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Page 7

BUMRUNGRAD INTERNATIONAL HOSPITAL: RAISING CHILDREN: THE SOONER YOU START...

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Raising children: the sooner you start...

In front of a famous cathedral in Italy there's a plaque that I always think about whenever the topic of raising children comes up. I stumbled on it a few years ago during a social visit to patients of mine in that country.

One day during the trip I toured the hillside town of Orvieto, in the central region. Popes have stayed in this town since the 11th century and it's also home to a famous Gothic cathedral which dates back to the 14th century.

The text on the plaque can be translated as follows:

1. At the age of 3: Dad knows everything.
2. At the age of 5: Dad knows nearly everything.
3. At the age of 8: Dad is quite knowledgeable.
4. At the age of 12: Dad knows some things.
5. At the age of 15: Dad knows nothing.
6. At the age of 20: Dad is not knowledgeable, so I have to teach him.

This sums up succinctly my belief that, if you want to teach and make a lasting impression on your children, you must begin in their very early years, because once a child's schooling begins, parental influence wanes. As the plaque indicates, once toddlers begin to develop self-awareness, they realise they need their parents for continual guidance; they view their parents as "superhuman" beings who can teach them everything.

HARD AT WORK

Nowadays, many parents take a less-than-active role raising their children during the critical, (in)formative early years. They may feel pressured to work harder in order to achieve financial security and so they hire outsiders to handle much of the child-care duties.

However, during these early years children don't yet understand the meaning of money; they simply want their mum and dad to be around and to teach them about life. Speaking from a personal perspective, I am here today as a physician because my mum raised me well. She was always around to support me and she had to assume the parental role single-handedly because my father died when I was still a child.

SCHOOL BRINGS CHANGE

A child's perspective changes around the age of 5, the time when school begins. By then, children are a bit more aware of what is happening around them and new authority figures come into their lives to teach them. By the age of 8, they are quite knowledgeable about a range of subjects and begin to realise that their parents are not infallible.

A major turning point in the parent-child relationship takes place around the age of 12. This is a time when the generation gap becomes deep-seated; children make a noticeable push for independence from their parents, who find it increasingly difficult to influence or impress their child.

TURNING POINT

When my son was 12, my wife and I decided to send him to school overseas. This shocked many of our friends, and we were frequently asked to explain the reason for our decision. The gist of my

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response was: My son is 12 years old and I have taught him well. But I am no longer able to continue teaching him. It would be better for a teacher to instruct him from now on.

Further pressures between parents and children occur when the child is around the age of 15. Teenagers often overestimate their knowledge base, and parental efforts to teach or discipline their teenage child often result in conflict.

ROLE REVERSAL

Finally, by the age of 20, the tables have begun to turn in the parent-child relationship. The typical 20-year-old tends to view his parents as uninformed, or unaware, and in need of the child's guidance.

This has certainly been the case in my family. The relationship my wife and I have with our son, who is now in his late 20s, has been completely reversed. My son lives in Canada and when we visit he takes care of us the same way we took care of him when he was young; he says he does so because we are now old.

I fight him on this point, but he just replies that, in his eyes, we are old. Not only does he help us with our investments; he insists we seek his permission before taking an overseas trip because he worries that we might choose a dangerous destination.

His concern is based on love. My wife and I were regarded — by outsiders and my own mother, too — as strict parents. That didn't bother me; I would explain that, even though we might be strict parents, our children would always know that we loved them.

When it came to discipline, my parenting philosophy was: if your child does something good, tell him so right away. On the other hand, if they do something bad, don't tell them they did something wrong; instead, talk to them about it in a way that will encourage them to reflect upon what they did and allow them to come up with a way to change their course of action.



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