

Parenting: Raising our children as friends and partners

Iris Efthymiou- Egleton @ CNN, February 25, 2019

1. What deeper desire urged you to write your book 'Parenting'?

In my books, I have dealt with many different subjects, but they all have human health as their common denominator, the physical and/or mental part of it. From the environment and the economy to our nutrition and the upbringing of our children, everything is linked to human health and psychology. A fundamental conclusion about life to which I have reached is the deepest, most essential and holistic meaning of the verse "A man reaps what he sows". In the case of upbringing, we try to teach our kids how to love others without teaching them how to love their own selves. But the former cannot happen without the latter. Love, understanding, respect need to be sown and cultivated with much care and attention. On the contrary, negative feelings are like cacti. They grow, stay fresh and survive with a noteworthy ease. And that's why we live in a world full of hatred, bigotry, envy, indifference and intolerance. With every new piece of knowledge on children's upbringing and psychology, I realize that problems begin early on and, unfortunately, the necessary information is not there. Therefore, aside from the verbal communication with the people in my social circles, what better thing could I do than share that kind of knowledge and personal experiences with other people too, other aspiring parents, through a book?

2. Since there is no Practical Guide on how to raise a kid, what should people know as a main philosophy for their new role as parents?

Allow me to divide that question into two parts. Concerning the main philosophy for parents, we'll have to accept that our children are not our property but independent beings

and understand what that means. We all know it theoretically, but how many of us also apply it in our life? As for the “nonexistent” Guide, it is certainly true that there is no one specific way of parenting that befits all children. Each child is different, so as parents, we are called for a long period of time during each child’s first years to get to know their needs and particularities. Nevertheless, it is useless to just sit with our arms crossed until that moment comes. The closest thing to a Parenting Guide at our disposal is Child Psychology. I have realized that said branch of psychology can be an indescribably useful and helpful tool for all parents. On a side note, Developmental Psychology can be equally helpful. Of course, I’m not urging anyone to actually go to college and study that field; I’m talking about a personal study of relevant books to learn how our words, reactions and behaviors toward our children can affect them in both the short- and the long-term. So, I have dedicated an entire chapter in my book exclusively on psychology matters, separate from the chapter on other health-related issues. We don’t have to refer to the field of Child Psychology only after the appearance of a problem, but also for its prevention in the first place. The more we know beforehand, the better for all family members.

3. What should hard-working parents know concerning their children’s upbringing?

Parents who work long hours usually have feelings of guilt for not spending enough time with their kids. I deeply believe that no parent should have such feelings, as they are obviously of no help or benefit for anyone. The solution to the issue in question lies in the quality of the time that each parent spends with each child. Both parties need that bonding, so the best thing we can do is focus on that bonding in various ways.

For instance, we can avoid questions, such as “How was school?” or “Did you have a good time last night at the

party?”, which will lead to the barren response “Good.” While if we become more specific and ask, e.g. “Which chapter were you taught at Math?” or “What foods did your friend Mark’s parents have at the party?”, then our child will automatically feel that there is genuine interest and will respond appropriately. Also, that way, our child will be inspired to narrate more details that they wouldn’t say in the first case. All this might sound strange or inaccurate, but it is actually based on scientific studies.

When the time you spend with your kid is limited, you can make sure that every second of it is worth it. How? By having a pleasant conversation covering the time you spent apart, by following the advice I gave as an example, and then, by doing with them an activity in which they’re interested. It can be a game, a puzzle, a movie, a walk, painting, biking, or something else. Or it can be – and I highly recommend that – a philanthropic or an animal-loving act, as I mention in the book.

Let’s take an extreme example where you only have half an hour every day to carelessly spend with your kid. You will never regret it at all if the two of you spend those thirty minutes at a homeless shelter, offering socks, pillows, clothes, food, water, etc. What better thing can you do than explain to your child that “Not all fathers or mothers have the same amount of money to buy a croissant to their kid, so we’ll get two. One for you and one that you will give to a kid that cannot afford it.” With that example, that paradigm, you could call it, a child can learn the meaning of gratefulness as well as those of compassion, support and humaneness. There are, of course, many virtues and principles that every parent would like to teach to their kids, and the best way for all of them is through action and not just words. The bonds that are created through the nurturing of principles are very strong, very fundamental, and you will immediately overcome any feelings of guilt.

4. What is the secret for a parent to not lose their interest for the many other roles in their life (worker, friend, lover, sibling, etc.) while performing the great task of parenting?

The moment when we become parents is clearly radically changing our life, our daily program, our way of thinking, our priorities... And it's accompanied by a plethora of positive emotions, excitement being one of those. We want to spend every hour, every single moment with the new human we just brought to life, we want to devote ourselves to them and to covering their needs. It sounds selfless, but it's a temporary trap.

I won't disagree at all with the fact that children are the absolute priority, provided that we set it in a reasonable and feasible context, of course. We are confused about the meaning of "first priority" thinking that it means "only priority." Work also comes before entertainment, but we don't work 24/7. And aside from the fact that we are also social, sexual and productive beings and want to satisfy all our different sides, our own children don't just need a parent but a happy parent. So, our personal happiness and balance are major for our children's wellbeing and mental balance.

