

Using the Brain's Biology to Become Humanistic Parents

Raising Humanistic Children: An Introduction*

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A series of brief articles will introduce parents to some of the research on the brain, the mind, and human relationships represented by a new perspective that is being called "interpersonal neurobiology."

Recently I visited my youngest stepdaughter in Texas. As we chatted and reminisced about her childhood, I reminded her of an incident that took place when she was about five years old. She had written all over the bathroom marble fixtures in red crayon. This was very challenging for me as a parent. I clearly remember my inner struggle to avoid getting caught up in an authoritarian reaction. In that moment, I spared no effort to manage my own anger and frustration and to be respectful of her as a person - yet get her to clean it up. We laughed about it together, and yet my stepdaughter replied, "I've heard this story before but I really don't remember it."

In relating our conversation to a colleague, I realized the event was not a memory *for her* because at the time she wasn't the one struggling to change. The emotional flow between us occurred within our normal range. Siegal and Hartzell state that "it is important to attune to, or resonate with, the emotional experience inside the child before changing the external behavior."¹ Had I "lost it," I would have caused her great emotional distress, leading to a rupture or disconnection in our relationship. She would have been more likely to remember the incident, and not fondly.

In *The Buddha in Your Mirror*, the authors describe "three stages in the character development of human beings: dependent, independent, and contributive."² When we form relationships with other adults, we can have a contributive, or interdependent, goal at the beginning of the relationship. The relationships we have with our children, however, are unique. In raising children, we *begin* with their being dependent on us. Over time, we support them in developing their own independence and then their capacity to function in a contributive manner. When SGI President Daisaku Ikeda stated, "for the sake of your children's sound development, please build a 'creative family' in which you will develop and advance alongside your children,"³ he was providing us with a vision of the contributive framework.

If asked, most parents would say that they love their children. When we closely look at our behavior during the daily interactions we have with our children, however, we may be dismayed that we do not demonstrate our love as often as we believe. It is a parent's crucial function to guide and teach children. In some cases, we unknowingly invest in our child's achievement in a manner that builds a dependent (or co-dependent) framework, distorting our intended guidance and teaching. When this occurs, we neither contribute to their lives nor teach them to be contributive persons themselves.

Once there was a high school freshman whose father harbored a strong desire that he play football, a dream the son did not share despite this physical suitability. The father couldn't hear that the son's dreams for himself didn't include football and thus arranged for him to attend football-training camp. The young man's heart wasn't in it and he sustained an injury early on that kept him off the field for the balance of the season. This pattern reoccurred each year throughout high school.

When we treat our children as a possession or extension of ourselves rather than as separate beings with their own inherent enlightenment, we diminish our own lives as well as theirs. "One of the greatest obstacles to the joy of loving is our desire for control. We sometimes mistake our wish to control others for loving concern. We may think of ourselves as affectionate, yet our 'love' may be a disguised desire to manipulate others for our personal gain."⁴

This controlling type of 'love' was astutely described by Eileen McGruder. "I...discovered that, while on one hand I was chanting for my 22-year-old son to grow up and be strong and independent," she writes, "deep inside I really wanted to keep him needy and dependent on me; because in my heart, I believed that if he wasn't dependent on me, then he wouldn't love me."⁵

We struggle so often to respond appropriately to our children and yet, all too often, entangled in our own history, we instead react in a way that establishes a negative cycle. We are advised that "the purpose of parenting is to protect and teach our children how to survive and thrive in the society in which they live. Looking at our cultural context and family goals, we must continually ask ourselves how we can best support our children, and are we making the parenting causes to get there. Examine *your* parenting style. Is it closer to autocratic (dictator-like, imposing parental will through anger and punishment), permissive (limitless, 'anything goes'), or democratic ('do-as-I-do' and giving freedom within limits)? The most humanistic (and effective) style is the democratic model."⁶

Our essential mission as parents practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is to bring out our own enlightened nature and encourage everyone around us to do the same, including our own children. In order to achieve our mission, we must develop a humanistic parenting style and become wise parents. Therefore, it's helpful to understand all that we can about our lives and the developing lives of our children. The intent of this series is to help parents achieve this goal.

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¹ Siegel, Daniel and Hartzell, Mary. *Parenting from the Inside Out*, (NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher Putnam), 2003 p. 58.

² Hochswender, Woody; Martin, Greg; and Morino, Ted. *The Buddha in Your Mirror*, (*Santa Monica: Middleway Press*), 2001, p. 130. The authors state that most people are aware only of the dependent state (e.g., dependent upon another's behavior for his or her happiness) and independent state (which can lead to arrogant self-confidence) The contributive, or interdependent, state of life, however, is one in which we neither attach strings to our relationships with others nor cause conflict with others and become isolated. Rather, because we stand firmly on a foundation of our own happiness, we can engage in sharing, nurturing relationships.

³ SGI President Daisaku Ikeda's message to the "Raising Our Children" Conference, SGI-USA Florida Nature and Culture Center, August 16, 2001.

⁴ Yatomi, Shin, "What Love is Not." World Tribune, December 7, 2001 (p. 10)

⁵ McGruder, Eileen, "Discovering Soka Spirit in My Own Life." World Tribune, March 15, 2002 (p. 4)

⁶ From overview materials, "Raising Our Children" Conference, SGI-USA Florida Nature and Culture Center, 1999.