

## **Do Our Parenting Worries Stem from Our Own Shame and Guilt?**

Bassma Younan, MDiv, RP

As parents, we care deeply about the well-being of our kids, but do we worry more than we need to? Though all of us have concerns about our kids' social skills, grades, extracurricular involvement, or level of giftedness in music or sports, we might be inhibiting our children's development because of our excessive worrying. In fact, chronic parental worrying can affect not only our children's capacity to flourish now but also their self-esteem as they find their place in the world.

### **“Am I a bad parent?”**

Our society loves to make comparisons and not even our children are exempt from scrutiny. When our kids do well by society's standards, we feel good about ourselves. But when the inevitable happens, when our kids fail to measure up in some way, it's common for us to become embarrassed and start to question our ability to parent.

Bottled up guilt and embarrassment for our children indirectly manifest as excessive concern about whether they will secure a successful future. Over the long haul, this emotional suppression drains the life out of any parent.

And that's not all. While we might assume our children's performance is the cause of our discomfort, it's really just the trigger for deeper self-worth issues. Disappointment in ourselves often lies at the root of parental shame. Many of us impose strict rule-setting and over-scheduling in a fearful attempt to manage our children's lives so they won't end up repeating our failures or carrying the same lack of fulfillment we experience. Underneath the efforts to shape our children's lives lies a sense of dread that unless our children succeed, they won't be good enough – just like us.

### **Passing on low self-worth**

The pressures we put on our kids to get better grades, master a musical instrument, or participate in a sport are not wrong in themselves. But when we base our love and acceptance of our children on their performance or obedience, then we undermine rather than encourage their development. In fact, conditional acceptance only reinforces in our children what we were trying to avoid in the first place: a second generation of self-doubters who struggle to feel value beyond achievement.

In this vicious control cycle, both we and our children lose out. We lose connection with our kids, appreciation for who they really are, and awareness of their true wants and needs. Meanwhile, our children lose permission to be themselves. In the grip of control mode, our preoccupation with schedules, programs, and goals inhibits our ability to listen and to give attention to their stories and feedback. We are thus robbed of our ability to relax and simply enjoy our kids' existence.

## Naming our dragons

To make a change, we need to get to the root of our fears. We can start by taking a moment to ask soul-searching questions, like:

*What am I afraid will happen to me or to my child and what does this mean to me?*

*Will my current behaviour prevent this from happening, or am I needlessly pressuring my child and creating tension in our relationship?*

Following is a list of some normal and realistic intentions for our child, which can be driven by our own fears as parents (in brackets):

1. Moral character (*I don't want my child to end up in jail like uncle Ted*)
2. Success (*I'm worried my child will grow up to be a failure like me. I couldn't get a decent job because I didn't stay in school*)
3. Social ease (*I won't let my child end up lonely and friendless like I am*)
4. Musical abilities (*If my teenaged son doesn't take music lessons, he'll get bored and get into trouble, just like I did when I was his age*)
5. Athletic competence (*I am scared my child will become as big as me, develop unhealthy eating habits, and struggle with body image*)
6. My reputation (*If people catch my child misbehaving or under-performing, what will they think about me?*)
7. Providing for my child (*If I can't afford to get my daughter the latest video game for Christmas, she'll feel insignificant*)

We will find some insecurities are easy to overcome, whereas others are more deeply rooted in our identity and require extra patience and effort. Regardless of what we find, we need to take the first step of “naming our dragons” if we hope to build meaningful connections with our children.

## Identifying subtle signs

Once we are aware of our worst fears, we need to identify the not-so-obvious ways they show up in our thinking and our relationships with our children. These signs often manifest as physical and emotional discomfort. Some common physical signs include heart palpitations, sweaty hands, and upset stomach. Common emotional symptoms include feelings of irritation, anger, anxiety, depression, bad mood, short temper, and withdrawal.

Changes in our behaviour can also signal to us that we are operating out of fear and may be at risk of making choices that don't serve us or our children. When we are tired,

irritated, or fearful, we tend to use what Faber and Mazlish refer to in their book, *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*, as the short-term survival techniques to try to get our kids to conform. Examples include threatening to embarrass our children, saying that it is our children themselves who are bad rather than just their behaviour, name-calling, and making gloom-and-doom prophecies about their future.

When entertaining our fearful thoughts, we can get locked into controlling patterns of parenting. But as we recognize these signs early on, we can learn to re-examine the validity of our fears, choose to let them go, focus on being present, and successfully build parent-child relationships founded on healthy boundaries and consistent, loving guidance.

### **How to control less and connect more**

To be able to connect with our child, we need to meet our children where they're at by taking an interest in their world, interests, struggles, and challenges. In other words, we need to put ourselves in our kids' little shoes. We can do this by listening more than we talk, asking questions and staying open when they share their thoughts, feelings, dreams, concerns, and perspectives. We need to give them the chance to be child-like, playful, spontaneous, and free of the unnecessary structures normally imposed on them.

When we struggle to find the right words, nonverbal communication speaks volumes. Facial expressions that reflect our children's emotions and intentional eye contact give them assurance of being respected and understood. A tender tone of voice or a warm touch helps them to feel *felt*. These right-brain connections comprise a powerful communication tool that Dr. Daniel Siegel describes in his book *The Whole Brain Child*.

### **Conclusion**

Healthy hopes and desires for our children are realistic, age-appropriate, and based on their well-being rather than our fears of potential embarrassment. Difficult moments can be tough to handle, especially when our kids' behaviours seem irrational or disproportionate. But as we remind ourselves to be curious instead of critical, think about what they may be feeling in these situations, and examine how our own fears might come into play, we can more easily empathize, connect, and direct our children to the best outcomes.

### **Resources**

Faber, A., Mazlish, E., & Coe, A. *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* (20th Ed.). New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.

Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2012.