

"Parenting the Whole Child" Philosophy of Growing Families International

This forms the basis for "Growing Families International's" approach to child rearing.

In the mid-1950s, the nation's cultural ethic defined our personal values. It formed the "left" and "right" banks of acceptable behaviour. Families governed themselves within the framework of a larger moral consensus. Today we live in an age of moral diversity. Each family decides what is right and wrong for them. Frightening prospect.

Such sovereignty has created problems in our schools, churches, synagogues, and neighbourhoods, and ultimately our homes, as children struggle through the diversity. If everyone has a different set of values, how do you teach your children right and wrong? And what do you do in the face of so-called post-modernism, which says there is no fixed right and wrong? How can you teach them to get along with others? Without a mutual morality with basic virtues, your child may become either a bully or a victim.

Yet, finding moral common ground that all can applaud will not prove as difficult as it might first appear. We take confidence in the fact that most who find encouragement from this site, share a respect for fundamental character traits. We know you want to instil honesty, empathy, compassion, kindness, gentleness, respect, honour, and self-control in your children.

This is not a wish list from Never-Never Land. It is a reasonable goal for your children. But neither are they born with these virtues. They're cultivated. It is the duty of parents to put character into their children and not sit back and hope good character emerges naturally. It won't.

The Ezzos, throughout their teaching emphasise the importance of moral education in young children. They desire to show parents how young children learn moral lessons, internalise meaningful values, and then translate them into social skills. They want to share with each reader how to raise great kids, kids who are kind, courteous, respectful, confident, sensitive to others, obedient, fun to be with at any age, and characterised by self-control and cooperation. Simply put: *kids who are a blessing to other people*. The Ezzos propagate the belief that the pathway to a healthy sense of self starts with a healthy sense of "otherness appreciation."

The Ezzos passionately believe that a child's moral sense proceeds from his early social experiences, directed by parents and influenced by his peer community. That is why it is so important to educate parents. By intent or neglect, parents are still the greatest influence on their children. A pressure-packed statement? Absolutely! Raising good children and having a great family is not a matter of chance, it is parental choice. Even in this age of moral diversity. You can have great kids whose behaviour shouts to the world that they have great parents.

What about adolescence? Although this stage may seem eons away, we encourage you to look forward to it with great anticipation, not fear or dread. These years do not have to be stressful or full of storm. On the contrary, they can, and probably will, be some of the best and most joyful years of your parenting. Too many parents have been successful with the Ezzo's counsel to deny the outcome or relegate it as a matter of chance. Any parent can get there. It is simply a matter of parenting the whole child.

Parenting the Whole Child

We are pleased to see that within educational circles today there seems to be a healthy movement away from single-focus parenting, to a growing consensus in favour of parenting the "whole child." This term implies a child-rearing approach that considers the natural capacities of children as the primary targets of parenting. It is the counterweight to, on one hand, the unbalanced child-centred, laissez faire approach that elevates a child's happiness over morality, and on the other hand, the strictness of the authoritarian approach that regulates behaviour, often at the expense of a child's developing emotions.

In the recent past, the title "whole-child" has suffered from some myths and misconceptions. Confusion arose over the transliteration of the word "whole" to the word "holistic" as in New Age mysticism. Be assured that neither the word nor the concept has anything to do with such matters. It is a healthy and sensible developmental concept. The essence of the whole child can be measured and understood by the natural capacities of children.

There are four general capacities:

1. Children have physical capacities. The duty of every parent is to nurture and provide for his or her children's physical growth and well-being. Parents feed, clothe and shelter their children and encourage the development of the natural skills and talents necessary for life.
2. Children also have intellectual capacities. The duty of a parent is to stimulate his or her child's intellectual competency. Parents educate their children in basic skills, logic and useful knowledge.
3. Children have emotional capacities. The duty of a parent is to nurture his or her child's emotional well-being. Parents help their children establish internal controls over both positive and negative emotions.

4. Children have moral capacities. The duty of a parent is to help his or her child internalise virtues that reflect the values of the family and society.

All four facets receive attention. None should be neglected, underdeveloped, or overemphasised. Why is that? Because competence and character go hand in hand. You do not want to raise a smart child who lacks integrity. Nor do you want a great athlete with a shallow intellect. Academic skills without values, values without healthy emotions, happy feelings without productivity and physical stature without moral wisdom all represent developmental imbalances.

A Plan that Works

These four capacities, a child's native skills, intellect, emotions, and morality are the building blocks of development. All are important, but which is most important? What is the best order in which to arrange them, or does it matter?

The Ezzo's "whole child" approach assumes that one arrangement of the blocks is indeed better than all others. In fact, disagreement between parenting philosophies usually centre on which building block is to be awarded priority in the construction of the whole child. A small percentage of parents put intellectual stimulation at the top of the pile. Everything else is secondary to the child's cerebral development. When arranging the blocks this way, a child's character and emotions are usually left underdeveloped.

A second arrangement, representing the lion's share of modern parenting thought, considers a child's emotional development as the first priority of training. Morality and academics are dependent on it. The theory is that if children can just be made to feel good about themselves, they will turn out great. (They won't.)

Some parents seem to think physical development deserves the top position. They enrol their children in junior aerobics, junior football, swim teams, and weightlifting. Certainly parents should encourage their children in this area, but does it really belong in the highest slot? Most kids develop physical skills just by being kids.

How then, should you stack the blocks? **Place your emphasis on moral training.** Instil morality into a child and his behaviour will fall into place. We believe moral education should not only be the priority of early training but is absolutely essential for optimal intellectual and emotional development, as well as the advancement of natural skills.

