
FROM A FATHER'S PERSPECTIVE

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“Avoiding the Temptation of Imprinting Yourself on Your Child”

As the story goes, Leonard Bernstein's father was criticized for failing to recognize the talent of his son, to which he was reported to have responded that, “How was he to know he would grow up to be Leonard Bernstein?”

As I reflect on the early years of our children's lives, it was hard to resist the temptation of looking into their eyes and seeing an image play back of how much I wanted them to be an improved model of myself, absent all of the flaws and imperfections I saw when I looked at myself in my own mirror image. I so yearned to save them from the wrong turns I had made, yet was resigned to the fact that with their first utterance of the “No” that these little lives that were carrying my genes had a few of their own. Thus began the struggle to resist smothering their emerging oneness in themselves.

As a teacher with abundant graduate education in learning theory, I found myself wholly unprepared for the imprinting on a child beyond that delivered in 60-minute increments. Soon I found the true lessons of the power of the incremental impact of parental influence over children. First in those lessons was the reality that even when parents do their work badly, children have a self-righting ability and can figure out even the most amateur of attempts to influence their persona. The next stark lesson came with the realization that timing has something to do with the influence parents have over children. No longer was I able to use the excuse that *I am big and you are small so listen to me*. I came to find that listening has a switch that is time sensitive. Understanding the best timing gave me access to the switch. This was followed by the lesson of the volume of the speech does not necessarily positively correlate to compliance – in fact, to the opposite – the lower the volume, the greater the compliance; which led to the lesson on playing both sides of the street. Children have a finely honed skill for working parents through selective release of just enough information to eventually gain parental compliance – a skill attributed to the gene associated with the relative no one ever talks about. Finally, children, in all of their innocence, use language in a manner far too clever for all but the most observant parent to recognize. All too often, we as parents cast off the ramblings of children with dispatch until one day parents find themselves stopped in their tracks saying, “What did she just say?” It is at that point that laser-like focus begins to develop on the amazing emergence of a person struck in your image, but casting a shadow refreshingly different than your own.

It is then that you realize that your omnipresent parental influence has its limits. Yes, they are destined to be an image of you, but not an exact image. Yes, despite your sometime loud protestations, they are going to punish you by making some of the same mistakes you did and some of their own, but the joy of parenthood is not producing a clone, but imprinting an individual, then sitting back to watch how they do as parents, resisting those very temptations you experienced as a parent – the full circle plays out.

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