

Marriage and Family Corner: Authentic and Compassionate Parenting

Mary McKinney | Posted: Thursday, March 5, 2015 7:37 am

'Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we we're supposed to be and embracing who we are.' - Brené Brown

'If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.'

- Siddhartha Gautama

The practice of authenticity involves compassion. Authenticity and compassion — for ourselves and others — is necessary for either to be realized and sustained.

I once heard a preacher comment, “I don't stay in the will of God, but I drag myself back therefrom time to time.”

This statement stuck with me, and have I found the idea applies to many things.

In this case, it can be stated that I am not always authentic or compassionate (with myself or with others), but I drag myself back to those practices from time to time.

This intentionality requires accepting and embracing what really is.

Willingness to be vulnerable — and to accept the vulnerability of people we love most, including our children, makes it possible to repeatedly choose authenticity and compassion.

Vulnerability includes the realization that none of us can protect our children from unintended results, from the consequences of their choices — or from anything else present in their lives.

The realization that ability to protect children, fundamentally, ends upon their conception was harsh for me.

I repeatedly drag myself back to accept this fact.

In my career, I have seen that this difficulty is common for parents.



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Safety and other outcomes for our children are influenced by variables beyond our control. Giving up ideas of control allows us to make our goal in our children's lives to be positive influence.

The potential to shift from protection to positive influence happens when compassion is extended.

The compassion of embracing what is real about ourselves, as well as who our children are, is authentic. Authenticity opens the way for greater connection, health, happiness and joy.

As the mother of young adults, I am challenged by another truth: our ability to teach our children essentially ends with their adulthood or late teenage years.

We must respect that the developmental task of adolescence is for separation; it dictates that children move toward independence.

This shift mandates a role shift for parents, too. Thankfully, wisdom can still be imparted to our children when they ask for it or, more powerfully, when they see it demonstrated in our lives.

The truth that direct teaching is essentially finished can be hard to accept, or even to understand.

Parental vulnerability may be heightened again when children move out in the world, seemingly with inadequate development, information and awareness.

It may appear that the foundation for separation and individuation is incomplete, especially if grief, addiction, trauma — or our own mistakes — have interfered.

The wish to facilitate and remediate progress past any stunted development is common, although basically impossible.

Our children's ability to complete this development is supported by our willingness to accept them as they are and to have confidence that they will find their own way — even when that way creates anxiety for us.

Obviously, it is important to remain available during their starts and stops in this growth.

Adopting this legitimate parenting role doesn't mean we stop trying to convey wisdom and information that is not requested by our children or that is not evident in our own lives.

After all, as humans, we often feel a need to try the same thing many times before recognizing futility.

Many of us are familiar with the quote: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result."

This quote is usually attributed to Albert Einstein, but also to Benjamin Franklin, John Dryden and Rita Mae Brown.

This insanity is easier to notice in other people, including in our children.

Misguided attempts at protection or teaching are manifestations of fear, not of compassion.

This fear doesn't come from a lack of genuine and intense love. It generally comes from difficulty in accepting the vulnerability of our children and ourselves.

Vulnerability can be terrifying. It can also be exhilarating as greater capacity for healthy relationships, including with ourselves and with our children, is built through authenticity and compassion.