5. What can parents learn from ancient Greek philosophers concerning their attitude to life?

I'll start off by stating that I adore ancient Greek philosophy and that I have included it in most of my writings, as it has something to teach us about all aspects and sectors of our lives. Philosophers observe, study and comment on life in its bigger picture, without spatiotemporal limitations. And child upbringing is no exception to that. If we get to know philosophy's content, we'll be able to see numerous things more clearly, especially concepts, such as virtue and morality, and not be overtly affected by our passions and desires, something that can be of great help in our parental role.

A child's upbringing does not last for 18 years, nor does it affect only the first 18 years in a person's life. Another theory that we all know but don't apply. For instance, when we say to a kid, "Alright, if I buy you this toy, will you stop crying and shouting?" or when we give in for a similar reason and let them for the zillionth time eat their favorite unhealthy food, then what's the upbringing that we're giving them? What is the message that will be beneficial to adopt as an "attitude to life," to use the expression in the question? Everything that children - as well as people of all ages - see or hear is accompanied by a message, so we should act more consciously, more mindfully as parents and judge whether our behavior, our words, our choices are sustainable or not.

Is it sustainable to bribe our kid for a temporary calmness? No, it's not. Therefore, we need to follow another method. If we approach the issue more holistically, more philosophically, our aim should be to raise a child so that they become the friend we'd like to have, the professional with whom we'd like to collaborate, the politician we'd like to vote and so on. For instance, as we know, it's better to avoid overloading our children with "no," "don't" and "mustn't." So, instead of saying a mere "Don't throw garbage on the ground," we can explain that the garbage we throw in the fields pollute the ground, the garbage we throw in the streets or on the pavement are dragged by the rainwater all the way to the sea and pollute the seawater or cause sea animals to choke, while if we throw them in the trash bins, they will go to a factory and be used to manufacture something else. That is, instead of constantly adding new rules to an endless list, we can opt for passing beneficial messages. In this particular case, apart from recycling, we also teach a kid how different things are connected to each other, how our actions are accompanied by specific consequences, what is our place on this planet and in the world as well as the idea of responsibility.

As I said earlier, a parent's strongest card is their knowledge of child psychology. And philosophy is intricately linked to psychology. More precisely, per Aristotle, we cannot be ethical or decent unless we respect our human nature. For example, if we know how prone young people are to disappointment and arrogance, we understand that we should avoid verbal abuse as well as excessive praising.

Plutarch, Aristotle and Plato all dealt with the human soul and how it's affected by various sectors, such as education, glory, beauty, physical activity, health, etc. So, we must be more attentive, more conscious when it comes to the way we talk and behave to other people, and even more to our children, as their soul is founded and built at a young age. Lastly, in Aristotle's philosophy, a dominating idea is that our aim should be to focus not so much on how to make our child the best possible person but rather on how to become ourselves the paradigm that we'd like for a child to have.

6. How should single-parent families handle a child's or children's upbringing?

First of all, I can refer to any piece of advice that someone would give to a hard-working parent. After all, the parent in a single-parent family is by definition a hard-working individual. Therefore, the limited time that they will spend with their child should be productive, as we said; it should mean something to the child. Aside from that, I would advise single parents to lay early on the groundwork for a possible new acquaintance in their life.

I find it bewildering that all my friends and people I know who have a single-parent family have done the exact same thing, that is, do not even mention the subject in front of the kid as long as there is nobody in their life, because they don't know how to approach it. And then, when they do meet somebody, they keep postponing that discussion with their kid. But there are no appropriate conditions or right moment. Any day can be the one when you will talk - with a few

simple words - to your child about adult human relationships, how they work, how a personal relationship can end and how a new one can begin after some time.

7. In your book, you describe with an interesting raw honesty how you managed to transform from a career woman into a full-time mother, giving all your time and energy to raising your child. What was your secret for that change, that transcendence, and what do you suggest to career women who decide to have a family?

From the very start, I'd like to make clear that I do not exhort women toward one of the two options. The only thing I can do in my book is present my own case and explain my own decision. Personally, I didn't like the examples I witnessed around me of women who did not raise their children themselves, and I had the luxury of making that transcendence which I would characterize as a rather tough call. But there is no right or wrong, there is no good or bad choice. Each future mother judges and decides based on her life's current circumstances. Of course, there's a couple of things that it'd be better to never ignore: Firstly, that as humans, we all have the need to be productive. We have the need to be creative and express ourselves. And secondly, the idea that a woman's role is raising children is quite old-fashioned, anachronistic even; that's the truth. So, in cases where a mother leaves her work, the best thing would be for her to have a plan of reintegration into her professional sector. I have met several women who regretted their decision to permanently stop working, which has to do with the need for personal expression I mentioned earlier. Besides, our baby will become a child at some point, then a teenager and finally, an adult. The demanding upbringing of the first years will end, and the worrying 24/7 will remain. That concern never ends!