

They're Watching You: How Your Relationship Impacts Your Children

By Sharon Klempner, MSW, LCSW, BCD

I am a gardener so I sometimes experience the world in terms of flowers. Children are the flowers we 'plant' and nurture. How we do that has a considerable effect on how they grow and flourish. The relationship we have with our partner/spouse has a considerable effect on how children learn to deal with others. As you read this, you may recall your own parent's relationship and its impact on you.

From a very young age, our offspring experience and observe us. We are the most important people to them. They count on us for survival, guidance, teaching and fun. It is a given that they learn more from what we do than what we preach. Infants are more keenly aware of their surroundings, especially people, than we realized many years ago. When babies are exposed to parental tension, they experience bodily responses, just as young infants often respond to other crying infants by crying too. Parental figures provide their sense of security and can threaten feelings of safety when they are engaged in verbal battle.

As a therapist, taking an initial history, it is important to understand the family "soil" in which a person grew and developed. There are many connections related to the interactions of parents which serves as a blueprint for their children's future intimate relationships. Just as we see children playing house, feeding or soothing a doll, they are absorbing and reenacting their parent's ways of behaving with each other. They may shave like daddy, cook like mommy and hug their little 'spouse' or yell at them. They may learn to boss or control their playmate or ask what they think or would like to do.

So, no matter what we tell our children about behavior, we influence their belief system by our own behavior. Do we negotiate respectfully, giving our partner/spouse the time to explain his/her feelings and perspective? Are our children learning to trust, respect and still feel secure even though they disagree with others? Do they see us arrive at compromise with which we can both be comfortable? What are we demonstrating [ie, teaching] about friendship, caring and affection?

As parents, we need to prepare, work and enrich the soil of relationship in which our children can grow and blossom. Just as the above is true for marriages, it is equally, if not more so, for parents who are divorcing. We can demonstrate that even though the love may be gone, to maintain a viable marriage, we can differ, negotiate and compromise to offer a continuation of respectful and civil co-parenting.

Remember, they are watching you.

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