

Compassion Over Criticism by Marilyn Suttle



When you thought about becoming a parent, did you imagine having the perfect child? The perfect relationship? The perfect life? Life can be far from perfect. Some kids have physical or emotional challenges. They're strong-willed or have problems in

school. You're faced with everything from toddler tantrums to preteen mood swings, childhood bullying to drug abuse. How do you handle the challenges of parenting? Do you do it alone or do you reach out for support?

Challenges are opportunities to learn new skills and increase resiliency. As a parent, you're given many situations to stretch your comfort zone and grow in your humanity. It's rich and rewarding . . . and **HARD!** Having a network of supportive parents to share your concerns can make a world of difference in how you handle upsets along the way. However, support isn't always available, because harsh judgements and fears can get in the way of compassion.

I can't count how many times I've heard one parent criticize another over a child's behavior. Common comments whispered behind backs include, "I would never allow my child to act like that in a restaurant." "That child would shape up with a little more discipline." "Her baby is still crying, why doesn't she do something!"

I hate to admit it, but as a first time mom, I was secretly critical of other parents. Oh, I didn't say anything out loud, but if a baby cried for more than a moment, my eyes would flash with disapproval. Then . . . my second child was born. He cried, and cried, and cried for the first three months of life. I received many disapproving looks from parents during that time. I knew what to do to comfort a baby. I had stopped my oldest from crying with ease. Yet, once this newborn started crying, he was slow to stop, no matter what I did. Oh, what I would have done for one compassionate parent to give me a sign of encouragement.

Once I was on the receiving end of disapproval, I felt overwhelming compassion for every parent I had ever judged. I felt grateful for having been given a challenging baby. If my second child had been as calm natured as my first, I would have lost the experience that opened my heart, calling me to be an advocate for the support and nurturing of parents.

It's not always easy to be supportive. While shopping for wallpaper, the woman next to me flipped through sample books, while her three-year-old played with his toys for over an hour. When he started fussing, I thought his mom would realize her time was up and take him home. Instead her temper flared as she tried to finish looking through her stack of books. When he started hitting her legs, she picked him up, called him a "bad boy," and threatened to spank him if he didn't behave. Now was my moment of truth. How could I show compassion to this parent who was screaming at her tearful child. Instead of judgements, I chose to show respect for her struggle. I said, "It isn't easy to get everything done, that you want to do, with a young child is it?" To my delight, the mom immediately softened. She breathed a sign of relief, agreed, then tended to her son with tenderness. One compassionate comment from a stranger defused her frustration and helped her cope more positively.

When we withhold compassion and chose to criticize, the results can be disastrous. Parents hide their problems for fear of shame and ridicule. What we hide from, runs our lives. Parents dealing with a child's, behavior problem or learning disability may pull away from family and friends when they need them the most, to avoid the pain of blame and criticism. When we drop our negative judgements and reach out with compassion, our humanity flourishes, as we create a space for hurting parents to heal.

I am convinced that the challenges of parenting are gifts in disguise. Consider the following situation.

Suppose your child didn't talk until he was four years old. Suppose he couldn't read before the age of nine. Suppose he was antisocial and his teachers labeled him mentally slow. When he takes his college entrance examination, he fails. If this were your child, would you feel defeated? Albert Einstein had all those problems. I can just picture some of the mothers of Einstein's classmates, taking their children aside saying, "Don't play with little Albert. He'll be a bad influence on you. His parents must not know what they are doing." Einstein developed the theory of relativity and received the Nobel Prize. I imagine his parents were about as proud as they could be. I wonder if they had a supportive community to help them through the challenging times.

Helen Keller was born a healthy child, suffered an illness before the age of two, leaving her deaf and blind. Her life was not a tragedy. It was a triumph. She understood the value of support, as shown in her quote: "The public must learn that the blind man is

neither a genius nor a freak nor an idiot. He has a mind which can be educated, a hand which can be trained, ambitions which it is right for him to strive to realize, and it is the duty of the public to help him make the best of himself so that he can win light through work."

When you see a child struggle . . . when you witness a parent in distress . . . what will you do? Will you recognize that a child is neither bad nor good, but a person in progress? Would you be willing to look for ways to show respect for a parent's struggle? Would you be willing to accept the support of other parents when you are struggling? We can bring out the best in ourselves and others by replacing criticism with compassion. It's time to form a powerful community of support for parents.

Feel free to reprint this article in your publication or newsletter with the following byline: Marilyn Suttle shows you how to create happier family and work relationships. She is a dynamic speaker, author and columnist. Subscribe to her FREE monthly e-newsletter: Life in Balance: Thriving Kids/Thriving Parents, by visiting her web site: WWW.SuttleOnline.NET. © 2005 Suttle Enterprises LLC.