



INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

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Parenting - the importance of consistency

by Joseph Degeling, Psychologist

Those of you that know Carlingford railway station will be aware that it's a small and poky 4 carriage station at the end of its own single track line. Despite being in the middle of suburbia, it's easy to feel like you're in the country – the sharp early morning commuter will occasionally even see rabbits feasting on the spills of the previous day's work at the old stockfeed place on the other side of the line. The same station manager is usually there every day, adding to the sense of familiarity and community. Buying a ticket on my regular commutes to Central eventually got to the point where I wouldn't even need to say where I was going – amidst the pleasantries, the station manager would just hand me the ticket and I would pay the fee. This pattern of consistency and familiarity went on for about a year or so, until one fateful day it was shattered, never to be the same – I asked for a ticket to Strathfield! From that point on, particularly for the next few weeks, the platform manager waited until after I had asked for the ticket before he felt confident to print it off.

I was struck by this. A long pattern of confident behaviour had so easily been challenged. The security that had surrounded our little interactions was

replaced with a mutual feeling of awkwardness. Humans seem to have an inherent need for familiarity, stability and predictability. We can all recall times when this rings true: our usual work day is disrupted by an unexpected fire alarm in the building; a major change in the workplace; a car accident; the sudden injury or death of someone close; terrorism. We seem to be wired to expect 'the same' – and when things occur out of our set of expectations our bodies and minds have to go into overdrive in an attempt to cope. Of course some people are better at this than others, and even in children, we can see that some cope much better with change. But, nonetheless, the safety and security that is provided by living in a predictable, stable and consistent environment is essential to both good health, and good mental wellbeing.

The development of a child is an intense and amazingly complex process – and it is scary to think as a parent, that we are major players in the trajectory that this development follows. Being a stable, consistent and predictable parent is one of the more central practices in helping our children grow into healthy and contributing members of society. Although much of the literature

surrounding the importance of parental (and interparental) consistency is theoretical, there is empirical evidence to support that it is a central variable in healthy childhood development. A troll through this literature will reveal that a high level of consistency and stability is correlated with better school achievement, healthy social and emotional development, will contribute to a child's ability to adapt to new environments or changes in general (flexibility), contribute to the development of good mental health and resilience, and help children to develop skills in impulse control – to name a few.

Theoretical models within developmental psychology place strong emphasis on consistent, stable parenting as a key factor to positive development in childhood. More specifically, some models conceptualise the dyadic relationship between parent and child as the base from which internal cognitive models of the "self" and "others" are derived – "am I worthy of love and affection?", "can I count on others for safety and assistance if required?". It is through consistent and stable positive relationships that these core beliefs are formed. A healthy parent-child bond provides the safety and security

from which children explore the world – in this way enabling inquisitiveness and learning. Through multiple and consistent positive experiences of the parent “being there” in a supportive fashion when needed, children begin to internalise and adopt behaviours that will assist them in providing their own security, to internalise beliefs that will enable positive self-esteem and confidence, as well as beliefs that other people are safe and trustworthy. Similarly, the parent who lets their child explore the world, without too much “hovering”, also contributes to a developing sense of confidence and safety (by hovering we may give the message that “I have to be here for you to be safe”). Therefore the child slowly develops cognitive and behavioural structures which enable them to develop independence, to manage their own arousal, to have confidence and trust in others, and to continue exploring and learning about the world.

Similarly, consistency in limits and boundaries is a vital ingredient of parenting. In the mid 60’s an American psychologist by the name of Diana Baumrind conducted a very interested series of research studies into parenting practices, and came up with a 3 style typology of parenting based on the factors of warmth and behavioural control. Baumrind’s research identifies some interesting links between parenting styles and the later effects these have on children: the children of parents who were high on levels of warmth and low on levels

of behavioural control (permissive) and parents who had high levels of behavioural control and low levels of warmth (authoritarian) did not fare as well developmentally as those whose parents were high on levels of behavioural control and high on levels of warmth (authoritative). Further research in this area also identifies that these findings are more distinct when parents are consistent in the authoritative approach. This means that parents who have a fair and reasonable level of control, and who are consistent in maintaining the boundaries they set, whilst also facilitating a warm and nurturing relationship help create an environment that produces children who are more confident, more competent socially, have better behavioural control, better academic performance, and less problem behaviour.

While the evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of a consistent, stable and predictable approach to parenting, it doesn’t make the practice of this any easier! And while some parents may feel guilt at the thought of not being able to provide this consistency *all of the time*, we can be satisfied that as long as we are consistent and stable and authoritative *most of the time* we will still be facilitating a positive and supportive environment for development to occur.

10 tips for parents to create a stable and consistent environment:

1. Similar *family* meal time;
2. Similar bed time;

3. Similar study time, place and general routine;
4. Explicit love and affection are freely and regularly given *from both parents*;
5. Manage your own emotions – be real with your children, but don’t be scary (too emotional). Kids need to know that you are in control of yourself – this helps them feel safe;
6. Expectations or limits around behaviour are clear and simple;
7. Expectations or limits are enforced by parents in a consistent fashion;
8. Expectations around school achievement are realistic, yet challenging;
9. Maintain a consistent approach with your partner, and talk regularly about parenting;
10. If you are separated – do the above even more fastidiously!

FURTHER READING

- *Parenting in practice, 2nd Ed* (2008), Joseph Degeling and Christine Langridge:

available from-

www.johbarneschool.org



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