Moral training gives children advanced modes of thought that are more easily transferred to both the intellect and emotions than through any other form of education. Moral training provides the objectivity needed for emotions to function freely without overpowering the child. As a result you are much more likely to successfully parent the whole child. Moral training, done correctly, delivers the whole package: emotionally balanced, intellectually assertive, morally sensible children, raised to the applause of a grateful society.

Now to come full circle. What should guide your moral training? Specifically, can we establish a singular code of ethics for self and community? Is there a common starting point for morality from which all parental training can be measured and evaluated? We believe there is. **We call it the first principle.** It is the crucial assumption that keeps parents focused on the task, directing and monitoring their children's thoughts, words, and actions.

The First Principle

When asked if there is one word upon which the whole of life may proceed, Confucius replied: "Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not yourself desire, do not put before others." There is a first-century Jewish saying that states the same truth in a positive form: "Do to others what you would have them do to you."

If you want kindness, gentleness, respect, honour, compassion, mercy, and justice shown to you, then live by these virtues yourself. Treat other people the way you want to be treated. Shun the vices of cruelty, selfishness, malice, and deceit. It is never too early to be teaching your children about virtues and vices. But the failure to do so may severely limit his/her human potential.

Whether drawn from an ancient dynasty or the Christian New Testament, the core message is the same: Community life revolves around the assumption that social actions are reciprocal. One's conduct has implications not only toward others, but about how we expect others to treat us. Moral reciprocity is a child's teacher. It is fundamental to all relationships. In the past, this ethic is what gave parents moral direction and purpose. It helped them make sense out of their parenting. It still has that same wonderful power today.

The first principle is first in magnitude and goes like this: What you do not yourself desire, do not put before others. Do to others what you would have them do to you.

Because morality is fundamentally concerned with one's obligation to others, then everything we do comes back to the first principle. Let your parenting be guided by it. The first principle has everything to do with teaching children how to build and maintain healthy relationships. It starts with the knowledge that other people count.

Other people are precious. Brothers and sisters, Mum and Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, cousins and friends, they all count. So does the butcher, baker and candlestick maker. Everyone in our community matters. Learning how to rightly relate with others is a necessary prerequisite to learning how to rightly feel good about self.

Without a clearly defined first principle, parenting becomes a matter of hit-and-miss. When it comes to subduing

mischievous behaviour, for example, parents with no first principle tend to look for clever strategies, rules, and techniques. What is the best way to respond when faced with disobedience, tantrums, a finger in the dog's eye, or another missing cookie?

Today's parents have no shortage of suggestions for what to do. "Try a firm no!" says one mother. "Do it with passion," says another. "And if that doesn't work, cry. That always stops my kids in their tracks. "Just scream," says another mother, "It works for me." "I persuade my children," says another Mom. "I talk to them gently and calmly, reasonably explaining the situation. If that doesn't work, I get out the wooden spoon. That works, too." If none of those solutions work, the modern parent can farm the kids out. Let the sitter, the nanny, the teacher, or the neighbourhood kids deal with the issue.

Ready for a better idea? Go back to the first principle. If you operate from a first principle orientation, the discipline technique you use becomes secondary. The question, "What am I going to do in this situation?" becomes less difficult. Everything snaps into focus when you ask your child something like: "Would you like someone to treat you like you just treated Jennifer?"

The first principle is your guide. You must feed it, satisfy it, live by it, monitor behaviour by it, and cultivate it in your children. It is your rudder, your compass that always points true north. When the first principle is transferred to children, it becomes their guiding light, helping them transition from their natural self-centred orientation to an otherness perspective.

How does this proposition square with all the self-esteem training of our age, which emphasises self, rather than others? It doesn't. Isn't that a relief? Everyone is looking for the cultural antidote to natural selfishness. Enhancing self-esteem is not it. We serve our children better by helping them acquire the values and virtues on which a positive sense of self is actually built. Without a healthy "otherness ethic" in place, there is no basis for self-esteem. "Children have difficulty feeling good about themselves when they lack the social and moral skills necessary to get along with others.

Benefits of the First Principle

Moral parenting is practical and easily translated into the everyday how-tos. We're excited about this because we know when a principle is made practical, beautiful changes come into the lives of children. In fact, parents today have every reason to hope for and experience strong, positive, healthy, and lasting relationships with their children.

The benefits of right moral training derived from this first principle are inspiring. Here is a short list, drawn from families who have employed the "treat others as you would like to be treated" first principle. This is a sampling of what we believe can happen with your children.

The first principle ethic:

- ◇ It established during the preschool and elementary school years, becomes the basis of self-assurance and relational success during the teen year.
- ◇ Is the foundation upon which emotional, intellectual and creative ventures flourish.
- ◇ Gives a child the best chance of growing into a happy, well-adjusted and successful adult.
- ◇ Provides the armour that protects kids from drugs, alcohol, unhealthy habits and delinquency. It is often associated with high motivation and drive for achievement in school, work and play.
- ◇ Helps children develop high moral standards, have deeper relationships and have more friends who are honest.
- ◇ Produces children who stand strong and will not succumb to peer pressure.
- ◇ Produces children who are more open to constructive criticism.
- ◇ Produces in children closer relationships with siblings, parents and grandparents.
- ◇ Draws appreciation from those outside the family, teachers, coaches and employers.

If these are not enough to convince you, consider your alternatives. If the first principle really is what provides children the relational attributes listed above, then what happens in its absence? Our playgrounds and grocery stores, and our jails and talk shows are full of examples. The stakes are high in the arena of parenting. Success or failure is seen in results only measurable ten years down the road. Choose your child's future wisely.



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