
insights and encouragement from the “home front”

MEMOIRS OF A MOM

March 2008

Breadcrumbs to Maslow

Abraham Maslow, the well-known American psychologist, probably didn't think a great deal about parenting as he was formulating and presenting his Hierarchy of Human Needs in post-World War II America. But forty years later I thought about Maslow a great deal as I became a mother to two children. My contemporaries were interested in what I envisioned as a lower need—self-esteem. In fact, parents seemed all-consumed with giving their children good self-esteem. If they completed small tasks, they were praised. Rewards were given for grades, completed home chores, nearly anything which could be documented. Refrigerators were covered with star charts, certificates cluttered bedroom walls and every child needed an opportunity to play the sport and receive a trophy, despite their interest or inclination.

But I wanted more than self-esteem for my children. I wanted them to be, as Maslow described, self-actualized. Self-actualized people have a clear sense of what is true, they are spontaneous and creative, they are aware of truth, justice and harmony. But most significantly, self-actualized people tend to focus outside of themselves.

I soon learned that I was in a tiny minority of parents. When I mentioned that, as a family, we were volunteering at the local food bank, other parents noted that this would be a fine resume item for my son. I wanted to teach compassion...but, was I teaching capitalism?

So I quickly determined that I must be sneaky with self-actualization. I couldn't place it in front of my children, their friends or the parents of their friends. Just as Hansel and Gretel had dropped bread crumbs in the deep, dark forest, I would have to be discrete with my Maslow crumbs.

I began with a personal vow which I shared with my husband. We wanted to create a certain home environment. We wanted our home to be a sanctuary, a peaceful place. Our peaceful home looked like every other home in our neighborhood, with kid clutter, dirty handprints in strategic locations and plastic pitchers with exactly one tablespoon of orange juice left in the refrigerator. But we did adhere to a single consistent, specific peaceful rule.

We made every attempt to avoid criticizing our children in front of their friends or any other visitors in our home. The spelling test grade could be discussed later. The toothpaste trail in the bathroom could be cleaned after the guest left. We wanted our children to feel respect in their home, and we wanted to feel peaceful as parents.

This rule continues today (although the “children” are now in their late 20’s). There’s no reason to criticize in front of a crowd. “Did you send your grandfather a card for his birthday last week?” or “When are you going to get that stuff out of the garage?” does not have to be paraded to visitors in our home.

What we have learned from our rule (twenty-five years and counting) is that our home has a magnetic appeal for people. Our friends and adult children, as well as their friends want to spend time in our home. For a while we thought it was because we could throw a good barbeque or played great music on the stereo. But after stepping back a bit, we have surmised that it is that feeling of acceptance, comfort and peace.

Rosemary West
Nevada KIDS COUNT Executive Committee
Nevada Cancer Institute