

How Much Should We Share with Our Children?

By Mel Schwartz

As parents, we are happy to reveal our strengths and virtues to our children. We perhaps assume that this will enable them to emulate us and our values and move them toward prosperous and happy lives. Our positive features and characteristics become the lineage that we choose for them to inherit.

We are, however, at times reluctant to share the darker side of our life's struggles. Often, parents indicate that they don't want to burden their children with their problems. Other times, we simply don't want to present ourselves in a way that is inconsistent with what we hope to model. When we share only the positive with our children, we deprive them of the fuller picture of life experiences. When we share the difficult, as well as the good, we are actually instructing a valuable life lesson; life is difficult at times and struggle is normal. By not divulging these personal travails with our children, we actually set them up for personalizing their difficulties.

When a child or adolescent encounters some anxiety, insecurity or distress, it would actually be beneficial for their parents to not only be supportive, but to normalize the event by sharing their own similar experiences. Actually, this sharing should occur as part of the normal repartee of child rearing. In other words, life is difficult and even mom or dad, have had their share of problems. This normalizing of life's stressors is essential in how our children learn to cope with their stress. Life's stressors are bad enough; we don't need our kids thinking that it means there's something wrong with them. Most people tend to think that others are better off emotionally. In other words, their difficulties are unique to them and other people are happier or better off. This is an excruciatingly damaging myth. We can help break this myth by sharing more honestly and fully. A proper preparation for life is to honestly address all that life brings forth.

Many times I have heard people who have recently separated or divorced, struggle with what to inform their children in regard to commencing dating. It is of course, essential that parents be sensitive to the trauma of divorce. Focusing on a healthy transition for the children should be paramount. This does not suggest, however, that we hide our lives from them. I have often heard divorced parents state, "I wouldn't expose my kids to my dating." Making a life transition and eventually meeting other people for social circumstances is not akin to the West Nile Virus. More to the point, it might be helpful to children to understand that dating is a process and that your next partner doesn't ordinarily just turn up magically on your doorstep. If that is what they are led to believe, they will likely internalize some negative self-esteem when they don't fall in love with the first people that they date.

Sharing the fuller richness of our lives with our children rather than simply modeling the "proper" parent is of inestimable value to them. I had the great fortune of having a father who communicated with me the full measure of his life. Not just his successes and rewards, but his hopes, his struggles, his fears and his disappointments. This degree of mentoring is sadly missing in most lives.

There is naturally a fine balance between appropriate sharing and not turning your children into your emotional partners. We never want to unduly burden them, but do want to prepare them for life. Fine tuning that balance is the goal. The greatest gift we can give our children is to fully participate in their lives by opening up our own to them.

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