

Psychotherapy Newsletter

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Every Day is Mother's Day

Aside from being a little too busy at times, I have always been grateful that I have either been in school studying psychology or functioning as a therapist as I am raising my children. When I have learned principles regarding relationships, parenting, communication skills, boundaries, and so on, over the years, I apply them as best I can to the ongoing, challenging job of helping myself and my family members (whether they want it or not) become as psychologically sound as possible. Not only do I have the advantage of learning parenting material along the way and working with other families

with similar issues; but I have also had my own therapy and a circle of colleagues that provide me with the opportunity to run scenarios by them and receive very valuable, professional feedback.

A therapist shared a bit of wisdom with me years ago when my children were still very young. I have kept it in mind and it has served me well over the years. It goes something like this: parenting never stops, even on those special occasions when we are "supposed" to be happy. Disneyland, the "Happiest Place on Earth," must still remain a training ground for maintaining healthy boundaries, following parental directives, exhibiting kindness toward others, and so on, even though a day at Disneyland is slated as a carefree, fun, "happy" event. Taking ten minutes for a time out on a bench on Main Street, may be, in the long run, the most valuable occurrence of the

day. Knowing this as a parent and being willing to handle what comes our way, rather than feel an immediate sense of resentment that we are being called upon to "parent" when we just spent a lot of money to buy some "fun" and would rather consider it a day off and enjoy ourselves, is an important idea to keep in mind as events of the day unfold.

The same is true at our children's birthday parties. The very day that is carefully planned to be a special day to honor our child, is often one of their most tiring, challenging, and draining days. Between the sugar high, the over-stimulation of other excited little bodies around them, having to share their new, just unwrapped gifts, and focus on structured games where there is going to be winners and losers (usually mostly losers), is all terribly overwhelming. Watching our children disintegrate from the great little people they usually are to an exhausted, strung out (and for lack of a more descriptive word) "brat,"



is not exactly what we had hoped for the day. Again, the need to put aside our expectations that this will be a completely joyous occasion for our child, resentment that our child is not acknowledging all that we have invested in an effort to provide them with a fun-filled, special day, and do the necessary parenting required of us is a challenging, but useful notion.

Now that my children are older, I still need to remind myself that the idiom from the earlier days still applies. I'm still "on duty," even on my special days. Take this Mother's Day, for instance. Being the forthright, non-martyr-like therapist-mother that I am, I gave my entire immediate family a plan for the day (we were not celebrating with extended family this year). I told both my children and my husband that I wanted to sleep in, go to the late church service, see a movie, and then go to dinner at a nice restaurant at a nearby, newly built resort. My fifteen year old daughter chuckled at me as I presented my plan a few days before Mother's Day and said something like, "You're so cute, Mom."

Everyone being agreeable to my plan and given plenty of forewarning, I had lulled myself into thinking this might actually turn out to be the carefree, gratifying family day I had carefully planned. It wasn't until an hour before leaving for the movie that I received my first hint that something was brewing that had the potential to shift the tide of the day. I was relaxing in the backyard, reading a book, enjoying the solitude of the moment, when my daughter asks if the outfit she has on is suitable for the evening plans. I told her that it would be fine if

we were only going to the movies, but due to dining at the restaurant at the resort, she would need to upgrade her shoes and wear a sweater instead of a sweatshirt. She seemed agreeable to the "suggestions" and off she went. The first official storm cloud appeared as she did at the car as we were pulling out of the driveway for the movies. She had on a different pair of pants than previously modeled, but one with frayed hems, and she was carrying her sweatshirt. Both my husband and I responded almost simultaneously, explaining that this was not appropriate attire. Since one of the issues my husband and I share in life is a lack of desire for conflict, we compromised and stated that if she left her sweatshirt in the car during dinner, that this would be acceptable. Unfortunately, we had not reached the borders of our housing area before I realized that the chatter from the backseat was intolerable for even the avoid-conflict-if-possible, and choose-your-battles-carefully parents that we are. With one quietly delivered utterance from me, something like, "oops, we just crossed a line," my husband pulled a u-turn and we dropped our daughter back off at home with instructions that she was not to leave the house while we completed my Mother's Day plans.

I am not suggesting this tack would work for all families, as we have the luxury now, with older children, to actually leave them

safely alone at home.

Even though avoiding conflict is one of my themes (healthy or not), the idea that my parenting never stops, even on Mother's Day, won out, and I was able to put aside most traces of resentment I might have allowed myself to feel (and if you are raising an adolescent, you know the tempting mantra...how can they can be so self-centered?) I enjoyed the movie, which luckily was a comedy, and had a delicious dinner with the other two members of my family. By the time we arrived home, I was filled up, relaxed, and confident that my daughter had learned whatever lessons she needed to learn, and no further consequence or limit setting from me was in order. I could tell from her respectful energy that I had guessed correctly. I went to bed that night satisfied that it was a Mother's Day filled with what gives me the privilege of being able to celebrate this day...the good, the bad, and the ugly of raising children. It wasn't until the evening of the next day that I got a tangible confirmation that we were on the right road and that I received my most prized Mother's Day gift of all...an "I love you, mom" from my daughter as she went upstairs to bed.

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