no control over her choices. That day is the culmination and the goal of all your day-to-day parenting efforts.

The question arises, then, what is the best way to parent your child so that she will make good choices in all areas of her life when she, and not you, is in charge of her everyday experience. Unfortunately, most if not all other parenting experts tell you to try to achieve your long-term goals in the short-term – that is, to try to get your child to behave *now* the way you want her to behave when she is an adult living on her own. For example, they tell you that frustration is good for children because it teaches them to handle the ups and downs they will encounter in "real life." That children need to learn that they can't have everything they want. That in order to become independent, babies and children need to play alone for some part of every day. That children who are untruthful should be punished – otherwise they will continue to lie when they grow up. That children should take responsibility for chores from an early age in order to learn to be responsible adults. That treats, presents, and even your company should be conditional upon the child's good behavior. That constantly giving children what they want spoils them. That too much attention is bad for children because it makes them self-centered and "attention addicted." That always comforting a crying child will teach him to cry to get attention. That if you do things for children they can do for themselves (get them dressed, help with homework) they will never become self-sufficient. That children need to learn there are consequences for their actions. That being nice to children who are misbehaving rewards and encourages their bad behavior. And on like that.

You may be surprised to hear that every one of these familiar statements is a parenting myth that is both incorrect and also, if adhered to, will be harmful to your child. Following these precepts will seriously interfere with your child's ability to become the adult you want him to be. The trouble with these reasonable-sounding prescriptions and so many others like them is that when they are followed, they interfere with your ability to meet your children's true developmental needs. As we will describe shortly, when children are forced to behave with the social graces of adults, they develop needs to make themselves unhappy and cling to childish ways long after they should be outgrown.

Roughly 2,500 years ago, Socrates posed the question, "Can virtue be taught?" All parents face the question of the best way to help their child acquire the capacity for self-regulation. History has shown that we cannot rely on the four most common methods of trying to teach children to be virtuous – disciplinary measures (including disapproval, time-outs, and consequences), moral instruction,

permissiveness and rewards. Think how many adults who lie, cheat, or commit crimes of various kinds know right from wrong and do wrong anyway -- know the penalties for wrongdoing and stray anyway.

The only reasons people with a free choice consistently choose virtue are that they have never developed needs for unhappiness and that they have a stable inner well-being that is based on the knowledge of being loved, loveable and loving, which makes them feel happiest when they are good to themselves and good to others. Put differently, adults choose to be consistently virtuous because they find it the most pleasurable way to live, not because they are worried about being punished or disapproved of.

Children develop a stable appetite for virtue, compassion, and self-regulation when parents understand the true nature of their children's minds and emotions and accurately tailor their expectations to fit their children's developmental stage. The Smart Love discovery, which has been supported by many subsequent child development studies, is that your child was born in love with you and believing that every experience she has is intended by you and good for her. In this way, the child's mind is very different from the adult mind. Every baby and young child equates effect and cause – if she feels happy and comfortable, she is convinced that her parents want her to feel that way and that what she feels is how she should feel. But if she feels unhappy and uncomfortable, and no one is there to comfort her, she is convinced that her parents want her to feel that way and that what she feels is how she should feel.

When parents consistently respond positively and lovingly, their young child wants only more of the happiness she feels at being able to cause her parents caring responses. When parents follow bad parenting advice and leave babies to cry themselves to sleep or to wait unhappily until the "next" feeding; isolate unhappy or angry toddlers; punish older children by depriving them of what they care about; and so on, children confuse the unhappiness they feel with happiness because they assume that whatever they feel is what their parents want them to feel and is good for them. As a result, children who are left to cry uncomforted develop needs for the unhappiness they feel because they have confused this unhappiness with ideal happiness. And because they have no language, no standard of comparison, and no ability to know that when parents leave them uncomforted parents are acting out of misguided but good intentions, babies and young children never doubt that the unhappy feelings they come to want are not true happiness. As adults, they continue to need some degree of unhappiness (which is why we called our self-help book for adults *Addicted to Unhappiness*[2]*).*

We often illustrate the process by which children develop needs for unhappiness by analogy to the imprinting that occurs in many other species. Because every baby is born adoring her parents and wanting to be just like them, every baby is destined to copy her parents – not just how they walk and talk – that will come later – but how they treat her and how they make her feel. Long before she develops speech, locomotion, or cognitive reasoning, a baby will throw her heart and soul into the effort to make herself feel just like she feels when she is with her parents.

