

APPENDIX 2

The Practice of Parenting

The apprenticeship of being human is a metaphor, not a method. It is, however, a metaphor with meaning. Parents can and should use this metaphor to examine their parenting methods. In this appendix, I offer a simple sequence of questions for parents to consider how they influence their children . . .

In: *Character, competence, creativity and the ability to collaborate*

Through: *Love, language and literature*

By: *Reflection, resolve and repetition.*

Charles and his mother visited the pediatrician for his annual checkup. At eight years of age, Charles tipped the scales at over 180 pounds. In previous visits to the doctor, Charles and his mother had discussed his obesity. In this visit, the doctor asked Charles' mother if she had followed through on the dietary recommendations they had discussed at the previous visit. In exasperation, his mother said, "He buys himself Philly cheese steaks!"

Charles and his mother are both decision makers, and their decisions have consequences for Charles' lifelong health. In fact, their decisions have consequences for a whole constellation of other people, including taxpayers and medical insurance subscribers. One scholarly estimate puts the annual medical burden of obesity at ten percent of all medical spending and almost \$147 billion dollars per year.¹ At times, it is tempting for parents to abdicate and say, "It is my child's fault!" However, as in the case of Charles, parents function as the gatekeepers. An eight year old can only buy Philly cheesesteaks if he has money; and regardless of pleadings to the contrary, parents hold the purse strings. The way we make decisions as parents teaches our children how to make decisions. Our children are apprenticed to us in the development of *agency*, the capacity of an individual to make meaningful choices in the world.

If indeed early childhood is the apprenticeship of being human and early childhood parenting matters to everyone in society, what can be done? Just as children's repeated experiences establish what is normal and normative, so also the repeated practices of parenting establish *our* sense of normal and express (in some degree) what we believe to be normative. What follows is an exercise in recognizing our repeated experiences, identifying patterns over which we have influence, and beginning the process of establishing routines that embody what we *want* to be normal and normative in our families.



Step 1: Reflection

Ruts and Grooves

When we find ourselves in a pattern we don't like, we often say, "I'm stuck in a rut." When we're in a rhythm that we want to continue, we say, "I'm getting in the groove!" Whether the trench is a rut or a groove depends on whether it is a good pattern or a bad one. For parents, it is helpful to frequently ask:

1. Where are we in a rut?
2. Where are we in a groove?

Start by thinking about the things that you do every day as related to the three key factors in child development:

Love, Language and Literature

"I love you," is one of the most important sentences a child can hear. A child's repeated experience of loving language in the home shapes her posture toward language. Is language merely a means for getting what I want? Or is it for putting others in their place? Or is it for exploring and enjoying the world? The way we repeatedly use language at home invariably shapes the way our children will use language.



Ask yourself:

1. How do I *usually* express love for my children?
 - Hugs and kisses?
 - Saying “I love you”?
 - Listening to them?
 - Doing things for them (like packing lunches)?
 - Making things (like a favorite meal)?

Love	
Grooves	
Ruts	



2. What are the ways that we *regularly* converse as a family?
- What do we talk about at meal times?
 - What do we enjoy talking about?
 - When do we have the best conversations?
 - How do we resolve conflict?
 - How do we enjoy having fun with words?

Language	
Grooves	
Ruts	



3. What role do stories play in our family life?
- When do we enjoy books together?
 - When do we tell – and listen to – stories?
 - When do we enjoy words in poems or songs?
 - What stories told on screen (movies, TV) shape our life?
 - What stories have shaped our shared vocabulary?

Literature	
Grooves	
Ruts	



Love, language and literature are the three key areas that you influence. But they're not the only realms of family life in which you may be in a rut or a groove. Consider the following three parts of daily routines:



It may be that mealtime is mayhem, and you recognize you're in a rut. Or you may realize that reading books with your child at bedtime is your favorite part of every day. You've found a groove. Before long you'll probably have a list of at least 5 or 6 areas you're in a rut or a groove.

Ruts	Grooves
1	1
2	2
3	3
4	4
5	5
6	6



Normal & Normative

Now you're in the position to ask how these patterns influence your children:

1. How do these routines establish a sense of *normal*?
2. How do our routines teach what is *normative*?

For example, "In our house, it is normal to read books together before bedtime. This teaches our kids that we love spending time with them and that beautiful stories are valuable and enjoyable." It can be helpful to name it by writing it out, even in a few words:

Rut/Groove	Normal/ Normative
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	



Step 2: Resolve

Character, Competence, Creativity & Collaboration

Knowing your ruts and grooves is half the battle. You can already see where your repeated actions have influence in both positive and negative ways. Now it is time to move from where you are to where you want to be in the four key areas that you influence: character, competence, creativity and the ability to collaborate.

