

UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

FEBRUARY 2011



karen , age 7 is waiting...

Photo by: Miyo Strong

UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

QUARTERLY DCFS NEWSLETTER



Steven age 14 is waiting...

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If you are interested in more information on any of the children featured in this publication, please contact The Adoption Exchange at 801-265-0444.

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Keep On Dreaming

Lyrics by Justin Carter, adoptee age 16

It will be all right, it will be okay
Coming upon us is a brighter day
I will make a wish and say a prayer
With any luck you will be there

When you came into my life
Our two dreams will become just one,
Then we can stand strong
Because we have fought and won

Keep dreaming, cause dreams really do come true
Keep dreaming, that dream of me and you
Keep dreaming of a life that feels so brand new
Keep dreaming, and one day I'll find you
Then we'll have that happy ending
A lifetime of together—nothing could be better
So...keep dreaming, just keep dreaming
Keep on dreaming of me and you

I have a dream that's coming true
My happily ever after will be because of you
We were meant to be together
For our whole lifetime through

We just need to find each other
so this dream can really start,
We'll begin our life long journey
By joining our two hearts

Our lives can change for good
We just need to take a stand
Keep wishing for that dream
Then reach out and take my hand
Now is the time to find each other
And have our dreams come true
A happily ever after in a family that just grew
So... keep dreaming, keep on dreaming,
Just keep dreaming of me and you

Chloe no longer has to dream of finding an adoptive family. She found hers.



Dandelion Bouquet

By Anna Whisler, foster and adoptive parent

A hot day; I wish summers could go on forever. I suppose without the cycle of seasons I would not appreciate the summers as much as I do. The pool is set up in our yard and my children squeal as they catch the grass “fishes” in the cool water before retreating to the safety of their sun-warmed, oversized beach towels. The sun itself wraps us like a warm blanket. Sopping wet children then begin a water war. They squirt each other with neon colored water guns, darting off before they can be drenched by return fire.

I sun myself on a camp chair, sipping a cold Dasani while I watch them play, appreciating that they are not breaking the cardinal rule of not getting mommy wet. I watch as my son, Nathan, streaks across our fresh cut lawn towards the pool, but stops suddenly, mid-run, at the sight of a lone surviving dandelion, nearly trampled by his slippery, wrinkled feet. He tucks it carefully and runs triumphantly to present it to me. “Mom! I found this flower for you!” He kisses my cheek quickly but is gone even before I can thank him. He is already off to do whatever it is that five-year olds simply must do. The soggy dandelion appears to be wilting already. Its tiny petals curl at the edges and the flower slumps lifelessly in my hand. I fear the days when the dandelions can grow uninterrupted in my yard, and there is no small child to pluck them. Allowed to thrive in the place they’ve rooted, they will grow until their tiny fairy seeds are whisked away by the wind. I look back and notice my son seems to be able to run faster today than he could just yesterday.

Scientifically, dandelions are known as *Taraxacum*. From the Greek word *Taraxos*, meaning disorder, and *akos*, disturber. Its common name means lion’s tooth but is too fanciful a match in my mind for this unappreciated beauty.

A simple, sunny flower with slivers of tiny, canary-yellow petals, grow bright and bold amongst the plushiest blankets of lawns. Deep green leaves and jagged edges, its stems, once plucked, are comparatively plain, and drip its sweet milk-blood, as if too shamed suddenly to uphold its bud.

My oldest child, Ashlyn, a raven-haired pixy, is now ten years old. With exaggerated weariness she approaches me and leans against my chair. “Today is like, my favorite day, Mom.” She reflects, placing deeply tanned hands on tiny budding hips. “You say that all the time!” I joke with her. “I mean it all the time!” She giggles as we both dodge a wayward spray. “Sorry!” Kylee, my 8-year old cherub-faced beauty squeals apologetically before dashing back to her play.

I marvel to think that when Ashlyn and Kylee came as a temporary foster placement neither could speak more than a few words, and were not toilet-trained. More like wild animals than 3 and 4 year olds, they were a sad reflection of what an infancy of neglect and abuse can do to a child. An ordinary voice message was left for me and husband on November 4, 2004. The state worker spoke nonchalantly about a homeless, cocaine-addicted, pregnant mother whose children had been taken into state custody when

she and her husband were jailed for domestic violence. The girls, ages three and four needed a new placement.