[2] McGraw-Hill, 2004.

The parenting process is transformed when we keep in mind both the nature of the child's mind and our long-term goal – the adult we want to produce. Instead of focusing on trying to get children to behave in certain "adult" ways (sleeping through the night, eating on schedule), the short-term goal changes. You want to take every opportunity to help your child to feel loved, loveable, comforted, and happy, and to help her to trust that when she is unhappy you will do everything you can to help her feel better so that in the long run she will copy you and become compassionate, caring, and competent and will never develop needs to make herself or others unhappy.

The difference between this perspective and traditional child-raising advice is vast. To illustrate: The goal of helping babies sleep changes from getting them to sleep through the night to helping them to put themselves to sleep without ever having to cry hysterically. The goal of responding to your mobile toddler changes from teaching her that there are things she shouldn't touch to making her environment safe for exploration. Your goal with the toddler also changes from trying to get her to play by herself so as to become "independent" to being especially available to her so that her primary happiness can become stable and she can experience true independence. I could go on and on, because when you keep in mind the special nature of the child's mind and the long-term goal of your parenting efforts, the resulting transformation in your short-term goals for your child touches every aspect of parenting in every phase and for every age.

Only in the Smart Love approach to parenting are the long-term and short-term goals of parenting identical, namely to raise children who have no need to make themselves unhappy and who always feel loveable and loved. Needs for unhappiness arise when parents act on bad advice and make their children unnecessarily unhappy on the theory that this builds character, produces desirable behaviors, or prepares children for the real world. As I said earlier, the child who is made unnecessarily unhappy confuses those feelings with ideal happiness and develops needs to feel more of that unhappiness. These needs for unhappiness can cause children to develop problems sleeping, eating, getting along with friends, in school, staying safe, and so on.

I would like to focus now on ways to distinguish helpful from harmful short-term parenting decisions. Helpful short-term parenting decisions further rather than interfere with long-term parenting goals. I will also make a few remarks about the best way to respond to children who have developed needs for unhappiness in order to help them become happier and more successful.

The following examples illustrate that because of the immaturity of children's minds, the worst way to get children to behave like adults in the long run is to force them into adult behavior in the short run. You may or may not have heard of the "no" phase, but if you have children over two, you have certainly encountered it. You are amazed one morning when you offer your child his favorite cereal and he looks at you and says, "No!" Or you tell him he needs to get his socks on so he can go to a friend's house and he shakes his head and utters a loud, "No." Soon you find that your formerly cooperative child is saying "No" constantly even to things you know he wants.

If you think of him as a miniature adult, you worry that he has become disobedient, rebellious, and antisocial and you may feel obligated to show him that you and not he is the "boss." But this short-term focus on his behavior will only intensify his determination not to have his wishes interfered with, and you will find yourself locked in a power struggle with an irrational and determined little being. Your child's insistence on having his way will solidify and, ultimately, become a part of his personality, making it harder for your child to want to be cooperative in later years.

In contrast, when you understand how different the preschooler's mind is from the adult's mind, you will see that it makes much more sense to take the long view when you respond to your determined child. Every child goes through an extended phase in which her inner well-being depends to some extent on getting what she wants when she wants it. She is under the spell of what we call the **all-powerful self**, which is the child's compelling but unfounded belief in her ability to fulfill any and every wish.

The all-powerful self tells the child that she is strong enough and wise enough to do anything that her parents can do (including cook on the real stove and drive the family car) and that, in addition, no one has the power to interfere with her wishes. She takes great pleasure in asserting this feeling of being all-powerful – hence her delight in saying, "No," (I don't *have* to do what you want) even when she means "Yes" (I really do *want* what you are offering/suggesting).

The all-powerful self can be challenging to live with, but it is also adaptive. When you consider the number of attempts young children must make to learn to tie their shoes, eat with a fork, learn to read, or ride a bike, you can see that the belief in their invincibility keeps them from giving up. Once you realize that this is a normal, adaptive, and time-limited phase, you can relax and not feel you have to stamp out the "rebellious" behavior.