What are the specific virtues, abilities, and qualities that you want to nurture in your children? You'll find some fit squarely in one category, and others could easily fall into multiple buckets. Using the four categories can help you think of qualities and abilities that might not otherwise have occurred to you.

Here are some suggestions to spark reflection: *love, humility, courage, patience, kindness, gentleness, compassion, generosity, loyalty, honor, justice, wisdom, self-control, contentment, gratitude, honesty, integrity, joyfulness, modesty, perseverance, simplicity, trustworthiness, resourcefulness, responsibility, active listening, diligence, inquisitiveness, respect, and peacemaking.*



Character	Competence
1	1
2	2
3	3
4	4
5	5
6	6
7	7

Creativity	Collaboration
1	1
2	2
3	3
4	4
5	5
6	6
7	7



2. How am I initiating my children into this Story?

- How do the stories that we read, tell and watch shape their vocabulary and understanding of the world?
- In what ways am I initiating them deliberately, and in what ways am I doing it inadvertently?

Initiation

3. How am I indoctrinating my children into a Story?

- How am I teaching them the basics of being human?
- How can I better teach the fundamentals?
- What stories communicate the Story that I want my children to embrace?

Indoctrination



Step 3: Repetition

As a teacher, I learned “Failing to plan is planning to fail.” It is just as true of parents as it is of teachers. The practices of reflection and resolve are incomplete without a plan to implement that resolve in the routines of life. In order to successfully establish those routines, it is important to start small, to focus on the one rut that you want to break, or the one groove that you want to establish.

So what is it? What is the most destructive rut, or the most desirable groove? Or, what is the rut or groove that you think you can most easily change to gain momentum?

Rut or Groove

Next, what *pattern* of life can you change to establish a new routine? My brother and sister-in-law, who are parents of a two-year-old, decided that the groove they wanted to establish in their family was their ideal evening routine. They took inventory of the normal parts of the evening routine: cooking dinner, eating dinner, washing dishes, bath time for the toddler, reading with their daughter, and discretionary time to read, relax or exercise.

In order to establish the routine, they did something surprising. They chose Mondays to implement their new routine. They didn’t say, “This is what we’re going to do every night from now on!” and then become discouraged when it was just too difficult. By choosing *one* routine to practice on *one* night a week, they created an incubator, a context in which they could practice and refine their routine. They could devote their energies to making Monday evenings work the way they wanted, and then truly enjoy their successes. Once they had successes, they could easily take bits and pieces, like a fun bath routine, and implement them on other nights.

Desire, Discipline & Delight

There are three key components to establishing healthy rhythms of life.

1. **Desire.** You’ve got to want it. If you don’t really want to establish a new routine, you won’t have the will to follow through. So start with something that you really want.
2. **Discipline.** Changing routines is like turning a gyroscope while it is spinning. It takes work. You can expect resistance; and you can’t be entirely sure which way the resistance will push against you.



3. **Delight.** Not only do you need to want it (in desire), you also need to enjoy it. Perhaps you've been persuaded that reading with your children is important, and you *want* to establish a reading routine.

Furthermore, you're willing to *work* through the resistance to make it a part of family life. If you don't *like* doing it, your kids probably aren't going to go for it either. Making routines fun for yourself and your kids is important to making them stick.

Repetition: Do it Again

Repetition only works if you repeat it. Going through this exercise once can be helpful to parents, but its value will be limited. I once heard a parenting coach ask a group of professionals how often they had a performance review at work. The answers ranged from monthly to annually. The coach then asked, "How often do you sit down to review your performance as parents?" There was an embarrassed silence. We know that performance reviews are important for our vocations because the repeated process forces us to focus on what's going well and what is not. In short, performance reviews help us to identify our ruts and grooves so that we can get out of the ruts and establish good grooves before the next review. However, we rarely apply the same wisdom to parenting. We read a book, or go to a seminar, or meet with a counselor. But we only do it once.

The point is not that you need to use *this* tool for a quarterly review; rather you need some repeated process of reflection, resolve and repetition – whatever it is. So pick a routine that you really want to establish, that you're committed to doing, and that you will really enjoy. For example, you could start having a family game night. Choose games that you and your children love. Protect the time so that it can't be undermined by work or TV or whatever else usually gets in the way. Then, put a date on the calendar in a month or so to reflect on how the new routine is working. Getting into the routine of reflective parenting will enable you to learn from your failures, celebrate your successes, and establish what you want to be normal and normative in your home.

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Eric A. Finkelstein, J.G. (2009, 27 July) Annual Medical Spending Attributable To Obesity: Payer-And Service-Specific Estimates
Health Affairs 28(5) pp. w822-w831

The Apprenticeship of Being Human:
Why Early Childhood Parenting Matters to Everyone
ApprenticeshipOfBeingHuman.com

