

Re-thinking assumptions about child-rearing

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

Do you ever feel anxious about how you rear your kids? Are you tired of advice from grandparents and teachers? Wondering whether to buy baby videos?

If so, maybe you can take a deep breath and take a few tips from what new research is telling us.

In *Nurture Shock: New Thinking About Children* (2009), authors Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman summarize hundreds of recent studies in brain science, social behavior, and learning. They offer several propositions that help parents navigate through the mine of conflicting (and sometimes profit-driven) opinions to the science behind recommended child development practices. Here are some of their propositions:

The more babies watch TV and videos, the worse their language skills and brain development. Many parents have fallen for advertisers' claims that having their babies watch specially designed videos and software will boost their children's brain power. Not so. Infants who watch so-

called baby videos end up with a smaller vocabulary than those who don't. The main reason is that watching a screen is passive, not interactive.

Furthermore, parents who simply chatter to their children aren't helping them much either. What really works is that parents respond to a child's speech and actions; it's the give-and-take of conversation. When Ernie babbles and Dad responds, "Is that so?" or "Tell me about it," Ernie is stimulated to keep trying. The same is true when Ernie drops a toy and Mom says something like "Down it goes. Shall I pick it up?"

Tip: Instead of putting a baby in front of a screen, engage the child in conversation. If you're cooking or doing laundry, place the baby in a highchair or other safe place and talk back and forth. Away from home, make sure your caregiver doesn't rely on TV as a babysitter.

Telling Leslie she's "smart" has the opposite effect. Praising a child's intelligence can convey the idea that learning should come easily. When presented with a challenge, a child may feel afraid to take a risk and face possible failure and embarrassment. Children can also sense when praise is insincere.

By contrast, explaining that a child's brain is like a muscle and needs to work more can help a child feel motivated to try harder. Furthermore, giving specific feedback provides a child with useful information to apply to future efforts. "You read three words on this page. Great! Let's see if you can sound out this one."

Tip: Encourage effort, be honest, and be specific. Avoid vague compliments for being "smart," "special," or "strong."

Sleep lost during the week cannot be made up on weekends. Children today sleep about an hour less at night than children did a generation ago. Typically they are losing sleep because of too many activities (music lessons, sports, video

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games) that push back their bedtimes. Once lost, sleep cannot be made up.

Adequate sleep is critical in childhood (and adulthood) for several reasons. First, sleep affects learning: tired children can't remember what they just learned. Furthermore, adequate sleep at night allows the brain to process what it learns during the day. Second, sleep affects the release of hormones that regulate hunger and fat production, which means that losing sleep can contribute to obesity. Third, sleep affects mood and well-being. Lack of sleep can lead to headaches, hyperactivity, moodiness, and other disorders.

Tip: Remove video games and TV from children's bedrooms, and re-arrange family routines to ensure children get adequate sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation, toddlers need 12-14 hours a night, preschoolers 11-13 hours, and school-age children (ages 5 to 10) need 10-11 hours.

Avoiding discussions about race sets up children to develop bias. White parents mistakenly think they are helping their children grow up to be color blind by not talking about race and skin color. Moreover, merely placing children in a school with a diverse enrollment will not help them develop positive attitudes about equality.

What actually happens is that children's brains, as early as the preschool years, categorize people by visible traits (skin color, hair color, gender, for example). As a result, children distinguish between people who are either "like me" or "not like me," favoring those "like me." In addition, shushing children when they innocently make remarks about diversity ("Why is her skin black?") only makes them think the topic is taboo.

Talking brings the subject into the open. "Yes, she has black skin. She was born that way. Lots of people have black skin. It's different from yours, but we're all alike inside." Children won't understand the word *equality* unless someone defines it for them. As they get older, hearing about past discrimination helps them grow in understanding.

Tip: Talk openly and explicitly to children about diversity.

Children lie more than we think they do. Parents generally think they can tell when their children are lying. And when children fib, parents rightly understand that preschoolers are too young to know what lies are or realize that lying is wrong.

Their early lies are usually attempts to avoid punishment. As children get older, they lie for other reasons, such as to get attention, save face, feel better about themselves, or make their parents happy. And why not? They see adults exaggerating or spouting untruths all around them.

A CHILD'S IQ SCORE CAN VARY WIDELY IN THE ELEMENTARY YEARS.

In reality, almost all children start experimenting with lying about age 4. Lying actually marks the development of an advanced cognitive skill that requires a child to recognize the truth, conceive of a different scenario, and then tell that scenario convincingly. If children are good at this skill, they may continue using this strategy, at least for a time.

Tip: Make it clear that lying is wrong, but give children an avenue for redemption: "I won't be upset if you lied because I know (this situation) is important to you, but if you tell the truth, we can deal with the real issue more easily."

A kindergarten child's IQ score won't predict later school performance. Many schools use IQ and other tests at the kindergarten level—and earlier—to determine eligibility for gifted programs, under the assumption that intelligence is inborn and stable. In reality, some intelligence is inherited and the rest develops unevenly; it can occur in sharp spikes, up as well as down. A child's IQ score can vary widely in the elementary years, a fact that is especially true of brighter children.

IQ testing, in itself, has been widely criticized for cultural bias, over-emphasis on language skill, dependence on a child's test-taking abilities, and other problems. In addition, children with the highest scores (above 130), the so-called geniuses, don't seem to fare markedly better in adult life than children with average (100) or moderately high scores (120). Yet our institutions continue to revere IQ scores.

Tip: Recognize that IQ is overrated in our society, and that gimmicks for raising a child's IQ have become big business. Look for your child's unique

gifts in everything from academics to the arts to sports, and keep in mind that the goal is to enjoy learning throughout one's life.

Giving siblings equal attention won't keep them from fighting with each other. It's commonly thought that brothers and sisters fight or taunt each other because they're competing for parents' attention. Actually, siblings fight because they have not learned the social skills to be friends with each other. They may be learning social skills at school (sharing, taking turns, respecting another's property, for example), but there's usually no incentive for being friends with a brother or sister. Besides that, being nice to siblings may not be viewed as cool by one's friends.

With time and experience, siblings generally stop fighting, but the tone of the relationships established in childhood, whether bossy or caring, often continues into adulthood.

Tip: Recognize that children's needs differ by age, temperament, and ability. How you treat one child may differ to some degree from how you treat another. Look for the fun times that siblings have with each other (on vacations, in family gatherings) because they can help balance out the conflicts.

Giving up two basic assumptions

The authors see two assumptions that guide parents in rearing children, and both can be set aside.

One assumption is that what works in adults also works in children. Instead, research holds that each person is unique from birth to death, with differing thresholds for restorative sleep, positive reinforcement, engagement, and learning. Remember, there's no magic bullet—a one-size-fits-all—for building competent children or for adults.

The second assumption is that we can identify what's good or bad for children and then shore up the good to ward off the bad. Here the research shows that some things we think are good (such as avoiding discussions about race) can have bad outcomes (bias), and that things we think are bad (such as lying) actually reflect something we value (advanced cognitive skill). Moreover, some things (such as sibling rivalry) can be bad as well as good.

This doesn't mean we give up on guiding and nurturing our children but rather that adults let go the notion that they can absolutely control how children

turn out.

Nurture Shock is available in hardback, paperback, and audiobook and also on Kindle from Amazon.com and Nook from BarnesandNoble.com. ■