

Nurturing Your Child's Nature

Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay,

Our daughter, age 11, is shy, while my husband and I are both outgoing and social. She blushes at the drop of a hat and is overly self-conscious. We hoped she would grow out of it, but she spends hours alone on the computer or in front of the television. She is not depressed and claims she is content having just one or two friends. It is hard to watch her act in a manner that seems immature, especially with family holiday parties coming up, and she is shortchanging herself of many opportunities. How do you turn a shy girl into an outgoing one?

Dear Parent:

You have already done the hardest work, which is to recognize the fact that you are not your child nor is your child what you might have expected. Our children are born with their own natures. They have a temperament that is genetically built in. I often remind parents, we all have

“hard wiring,” referring to our neurological makeup.

These inheritable factors that make up our nature influence how we think and how we respond, physically and emotionally. These internal factors are not entirely in our control, although we can accommodate and learn to temper our nature. We essentially adjust ourselves to adapt to the environment as best we can, and so do our children.

In addition to your child's nature, there are the experiences

and subsequent challenges and values of our immediate environment and larger culture. Social scientists refer to this as the “nurture” part of the nature-nurture interplay.

Here is a simple example I often use to illustrate the interplay of nature-nurture. Think about a young boy who is by nature fidgety and restless. He has “ants in his pants.” He is much happier when on the playground or out camping than when he is confined in a classroom behind

a desk. He lives in a fast-paced metropolitan area in an educational setting that emphasizes competition and high standards for achievement.

When forced to buckle down and perform, on paper, this child is inclined to bite his nails or chew his shirt. He rushes his work and clowns around when he's bored or anxious. In response to a serious or strict teacher, he might shut down a bit and fail to access his potential.

Take this same child, with the



same nature, and place him in a rural setting or small town environment (nurture). The pace is slow and folks are focused on family. They are fine with being average. There is less pressure on academic performance. There is a greater sense of calm, and the child can play down by a lake after school. He may appear happier and less stressed, despite his restless nature. With his nervous system more relaxed, he may even have an easier time rising up to his potential.

It is so easy to parent with comfort, pride and faith when we have a passion, say, for music that is shared by our child. Similarly, when a father recalls his blissful years as a high school football player, he naturally wants his son to walk in his footsteps. Our chil-

dren have a core personality and temperament that is developing from the beginning. I often remind parents that we all have one child who is our "growth gift," and that is the child who pushes our buttons the most.

In my practice as a psychologist, I find that problems involving parent-child fit are common reasons for a child or teenager's depression, anger or anxiety. Perhaps the child is "lazy," while the parents are ambitious. Perhaps the child is shy and reserved in a household of extraverts. Sometimes the child is an artist and is being forced to be a scientist. Young adults become symptomatic and angry from years of feeling as if they have to live up to what their parents need them to be. The sense of betrayal for op-

posing their parents' wishes can seem unbearable and impossible.

If only we keep in mind as parents that our children are but a gift to us. It is our job to raise them with a sense of responsibility and thoughtfulness. It is our job to offer them opportunities as they figure out their strengths and weaknesses. It is our job to teach them to follow through on a commitment, whether it be to orchestra or swim team. Yet, we walk a fine line as we listen to, and respect, their voices. It is not our job to live out our hopes and fears through our children to a degree that we imprison them.

Here are a few suggestions to keep you awake and confident as you nurture your child's nature, to help her be true to herself:

- Pay close attention from the start, observing your child's nature. We do not intervene in the same fashion for each child, whether by comforting them or signing them up for a recreational activity.

- Avoid the parent trap of believing everything must be "even Steven," as if what is fair or right for one is fair for all. Teach your children that what is right or fair is for Mom and Dad to determine at any given point in time, given the circumstances and given each child's needs.

- Avoid making comparisons aloud. Talk to your children separately and privately, whether you are addressing a report card or sibling rivalry.

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Is your Child Sad, Having Trouble Sleeping, or Not Enjoying Things?

If so, he/she may suffer from major depression.

NIMH would like to talk to you about participation in an ongoing depression study for children and adolescents.

Symptoms of depression can also include:

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• Try to see your child for who she is, and celebrate the differences between the two of you. This can be as simple as the colors she likes to wear or the books she likes to read. If you are redesigning her room, and she is mature enough to have an opinion, by all means make her room for her, not in accordance to your tastes.

• Try to avoid pressuring a child to perform at a pace that is unrealistic, even if she appears gifted. Remember that if you push an athlete or a student too far, she might break! Reach for moderation, thereby teaching your child to moderate herself when it comes to goals.

• Pay attention to your own needs and fears. Ask yourself why you might not have faith or why you are anxious that your child is not behaving or performing up to your expectations. It is important that we do our own self-check when it comes to our anxiety over parenting. Sometimes our child is perfectly fine and the problem is with us!

• Get used to the fact that you might feel embarrassed by your child at times. Trust that others know that your child's behavior and personality are not entirely

in your hands. She has a will and destiny of her own, and that is a good thing. Keep a sense of humor. It is our job to "hold up the mirror" and help our children redirect their behavior as needed. It is also up to us to learn when it is necessary to direct them and when it is time to let go.

If a child cannot face disappointing her parents, she may become symptomatic simply as a way to have a voice. There is a paradox in parenting a child who will not bend to your expectations. Most of the time that we are reactive or controlling, we are simply full of fear. Face your fears and work on yourself. Cultivate faith in your child by following her lead at times, as you are the teacher she turns to when needed. Being forceful often results in opposition and resistance. It is fine to uphold the values you wish to instill in your children. Simply do so in the spirit of watching and respecting who they are as they strive to become their true selves.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a psychologist in private practice in Garrett Park, Md. For information about her "Parenting with Confidence" coffeehouse sessions, visit www.kayabrams.com.

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