The long-term view that shapes your short-term responses is that over time the child's cognition will mature and she will cease to believe in her invincible power. As a sixth grader, the child who as a little boy told you he was "stronger than Spiderman," will tell you how much he admires another child in the class who is an amazing distance runner. The third grader who as a two-year-old couldn't understand why he couldn't cook on the real stove will ask you to hold hands with him so he doesn't fall when he goes skating for the first time. The all-powerful self is not fully outgrown until the end of adolescence, which explains why many teens think they cannot get STDs or be hurt by smoking.

Returning to our preschooler, when you understand the normality and inevitability of the all-powerful self and the phase in which "NO" becomes her favorite word, your short-term goal changes from forcing her into premature obedience to peaceful, affectionate coexistence. Why clash head on with a trait that will be outgrown on its own, especially when the child has no ability at that moment to know that the super powers she believes she possesses are not real. She will dig in her heels and resist any efforts to convince her that she isn't invincible, with the result that she will have great difficulty outgrowing her all-powerful self at the appropriate time.

When your long-term understanding of the child's developmental process changes your short-term goal to delicately managing rather than dominating the child's all-powerful self, this stage can be navigated with good humor and even enjoyed. You can feel tickled rather than challenged when you offer your two-year-old some raisins and she shakes her head and says "No" as she stuffs them in her mouth.

Many battles can simply be avoided – if your child doesn't want to get dressed to go to the park, it often doesn't matter whether you go now or later. And when you tell her she can decide when she wants to go, you will often find that after a few minutes she will announce with the same determination she told you she wouldn't go, "I want to go to the park now – I'm putting my socks on." Even when you have to insist that your child do something she doesn't want to, like get in her car seat, there is no reason to get angry at her resistance. If you understand that she is simply trying to prove that she is too powerful to be interfered with and that this is normal, you can try to make the behavior more palatable ("Can you put your bear in his seat belt too?") or if that doesn't work, just strap her in without becoming angry and try to comfort her if she cries.

When you take the long view and respond diplomatically to the "No" phase, your child will never be driven to cling desperately to feelings of invincibility. She will gradually learn on her own that although she can't always get what she wants, you are always there helping her to feel better. By the time she reaches adulthood, the child who is responded to in this way in the short-term will achieve the long-term goal of basing her everyday happiness on the pleasure of making a good effort toward a goal rather than on success at having things turn out as she wishes. She will be resilient, not devastated when she doesn't succeed, and she will not be driven to dominate others in order to feel good about herself but will enjoy dialogue and cooperation.

Another illustration of the way in which trying to get a child to behave in the short run the way you want him to behave in the long run can backfire concerns the notions of dependence and independence. It is puzzling that so many parenting experts caution parents against making their children dependent when the essence of childhood is dependency. It's obvious that babies and young children need intense care to survive, yet parents are told that if their children are to become independent adults, they need to be encouraged to be independent as children, which means children are told to play by themselves and not to demand too much attention or help.

These short-term strategies for developing independence in children backfire because they rest both on a misconception of what true independence represents and also on a misunderstanding of children's minds and needs. Independence is popularly and mistakenly defined by the extent of the child's emotional and physical distance from her parents, which is why the process by which children develop independence is often erroneously compared to a fledgling's being pushed out of the nest. But truly independent individuals expand their horizons because they possess an abundance of confidence and good feelings, not because they are pushed away, need to prove something, or are ashamed of their wishes for closeness. Truly independent adults also have the capacity for close involvement with others and are comfortable asking for help.

I described earlier how every child is born assuming that the way she feels is the way her parents want her to feel and the way she should feel, and how every child needs to reproduce for herself the feelings she experiences with her parents. The implications of this simple dynamic for parenting are seismic. When parents ration their availability and warmth on the theory that indulging their loving impulses toward their children will make them dependent and unfit for real life, children learn a very different lesson, namely that they shouldn't want or need closeness and help. Children's minds being what they are, children will take this lesson to heart and grow up to have great difficulties with closeness and to need relationship conflict. They may appear technically independent, but that independence is to some extent based on negative feelings about relationship pleasure and is destructive of their ability to enjoy their life. They are also likely to have great difficulty asking for help when appropriate.

