



Using Your Past

I did not have a great childhood. How do I make sure my children have a better experience than I did?

When most parents set their standards and expectations for parenting, they take into account their recollections of their own youth. As a first step toward understanding your own approach to parenting, and to use that information in a positive way, examine it through the prism of your own childhood.

To begin, answer the following questions:

1. What do you remember about the family you grew up in, particularly your relationships with your mother and father? What do you appreciate most about their way of raising you?
2. What did you most enjoy doing with each of your parents? The answer to this question might give you a clue to the activities your own child might enjoy doing with you.
3. What were the greatest difficulties you had with your parents? This information might help you avoid problem areas with your own youngster, while understanding why you respond to certain parental situations the way you do. For instance, if you felt your parents were too strict, you might become too permissive with your own child; or if you believe your mother and father were too withdrawn and quiet, you might insist upon talking with your child a lot.
4. What do you feel were their greatest shortcomings as parents? If your own father became abusive when he got angry, for example, you might feel anxious whenever tempers flare in your own household, and you might try to avoid angry confrontations.

Your Family Experience

You can also learn a lot from childhood relationships with your brothers and sisters. Ask yourself questions like: What were the best aspects of your relationship with your siblings? What did you enjoy doing most with them? What problems and conflicts did you have with them? How do you feel your parents handled these conflicts?

If you were an only child, you might have difficulty adjusting to the way your own youngsters relate to one another; you may find their fighting quite disturbing, although if you had grown up with siblings, you would understand better that sibling bickering is quite normal. Or if you were the oldest (or the youngest) child in your family, you might unconsciously identify more with your own oldest (or youngest) child.

Using Your Childhood Memories

Think about the significant events that took place in your childhood. What do you remember about moves to a new city? Starting school? Illnesses or injuries? Losses (the death of a pet, a friend moving away, a stolen bicycle)? These childhood memories can affect how you relate to your own youngsters today. If you had a tough time moving to a new neighborhood when you were young, you might find it hard to put your own child through the same experience. If the first day at a new school was always difficult for you, you might feel especially anxious when your child changes schools.

Also, examine your own memories of teachers and classmates, your academic performance, what you liked and disliked about school and important school events (tests, oral reports, class trips, science fairs). Think back upon your childhood friendships, too: best friends, adversaries, activities with other children and how you adjusted to changes in friendships.

As you reflect upon these childhood experiences, you might recognize how they have influenced your responses to your own child's interactions with others - and not always in a positive way. For instance, your youngster may prefer to stay home after school, playing a musical instrument, doing homework and not spending much time in social

activities. However, if you yearned to be more popular when you were young, you might push your son to participate more in sports, 4-H, or Scouting activities, although he might have no interest in them. These are issues you need to become more sensitive to.

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Talk About Your Past

As part of this self-examination, talk with your youngster about your own childhood recollections. He will love to hear stories about what life was like for you when you were his age. It will give him a sense of history and belonging. It will also help him through difficult times once he finds out that you, too, might not have been invited to a party you really wanted to go to, or that, like him, you had fears about giving an oral report in front of the class.

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