We had returned the call and accepted the placement, never guessing that it would lead to permanent parenthood for us when the birth mother voluntarily relinquished her rights to all three children once her newborn son was born. Nathan, now five, was born exposed to crack cocaine; his helpless, unborn body once bathed in harsh chemicals, he now suffers from severe hyperactivity and anxiety issues.

I twirl the dandelion between my fingers. These flowers are weeds, nuisances that must be banished from otherwise respectable properties. It's true, the roots of this hearty little plant will choke the nutrients from the soil of those that dare leave it in its place.

Few know of the dandelion's many uses. Young leaves can be tossed in summer salads, or boiled and eaten plain, before the flower blooms. Native Americans have used the roots for tea, and as a cure for heartburn. It is said dandelions can provide relief for all manner of skin conditions; is a cure for scurvy, and can aid in liver and kidney troubles, reducing enlargement of these organs. Numerous other medicinal reports have been made of its usefulness. "Alright kiddos, let's drain the water so I can go start dinner." I am as reluctant to end the afternoon as I realize they will be.

Nathan takes charge instructing his older sisters how to drain the pool so that it waters the most of our lawn possible. "Dad says you have to push down on that side of the pool so the water drains to that side of the yard. No not like that, like this!" He bends the floppy white plastic carefully as close to the bottom as possible, just as his dad has taught him so the edges don't crack. Though just a wisp of a boy in size, he is intellectually advanced, but only in comparison to his developmentally delayed older sisters. He likes to make that fact known as often as possible.

Our fourth child, Jayden, was quite a surprise when I discovered I was miraculously pregnant with him just over two years ago. He stomps his chubby toddler feet in the cold, fast flowing water, occasionally pausing in admiration of his older sisters and brother as they work together to get the pool emptied.

It is nearing dusk that evening. Dinner has been cleared away and still an hour remains until bedtime. We are at home when my husband and I discover we have made an error. "We are out of milk!" My husband calls from the kitchen. I can hear Jayden and know he is likely waddling close behind his daddy as he nearly sing-songs, "Ba-bal, please!" My husband comes in jingling the keys. "Okay, I'll see you in few minutes!" "Wait," I reply. "You're going?" We debate back and forth for a minute about who gets to go and who must stay and man

the post. No compromise can be struck and it's decided the fair thing to do is to bring everyone. We pile all the children into the large family Yukon. Patience, and at the moment, love, are in short supply all around. Still, hope is in the clock as it ticks ever closer to that glorious bedtime hour.

A fight breaks out in the back of the vehicle almost immediately. Ashlyn does not want to sit by Kylee, "She is stinky!" She whines. It's likely true. Kylee often manages to find a way to repel those that might dare love her, and then leave her. "Kylee, scoot over to the other side." I instruct as evenly as possible. "But Ashlyn stole food and stuffed it back here and it spilled all over that seat." "Did you steal again Ashlyn?" I ask my little hoarder, a typical behavior for children who have faced uncertainty of when they will receive a next meal. "No! She's lying!" "Both of you girls shut up!" Nathan interjects loudly while he jumps up and down, rocking the vehicle with his boundless energy. "Nathan, you are not the parent, sit down and buckle, and say sorry to your sisters for telling them to shut up." My words are ignored as children's fists begin to flail in all directions, landing with solid thuds on each other's arms and backs. A barrage of filthy language erupts from their sweet little mouths. Moments like this I am glad there are no witnesses to my children's chaos. My husband calmly turns on the radio. He is going to leave this disciplining opportunity to me. "Okay, all of you, sit down, buckle up, hands on your elbows and zip your lips so we can go to the store or there will be no milk for breakfast tomorrow!" "You are going to starve us?" Ashlyn crosses her arms angrily. Ready to pick a fight "Don't say that about our Mom-" Kylee is quick to defend me. "Enough!" I say convincingly enough for them to take me seriously and they separate and buckle.