In reality, the way to meet the long-term goal of raising children to be independent adults is never to refuse love, affection, and attention to the child who turns to you. It is normal and appropriate for young children to recognize their parents as the source of their greatest pleasure and to adore them and want to be with and near them. When your young child learns that love and caring are abundant and that help and attention are there for the asking, as she gets older this child will explore her world and make friends secure in the conviction that she is loved and loveable and knowing that relationships are one of life's great pleasures. The same principle applies to older children – even adolescents normally go through periods in which they need and want a lot of their parents' time and attention. Pushing away children of any age achieves the short-term goal of having them look independent at the expense of the long-term goal that they attain true independence as adults. Genuine independence is a function of the pleasure of exercising one's capabilities in the context of having close relationships with friends, partners, and parents, and also with the capacity to ask for help when appropriate.

The final example I will offer here of how a focus on short-term behavioral goals can interfere with our ability to achieve our long-term parenting goals is the topic of discipline. Parents are sometimes told that disciplinary methods are "magical" as in the popular book "One, Two, Three, Magic," but in reality they work for only one very practical reason – *we are bigger and stronger than our children*. Can you imagine telling a huge football player that he had better do what you want before you reach the count of three and thinking that this will be an effective way to get him to do something he doesn't want to do? *We can force our children to do or to stop doing almost anything – how we choose to use that power, though, shapes the kind of adults our children become.*

The short-term approach to discipline is to use whatever works (counting to three, disapproval, consequences, time-outs, and so on) to get the child to do what you want, or to stop doing what you don't want. When negative consequences, such as grounding or withholding allowances, are added to the management of children's behavior, children will often bring their behavior in line with parents' wishes. But what they learn is that might makes right, to treat themselves harshly when they make a mistake, and to feel angry and use aggression toward others who don't do what they want. So in the short-term disciplinary measures can make children "behave," but these measures sabotage our long-term goal of nurturing an adult who will be good to herself and compassionate and tolerant toward others.

The Smart Love approach is to keep in mind that children love us and will copy how we treat them. Therefore, we do not want to model aggression as a form of relationship problem solving. Accordingly, we separate the punitive and manipulative components of discipline from the regulatory components and we retain only the regulatory component. In the end, children learn to govern themselves effectively only by identifying with their parents' kindness and helpfulness toward them, and not by being made unhappy.

I advocate replacing discipline and permissiveness with an approach to managing children's behavior that I call *loving regulation.* Loving regulation means helping children to make constructive choices in a context of ongoing closeness with them. The child whose behavior is managed this way learns that genuine happiness results from feeling loveable and loved rather than from the gratification of any particular desire. The child also learns that it is possible to disagree with what another person is doing and still love and care for that person.
Let's say that your two-and-a-half-year-old keeps reaching for the knobs on the stove after you patiently explain that he can't touch the stove because it will give him an "owie." If you yell, slap his hand, or give him a time-out, he may well stop reaching for the stove, but he will also have learned to use power coercively against those who don't do what he wants. Moreover, these disciplinary measures interfere with the long-term goal of nurturing an adult who will do the right thing when no one is looking over his shoulder, because disciplinary measures cause resentment and rebelliousness. One way to get even is to do the forbidden thing as soon as no one else is around.

If you respond to the preschooler who is reaching for the stove with loving regulation, knowing that the child's all-powerful self is trying to prove that it cannot be interfered with, you will be as diplomatic as possible and will either find something fun for her to do (bang spoons on pots, pour water) or gently move her to another part of the house where you can get her absorbed in a different activity. If she cries, you will understand that she is at an age when it is hard not to get what she wants when she wants it and will do your best to comfort her. *Loving regulation protects the child from the stove while at the same time it shows the child that she can feel loved by and loving toward those who don't agree with her choices*. Because she is being guided in an affectionate and tactful way, she does not develop either resentment or needs to prove, when no one is around, that she can do what she wants after all.

If space permitted, I could give many more examples illustrating how making children behave like adults in the short-run interferes with our long-term goals as parents. I will mention just a few, all of which are discussed more fully in my parenting book, *Smart Love: The Comprehensive Guide To Understanding, Regulating, and Enjoying Your Child*. Examples are: Punishing children who lie to teach them to be more truthful. Grounding children who don't do chores to make them more responsible. Promising children a reward for getting good grades. Showing disapproval toward toddlers who grab and don't share in order to teach them generosity. Giving whining children a time-out to teach them to talk in a less irritating tone of voice. Withholding help from frustrated children in order to teach them persistence. And punishing or responding negatively to grammar school children who cheat at a board game in order to teach them to play by the rules.

