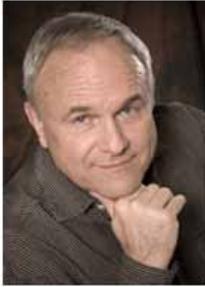


The Parent Taboo

by

Michael Mendizza



Parenting is transient. Pregnancy morphs into birth. One transforms into two. Each age and stage opens a new threshold to something unknown and unexpected for the child - and for the parent. The skills used to meet the needs of a three year old are completely different at five. The environment is also changing, as dramatically as our children. This demands that parents reinvent themselves, in different ways, right along with their children. But they don't.

Parenting today is more challenging than ever before. Changing lifestyles, new information, fragmented families, economic challenges, more to do, less time all confront traditional parenting models. Developing the right skills quickly, hopefully ahead of schedule, is best. Books and DVDs can help. Wisdom however, demands experience. Today's parents must be explosive, agile learners, just like their children. But they are not.

Behind our future-shocked excuses lays an invisible force that prevents many, if not most, from mastering the art of parenting as one might master a sport or craft. There is a *Parenting Taboo* and it must be broken.

Years ago my grandfather cautioned against speaking openly about three topics: religion, politics, and how to raise kids. Core issues have their own immune system. The more entrenched the topic the stronger the social pressure not to look or openly question, to stay away and keep quiet. When a foreign view comes close - the shields go up. The challenging idea is defended, killed or absorbed, preserving the prevailing belief or behavior. So strong is this taboo that many patterns persist, more or less, unchanged for generations.

In the past, when the dynamic of cultural change was slow, when most lived in closely knit villages, were bound by common stories, myths, beliefs and behaviors, this cultural immune system preserved and carried forward patterns generation after generation. There was a assumption that conforming to accepted norms was good and that deviating was bad, not only as parents, but in all aspects of communal life. Tribal, extended familial bonds are disappearing like the steam drifting off Sunday morning tea. The parent taboo remains, strong as ever.

For a child, belonging, feeling safe and accepted is a matter of life or death. The driving force for an infant is to maintain the bond at all cost. This expresses as a deep need for physical closeness, touch, body contact, movement, audio-visual communication and gentle affectionate play. Not being part of the group is devastating. The greatest punishment anyone and especially a young child can feel is rejection, abandonment. Sensory deprivation is more traumatic than physical punishment. Much of the rage we see in the world emanates from this rejection - religious wars, rape, domestic violence and endless cycles of child abuse.

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Culture, the conservative body of accepted beliefs and behaviors, is keenly aware of rejection's primal force and uses it daily. Everyone is caught in the net, gang members, church goers, parents, teachers, employees and heads of state. Those in power use shame and rejection to control those who are not. There exists a global behavior modification machine. Rejection is its currency.

Parenting is a communal, public event. Children are kin, part of the tribe or kingdom, not private property. Everyone is watching. A child's behavior represents a daily display of our competence as an adult, not just as a parent, but as a respected member of the clan.

We think we are free, but we're not. Babies are baptized into the larger social web of believers. This and a thousand other rituals place the authority of the group, church, club or culture above and beyond the individual. Governments, political parties, social classes, corporations, and gangs use shame and rejection to control parents and parents use shame and rejection to control children. It is the same game everywhere you look. Misbehave, fail to conform to this rule or that, and the punishment is the same – go to your room – rejection.

As a force, built up for tens of thousands of years, the primal need to belong and its shadow, rejection induced behavior, became an unspoken taboo, one that prevents many, if not most, from mastering the art of parenting as one might master a sport or craft.

In his most recent book, *The Death of Religion and the Rebirth of Spirit*, Joseph Chilton Pearce argues that culture operates as an invisible field. The brain translates the patterns or implicit meaning of these fields into information. Pearce began a previous book, *Evolution's End*, by describing how savants access vast bodies of information they have never experienced or learned. Entire populations are influenced profoundly by fields that operate beneath the level of their awareness. New human beings imprint culture the same way they imprint language. The parenting taboo operates the same way - similar to an invisible virus, it affects most everyone without any being aware of the influence.

