



PARENTING LESS THAN PERFECT KIDS

By Susan Vogt

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I've been waiting many years to write this article about parenting – long enough so that the child who was the primary focus would no longer be living at home and possibly be embarrassed. Having four children and having worked in the family relationship field for all my professional life (over 20 years) I feel I have accumulated a fair amount of knowledge and experience in raising healthy and successful children. In fact, I used to feel that my authority as a parent educator was confirmed by the successes of our two older children. One was high school valedictorian and the other a National Merit finalist. Both went to Yale and have been involved in numerous works of service to the community and stay connected to their faith. They are fine young people and Jim and I are very proud of both of them. I thought, therefore, that this would give credibility to my parenting advice. But the Lord was working at making me humble, or at least more realistic.

It all started with our first nursery school conference for child #3. I was used to hearing glowing reports about the progress of our children in school and when the teacher said this child was exceptional I was again ready to hear accolades. But she proceeded calmly to explain that he was very loving and seemed intelligent enough, but was having a hard time knowing how to relate appropriately with other children. This was an understatement!

As one school year merged into another we identified that he had a learning disability and some characteristics of A.D.D. I need not explain to parents who have been in such a situation what stress and frustration accompany such a high maintenance child. I started dreading teacher conferences rather than looking forward to them and I started to understand what many good parents face in raising their children. In fact, I found myself annoyed at parents with successful students taking up time at teacher conferences, just to hear good stuff, when I knew we needed extra duty help from the teacher.

At home, we struggled with how much to push this child that every IQ test said was of high intelligence but every grade said he wasn't trying. We dealt with surliness, rudeness, apathy, and lack of communication. Of course, having already twice gone through the teen years, we realized that some of this would be outgrown. I think I would have been a genuine basket case and figured we were intrinsically impaired parents if this had been our first child.

But you see, this was the point, the grace, and the lesson – parenting this child forced me to be a much less judgmental parent, drawing on reserves of unconditional love, stretching my skills at learning how to draw out an uncommunicative child, and certainly being able to empathize with other parents whose children were struggling despite their best efforts. This is the child who made me a Christian parent.

For instance:

- Supervising homework took a major hunk out of school nights.
- I learned not to compare children and to seek out the good no matter how hidden to my superficial eyes.
- I learned that my value as a person was not dependent upon the outward success of my child.
- I was pulled to prayer in a renewed way because sometimes that's all I had left.

- I have become gentler with myself instead of feeling guilty that I have not been as good a Christian as I intended, since after all, if I still love a child who sometimes insults and rejects me, then I could believe that God still loves and forgives me for my imperfections. (Rudeness, rejection, and generally being uncommunicative have applied to all our children at times.)

As I think about it, don't all these learnings (other than supervising homework) apply to how God unconditionally cares for each of us as beloved children.

I also think about parents of children who have more dramatic or visible handicaps than what I have experienced; or adoptive parents or infertile couples. I imagine *you* eventually come to an even deeper awareness of the ultimate value of each human life and learn to love without expectation of return.

The game's not over yet, but it's good that we have four children rather than two. It saves me from self righteousness.