It's quiet, for a moment, save the crooning of a soft rock ballad on the radio. I try to remember, it is not their fault, and it is not mine. I must tell myself I chose them, and not they me. I must be conscious that it is not normal for a child to have been ripped from one home after the next until placed into a final destination without their consent; to be told to love and obey strangers as mother and father, no matter how many they've graced with those titles before. Even so, there are moments when my memory is even shorter than my patience.

My daughters have seen things that would send a grown man's heart palpitating. Factual government documents put simplistic check marks down the pages of unimaginable horrors. Has this child been exposed to the following: Neglect? Check. Witnessed domestic violence? Check. Exposed to harmful drugs or other substances? Check. Physical abuse? Check. Emotional abuse? Check. Sexual abuse? Check. I remember that one caseworker told me a few months in to our providing foster care for these children that several other foster families had turned down the placement before

we'd said yes because of all the possible risks involved in taking a sibling group who had been exposed to so much. The caseworker had wondered at that time why we had said yes. At the moment, I can't remember what I replied.

What I do know, is that I was young. I wanted to do some good while I waited to become what I longed to be, what I was once told I may never be: a mother. Two prior foster placements had come and gone from our home. It had been several months since we'd had a placement at all and our home and lives felt empty. I didn't really care what the children's history had been. I knew there was no perfect child out there and felt passionately that all children deserved equal opportunities to be loved. Still, it was with a good deal of naivety and idealism I accepted these children in as our third foster placement.

I think of my dandelion, for now, at home in my pocket. I admire the dandelion for its audacity to take root where not desired. It knows its needs and will get them met, one way or another. It is common looking, compared to more cultivated flowers, yet holds its own in the cycle of things even when it must stand alone. Still, we feed it poisons, cut it down, and weed it out the more. Oh, dandelions are just fine, most say, on someone else's lawn.

"Did you know Nathan and Ashlyn have therapy tomorrow? My husband reminds me. "And we are almost out of the kids prescriptions. We need to fill those." "Okay. Oh, and I wasn't able to find anyone willing to babysit the kids on Friday so we won't be able to go on our date night. "My husband sighs deeply. "We haven't had a night out since Ashlyn was put back on line-of-sight supervision by the therapist." "Yeah, well, it's kind of hard to get people to watch your kids once they know the oldest can't be left alone with other children for even a second. Not much we can do about that though." "I know. I just really wanted to get away for awhile. It's been a tough week." He says, and I nod, understanding he is referring to the several rages our bipolar child has had this week.

The pink sky deepens to reds, purples and blues as we speed towards the store, but I barely notice. In my mind, I am busy cursing the limits of contemporary medicine. Two of my children are diagnosed with serious mental health disorders. Their medication is no panacea. How often it has let me down! Its effects are too short, and often leave evening hours full of mayhem, unbridled emotional responses, and an anxious need for more: of everything, as if there is no tomorrow, or at least no more needs that will be fulfilled tomorrow. Always there is evening fatigue, but that belongs to me and my husband.

Three hasty stops are required in vacant, long-shadowed parking lots to quell cantankerous children, random fits of frenzied clamoring over seats by those whose buckles seem

mysteriously to have come undone, slapping, hair tugging and subsequent wails by the offended sibling. Patience, only, preserves my remaining sanity.

We reach Wal-Mart. Bright lights beckon me and I get to go in. I know better by now than taking children into the store on nights like these. To those that don't know, could never know, only careless parenting produces unruly children. Elementary advice by well-meaning strangers is given but discarded by us, the parents of PhD-level special-needs children. Always there are the sideway glances that say, "I'm glad those aren't my kids," or "Why didn't they just leave those kids home." To which, on a good night, I chuckle inwardly, "Maybe I should have left them at your home!" Two gallons of milk and I hop back in the car. "Where's my balloon, Mom?" Nathan demands. I feel the panic well up in my chest, my heart pounds. Had I promised a balloon? I brace for combat. "Sorry, I was not buying anything but milk tonight."

There is an ensuing onslaught of expressions of anger and hate. I know he does not mean them. I know he is still my snuggle-bubba, my nickname for him since birth. The car hums steadily as it idles and my husband and I glance at each other, no one makes a move. Nathan mumbles curses under his breath until exhausting himself, he finally buckles and we leave. The tension is too much for the smallest of our brood, Jayden, simultaneously cursed and blessed to call himself ours, he cries all the way home.

