

Do You Really ‘See’ Your Child?

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Intensive parenting is problematic not only because of the pressure it puts on parents, but because some research suggests that all this exhausting parental striving may not be the best way to raise children. In fact, our research and experience suggest that raising happy, healthy, flourishing kids requires parents to do just one key thing. It’s not about reading all the parenting best sellers or signing your kids up for all the right activities. You don’t even have to know exactly what you’re doing. Just show up. Showing up means bringing your whole being — your attention and awareness — into this moment with your child. When we show up, we are mentally and emotionally present for our child right now. Naturally, no one can do this for everyone all the time, but as we explain in our new book, “The Power of Showing Up,” the idea is to approach parenting being present and aware in your interactions with your child — and to make repairs when that doesn’t happen. Longitudinal research on child development suggests that one of the best predictors for how any child turns out — in terms of happiness, social and emotional development, meaningful relationships, and even academic and career success — is having received sensitive, supportive care early in life. We believe the key element is an adult who supported the child by offering what we call the “Four S’s” — helping them feel 1) safe — where they feel protected and sheltered from harm; 2) seen — where they know you care about them and pay attention to them as they really are; 3) soothed — where they know you’ll be there for them when they’re hurting; and 4) secure — which develops from the other S’s so they trust you to predictably help them feel “at home” in the world. In the world of intensive hyper-parenting, the third S — “seen” — often seems to get left behind. We all know we should keep our kids safe and secure, and most of us believe we should soothe them when they’re upset. But what about really seeing them?

You know the clichés of the dad who pushes his disinterested son to be an athlete, or the mom who rides her child to make straight A's, regardless of the child's inclinations. These are parents failing to see who their kids really are. If they happen occasionally over the course of a childhood they won't make a huge difference — no one can truly see a child 100 percent of the time. But over time the child's sense of not being seen can not only harm the child, but the parent and the relationship. That sets up a heartbreaking reality: there are kids who live a majority of their childhoods not being seen. Never feeling understood. Rarely having the experience that someone feels their feelings, takes on their perspective, knows their likes and dislikes. Imagine how these children feel — invisible and alone. When they think about their teachers, their peers, even their parents, one thought can run through their minds: "They don't get me at all."

What keeps a child from feeling seen and understood? Sometimes, it's when we see the child through a lens that has more to do with our own desires, fears, and issues than with our child's individual personality, passions, and behavior. Maybe we become fixated on a label and say, "He's the baby," or "She's the athletic (or shy or artistic) one." Or "He's stubborn, just like his dad." When we define our kids like this, using labels or comparisons to capture and categorize them, we prevent ourselves from seeing them for who they are. Even in our most well-meaning moments, we can fall into the trap of hoping our kids will be something other than who they really are. We might want our child to be studious or athletic or artistic or neat or achievement-oriented or something else. But what if he just doesn't care about kicking a ball into a net? Or is even unable to do so? What if she has no interest in playing the flute? What if it doesn't seem important to get straight A's, or it feels inauthentic to conform to gender norms?

Seeing our kids also means being willing to look beyond our initial assumptions and interpretations. If your child is quiet when she meets an adult, you might assume she is being impolite and try to improve her social skills. But she may simply be feeling shy or anxious. Rather than immediately correcting manners, you should first observe where she is right now, and work to understand the feelings behind the behavior. The point is to develop an attitude of curiosity rather than immediate judgment. When your toddler plays the "let's push the plate of spaghetti off the highchair" game, your initial assumption might be that he's trying to press your buttons. But if you look at his face and notice how fascinated he is by the red splatter on the floor and the wall, you might feel and respond differently. You might be just as frustrated about having to clean it up, but maybe you could pause and ask yourself, "I wonder why he did that?" If your curiosity can lead you to see him as a young researcher gathering data as he explores this world that's so new to him, you can respond with intentionality and patience, even as you clean up his experiment. (And perhaps draw your own conclusion and put a towel down the next time you serve pasta.) Each child is an individual.

When our own desires and assumptions lead us to perceive that child as something other than who they are, we are unable to see them clearly. And if we can't see our kids, then what do we really mean when we say we love them? How can we embrace them as the individuals they are? In the end, truly seeing your kids isn't about being some sort of super-parent. You don't have to read minds or transcend your shortcomings or achieve spiritual enlightenment. And you certainly don't have to drive yourself and your family insane trying to attend every available enrichment activity. You just have to show up, allowing your kids to feel that you get them and that you'll be there for them, no matter what. When you do that, you'll be teaching them how to love, and how relationships work. They'll be more likely to choose friends and partners who will see and show up for them, and they'll learn how to do it for others, meaning they'll build skills for healthy relationships, including with their own kids, who can then pass the lesson on down the line through future generations. That's what it means to see — really see — your children. Then, maybe someday, they'll sit down with you for that cup of coffee and let you know how grateful they are for the way you saw them for who they were, and for the ways you showed up in their life.