The classic tool for mass behavior control is to invent an outside threat. It works every time. Culture tells us, *it is a jungle out there*. The world is full of terrorists, predators. Children must be conditioned for their own good and it is our job to do so. There is a difference between modeling adaptive intelligence and domestication. Chris Mercogliano argues *In Defense of Childhood* that nearly all children are domesticated, fenced in like pets or livestock, and so are we. Domesticated children become domesticated adults.

Taboo means forbidden. Its opposite is freedom. Which invites more wisdom and adaptive intelligence, freedom or prohibition? Children are told 'no' eleven times to each encouraging 'yes.' No! Don't touch. Keep your hands to yourself. You'll poke your eye out. No. No. No. Do that again and it's time-out for you Buster. Go to your room. We are conditioned from early childhood to obey, to do as we are told, color between the lines, always looking over our shoulder, knowing that

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someone will tell us to stop, do it this way, not that. We are compared, graded, judged, sometimes praised (a shadow form of punishment), labeled, pigeonholed, categorized and certified. Yes, this child tows the line, behaves in predictable ways, can be trusted not to deviate from accepted norms.

We are led to believe that inner and outer anarchy will spread widely without constraint. Taboos prevent us from even questioning this assumption. J. Krishnamurti insisted that intelligence is innate, not learned or accumulated, is orderly, cooperative, kind and compassionate. All the so called higher spiritual qualities, as the wise have said for ages, are innate. Only in freedom can these most valued qualities express. Maher Baba said it wonderfully. Love must spring spontaneously from within and is in no way amenable to any form of force or coercion. Inward, psychological freedom is our birthright. But we are not free - and that is exactly what taboos are designed to do.

To this we must add the weight of habituation. New perceptions, skills and capacities open and develop in a heightened state of energy and attention. Children call this heightened state *play*. As the new becomes familiar, through a well defined 'cycle of competence' (novel discovery, repetition, variation), the heightened energy and attention found in authentic play diminishes. Habits set in. Full spectrum intelligence is replaced with predictable reflexes. Physicist David Bohm insists that there is no real intelligence in a reflex. The more reflexive, mechanical and predictable our behavior the less intelligence we are expressing. All of these forces contribute to the parenting taboo.

Bev Bos, one of the nation's most respected early parent-child educator, describes how parents are under a spell, caught in a trance. We, more or less, blindly do onto others what others have done to us. And we identify with these habits. When someone challenges our reflexive behavior we feel attacked personally and react defensively. Fearing too much public attention we impose strict boundaries on our children, for their own good of course, to cover our ass. We might be sent to our room, not belong, and our children pay the price.

Compare this to the attitude of a committed athlete or a sincere apprentice. The road to mastery is vast, always extending. We reach one level only to find another, unexpected and richer, opening before us. Lifelong learning and practice is the key to mastery regardless of skill or craft, including parenting. We hit the ball and watch it fly. Learning takes place on the instant as we watch with wonder. If the results match our intent, we stay the course. If not, we adapt and hit the ball again. The art of parenting is a skill anyone can master. But we don't.

If we are wise (or lucky) we seek the guidance of a trusted friend, a mentor, who whispers, only on occasion, 'that was as nice a shot as it gets,' or, 'close your eyes and hit it again, softer.' We seek, even pay, coaches and guides for their counsel. We may confuse performance with our personal identity, but we don't relate defensively to the advice of our mentors. That would defeat the purpose. Defensive learning strengthens only our defense.

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Imagine what the world would look like if today's parents approached their ever-changing challenges with the same lifelong learning attitude as elite athletes, a master craftsman or artist. For this to begin, each parent must face and break the parenting taboo.

Rather than repeating the same stale pattern day-in and day-out, adults would approach each parent-child encounter as a learning opportunity. While the outer game might be exploring frogs or building a tree house, the inner game is all about relationship, how to be more present, attentive, listening, imaginative, responsive and empathic. The parenting taboo develops none of these. Rather, it prevents and corrupts them all.

Which will serve our children, us and the planet more fully, living under the spell or creatively reincarnating every day? There is no choice. Adaptive learning grows more and more necessary as the world changes faster and faster. The question is, how?

To begin we must understand the simple fact that child development is dependent on adult development. Nature invests in adult development and upon that the child climbs to the next evolutionary step. Personal and global transformation is model dependent. Forget institutionalized (conditioned, behavior modification based) schooling. The latent potential of every child is activated and developed by interacting with the model-environment. Monkey see monkey do. This principle is woven into our nature and has been for millions of years. Information is great but we, you and I, the adult culture, must become the change we wish to see in the world. The next frontier in education is addressing, head on, this urgent evolutionary challenge.