In each of these examples, forcing children into adult behavior ignores the immaturity of their minds and emotions and is counterproductive, producing contrary and negative effects. On the other hand, the Smart Love approach is to allow children the time and space they need to act like children instead of adults, secure in the knowledge that one day they will choose to be responsible and virtuous because they feel *happier* that way.

I would like to turn for a moment to the best way to respond to the child who has developed needs for unhappiness, expressed in symptoms such as night terrors, frequent periods of sadness or self-criticism, chronic conflicts with friends, difficulties in school, and so on. Lecturing and punishing children who have developed needs for unhappiness does not work, because these children have unknowingly equated unhappiness with parental love and affection and they continue to want and need this mislabeled unhappiness. Punishments and other negative responses further entrench children's needs for unhappiness because the more unhappy you make them, the more they unknowingly conclude that this is how you want them to feel.

The only effective way to help the child who has become addicted to unhappiness is to treat him as he needed to be treated earlier – with loving regulation rather than with discipline and tough love. You may have to insist on certain behaviors (he has to go to school, wear his helmet bike riding, he cannot hit his younger sister, etc.), but you can remain positive and affectionate in the process and try to help him to feel more comfortable when he melts down because he can't have his way. Only then will he have the ability to make comparisons between types of happiness. When he realizes that the happiness he feels when parents remain loving and positive in the process of managing his behavior is superior to the "happiness" he feels when parents use discipline (including disapproval, time-outs, "consequences," and so on) then at that point he can begin to prefer the happiness that comes from making constructive choices and being in close relationships and to turn away from the learned need to comfort himself with experiences that produce feelings of unhappiness. If you want to know more about how to respond to the child who has developed needs for unhappiness, there is a fuller discussion in *Smart Love*.

I would like to conclude by noting that perhaps the most difficult aspect of parenting is to parent in the here-and-now while simultaneously keeping in mind our long-term goal, namely nurturing an adult who will take good care of herself, be compassionate to others, and work productively when no one is looking over her shoulder. The problem is that we cannot use children's behavior as a guide to whether we are parenting successfully now for the long-term. For example, just because we can make a two-year-old share does not mean that she will grow up to be altruistic. In reality by demanding adult virtue from a child who is in a normal phase of wanting to have what she wants when she wants it, we are making it more difficult for her to outgrow this phase and develop the capacity for generosity. I have known more than one child who was forced to share as a two-year-old who habitually stole as an eighth grader. By the same reasoning, a two-year-old's inability to share is not a sign that she won't be a generous adult, but is phase-appropriate behavior. She will eventually outgrow her obsession with having what she wants, particularly when friends become more important to her than things and she realizes that sharing makes friendships go more smoothly.

Our true short-term goal as parents is not to pressure children prematurely into grown-up behavior, but to allow them to take the time they need to become an adult, *namely all of childhood*.

Letting children be children is easier said than done because so many of us grew up believing that children are by nature manipulative, selfish, and untruthful and, therefore, *that they will take advantage of kindness*. In this view, criticisms, punishments, and "lessons" are required to make children adequately socialized. It can be difficult to shift gears and accept that children's controlling inborn motive is to experience positive relationship pleasure with their parents, and that when development goes wrong it is because discipline and excessive expectations have taught children to want and need unhappiness.

One advantage of this new perspective on parenting is that it allows you to relax and enjoy your child and his childhood. Many of the behaviors that may have concerned you can now be seen as normal, phase-appropriate behaviors that will be outgrown better if they are handled in a relaxed and nonjudgmental way. You are free to enjoy your child without worrying that you are not training him properly. Enjoying him and allowing him to enjoy you is not only pleasant, but the best way to attain your long-term goals as a parent. The most effective way to help your child through the inevitable ups and downs of childhood is not to lecture or punish but to do what in your heart you really want to do – offer love, hugs, and gentle guidance knowing that that *your instinct to respond positively is not something you have to ration but is the best way to help your child develop into the adult you want him to become*.