

# The Hidden Gift Behind Our Biggest Parenting Struggles

Wednesday, September 10, 2008

by Lauren Bondy, MSW



Parenting is one of life's greatest joys. If you've been a parent for more than a week, you know that parenting can also be one of our greatest challenges. As mothers, we are thrust into the initial trial of managing our emotions under sleep deprived conditions while simultaneously redefining every aspect of our lives--including going to the bathroom. Just as we begin to get the hang of things, a new developmental milestone arrives. We are faced with questions such as, "How do we deal with the tantrums, the whining, the food and sleep issues, sibling fighting, the shy child, the aggressive child?" The list goes on and on. More relevant than how we deal with the challenge of the moment, is the deeper question of whether we like ourselves when dealing with parenting challenges.

I recently had an epiphany about parenting. As a social worker and mother of three, I specialize in helping parents broaden their range of parenting tools to nurture healthy development and help make family life more peaceful. Over years of working with parents, I've observed the greatest parenting struggles occur when our children behave in ways that push our buttons. We respond with knee-jerk reactions such as yelling, shaming, or scolding. These knee-jerk reactions are never helpful and leave everyone involved feeling miserable and disconnected. Each time our buttons get pushed, it is a signal to us that there is a hidden or unresolved issue that keeps us disconnected from the deepest truth of who we are.

My epiphany was that each tantrum, each defiant "no", each bedtime struggle, each friendship issue, each temperament response that is the exact opposite of ours is actually a gift to us. Yes, I did say "gift." Talk about a paradigm shift. You mean my child is not trying to torture me and the universe is not getting revenge for the trauma I caused my parents? The "challenge of the moment" is an opportunity for us to deepen ourselves, strengthen our way of being and connect with the present moment so that we can lead a more joyful and fulfilled life. If we choose to recognize and embrace that signal, we not only deepen ourselves, we create a nurturing space in which our children can thrive. The deeper our connection to self, the better we are at nurturing the same in our children. Talk about a win-win. Fortunately or not, parenting provides us with seemingly endless opportunities to practice living from a deeper place.

The struggle often works something like this: you need to leave the house in 5 minutes. You are rushing and you tell your eight year old to go to the bathroom, get

his shoes on, and be ready to leave SOON! You continue to complete your tasks so that you can leave on time. Five minutes later, you discover that your child has NOT put on his shoes, taken out markers, paper, glue and has made a huge mess. Exasperated, outraged, you yell, he cries and getting out the door now seems impossible. You tell him to "stop crying, there is no time for this." He cries harder and you scream louder. You get the picture. We've all been there....

The next time you find yourself in a similar scenario, begin by asking "What does being late mean to me?" or "Why do I over schedule my life so that I'm rushing myself and my family?" "What is my child's indifference triggering in me at this moment?" or "What happens to me when I have no control of the physical order around me?" Nerve-racking or stressful moments tend to be about triggered fear from the past, or anxiety about the future. Neither of these is about the present moment. When we are truly present, we will ALWAYS act out of love. We won't rage or behave in ways that make us and our children unhappy. Instead, our calm, our acceptance our empathy and compassion offer our children the greatest of all gifts. Know that the answers to such questions may not come immediately. However, by asking the questions, you begin an amazing process that will enrich your life and the lives of your children.

Parenting is difficult when we don't have enough tools to parent in helpful ways. There are four primary areas in which tools can be helpful. First, parents often have unrealistic expectations for their children's behavior based on the developmental age of their child. They move to correct their children and miss the critical step of teaching. Parents need to see themselves as teachers in the context of a loving and connected relationship. Second, parents often don't know why they are making the choices they make with their children (i.e. taking electronic privileges away for any type of misbehavior) but make them anyway. Third, quandaries exist when parents don't have enough strategies to help prevent our children's eruptions or realize how they may unknowingly be contributing to the drama. The earlier scenario is a great example of how a parent could benefit from tools to prevent that entire scene. Last, parents can benefit from strategies that will help them stay present and connected to themselves when "normal" childhood drama or painful experiences in life inevitably occur. When scenarios similar to those described above take place, parents lack a conscious plan (tools) for dealing with their children and/or have disconnected from themselves.

Becoming more conscious about parenting is not instantaneous. However, it is valuable to be keenly aware that our role as parents affords us an ongoing and unique opportunity to embark on a journey—a journey that we are already on but may not yet have recognized. Given this epiphany, we can say "thank you" to these unpleasant experiences that push our buttons. "Thank you, tantrum, for causing in me a reaction in which I scream at my child and become anxious." "Thank you" because I now realize that my reaction is actually an opportunity to reconnect to my deepest self which is truly about love and connection.