We must overcome the cultural tipping point that occurred at the end of World War II. Prior to the war parent development took place, never perfect of course, in the intimate human experiences we call the extended family, village or tribe. Parent mentors and coaches (grandparents, aunts and uncles), lived in the house or next door. This was true for 80% of the American households. After the war 80% of those families did not have a grandparent living in the home. Sprawling suburbs, mothers entering the work force, TV and institutionalized childcare replaced morning tea with granny.

Working mothers, daycare and TV crippled experiential-based parent development. Parents lost their mentors. They lost community, real family, and all the learning that takes place in these intimate relationships. Parents and children were the big losers.

Every intimate relationship represents the potential for explosive learning. This is how wisdom is born, how real development unfolds, in relationship. How can a mother or father master the art of parenting commuting on the freeway, answering the phone in a corporate cubicle? Great musicians play music. Great athletes practice. Scientists wonder. Chefs taste and they do so in the company of experienced mentors. The same is true for great parents.

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Realizing that we, not our children, are the next frontier in education, parents will naturally seek out and immerse themselves in dynamic, co-learning relationships with other adults and mentors facing similar challenges. Like the extended family of days-gone-by this parent development community will gather on a regular basis, not just on birthdays and Easter, at least once a month, to experience and practice real acceptance and belonging, trust, respect, curiosity, deep listening, empathy, to be inspired by the best science and age appropriate child development practices in the world, and to share with others what is working in their lives and what is not. They will come together to practice the skills that need more attention, just like dancers and world class athletes. The goal will not be to fix the child. Kids aren't broken. The goal will be continuing adult development that mirrors in the adult's life the explosive learning and growth modeled by children, as nature designed. And this adult development will take place neighborhood by neighborhood, in every city, region and country throughout the world.

This will take place when there is a 'place', a safe, sacred playground where parents gather, learn, practice and master the art of joyful, playful parenting. It will be close, convenient, cost little or nothing, be filled with up-to-date information, mentors and lots of hands on experiences. Parents need playgrounds to practice and master new skills. But they don't have any.

There are safe, mentored playgrounds for just about anything you want to be or become, except being a parent. Martial artists have dojos. Basketball players have courts, balls and hoops. Dancers have studios and partners. Chefs have gardens and kitchens. Parents have books, DVDs and a few mandated classes which are about as experiential as traffic school.

Don't be confused. Information is not experience. We don't eat the menu when we are hungry. Our bodies need whole nutritious food and enriched life changing experiences, and we need them every day. The parent taboo prevents this continued adult development. Now is the time to break the spell and replace data with inspired, mentored, neighborhood based experience.

One final courageous act is necessary to break the spell. Early childcare providers, practitioners and educators must reinvent themselves. They are, by default, today's parenting mentors. They have the playground and the kids, everything adults need to master the art of parenting. What's missing is a broader vision, one that reunites adult development with child development. They go hand in hand.

The instant the early childcare and education network grasps this simple fact, the paradigm changes. The focus of attention broadens. California's 45,000 licensed providers (along with millions of colleagues all across the land), will see immediately that they face two equal challenges: to provide optimum play-based learning experiences for children and simultaneously provide the same mentored play-based experience for parents.

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The parent taboo falsely separated adult development from child development. Providers are well trained to meet the needs of kids but have little or no training, skills, resources or funding to meet the continuing education needs of parents. Providers need support, just like parents, and that support must come from the local community. The local community doesn't know what to do, how to get involved, so nothing happens.

There is a spell breaker. It's called The Nurturing Project. It holds a broader, balanced view of adult-child development. It provides inspired tools and resources to help providers respond to the needs of today's parents with the same training and skill they now use to meet the needs of children.

The Nurturing Project creates the network, local nonprofit funding and open channels of communication necessary to engage the extended community in support of today's parents and providers, neighborhood by neighborhood, in every city, region and country throughout the world.

The spell has already been broken. One by one, like sleeping beauty, we are waking up, opening our eyes and seeing a new world, our children's world, blossoming like flowers in spring. To find out how to be a spell breaker in your community visit www.nurturing.us.

Join in and watch what happens.

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