Finally, that blessed, holy hour of bedtime has arrived and I wrap my arms like ribbons around my little brood, their heads bob against each other like the buds of a bouquet. They giggle delightedly. Fresh bathed now, they smell flowery and clean. It brings to mind a poem I once read by 19th century poet James Russell Lowell. It is titled, "To The Dandelion."

**"Dear common flower that grow'st beside the way
fringing the dusty road with harmless gold
'tis the spring's largess which she scatters now
to rich and poor alike with lavish hand
though most hearts never understand
to take it at God's value, but pass by
the offered wealth with unrewarded eye.**

That night as I prepare for bed I pull the dandelion from my pocket and pick up my favorite book. I press my dainty little weed carefully between its thick pages. It is a heavy book, with a flaking, dried up dandelion wedged gently between nearly every page.



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Sessions:

March 10 - April 28, 2011

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BENEFITS FOR ADOPTING AN OLDER

Compiled by, Marty Shannon, State Adoption Program Manager

YOUTH 13 YEARS OLD AND OLDER

Health and Mental Health

- Teenage youth adopted from foster care generally qualify for Medicaid coverage to age 18.
- Medicaid covers medical, dental and mental health services.
- Youth adopted after age 14 have Medicaid access that can transfer to any other state in the United States

Financial Adoption Monthly Subsidy

- Monthly financial subsidy is based on the youth's needs to help with the costs of raising a teenager. It is generally less than the cost of care for the youth in foster care.

Post-Secondary Education

- Youth adopted at age 13 years and older are eligible for federal Pell grants that pay tuition expenses and often books or other expenses. Application for FAFSA (Federal Assistance for Financial Student Aid, i.e., Pell grant) will be based on the student's own income. They do not have to disclose their adoptive parent's income. (Pell grants are based on income eligibility and disbursed through the financial aid office of the college or training institute. The Pell grant pays tuition expenses, and if there is any left over, it is disbursed to the student for books or other expenses.)

YOUTH 15 YEARS OLD AND OLDER

Adopting a youth 15 years old and older could have all the benefits of adopting a youth 13 years and older plus.....

Transition to Adult Living Services

- Basic Life Skills classes – the same that are available for youth in foster care. Classes are geared for youth ages 16 or 17. Classes are dependent on availability (adopted youth do not qualify for the financial incentives). Contact the Transition to Adult Living person in the region in which you reside.
 - Northern Region—Sarah Pomeroy, 801-629-5817, spomeroy@utah.gov
 - Salt Lake Valley Region—Jenna Leishman, 801-755-7092, jleishma@utah.gov
 - Western Region—Troy Gasser, 801-224-7824, tgasser@utah.gov
 - Eastern Region—Colleen Cook, 435-636-0206, colleencook@utah.gov
 - Southwest Region—Mike Beacco, 435-652-2960, mbeacco@utah.gov

Post-Secondary Education

- Youth adopted at age 15 years old or older who have received 12 months of Transition to Adult Living services while in foster care can receive federal Education Training Vouchers to help with the cost of post secondary education until they are 21 years old.
 - To be eligible, the youth needs to:
 - Graduate from high school or get a GED; and
 - Be accepted into college or a vocational training program.

ADOPTING YOUTH FROM FOSTER CARE

YOUTH 16 YEARS OLD AND OLDER

Adopting a youth 16 years old and older could have all the benefits of adopting a youth 13 or 15 years and older plus...

Post-Secondary Education

- Youth who were adopted from foster care after age 16 will qualify for Education Training Vouchers (ETV). (Youth who meet ETV qualifications can receive educational assistance until their 21st birthday. This can be extended to age 23 if the youth enrolled by age 21 and is successfully working toward a degree or certificate.)
- Youth who meet the qualifications for ETV may also qualify to receive Olene S. Walker Transition to Adult Living Scholarship. An eligible youth may receive up to \$5000 per state fiscal year for tuition, room and board, books, a computer, and other costs of education. Actual award amounts will be determined by financial need and other financial aid/scholarship resources and funds availability. Awards will be pro-rated for part-time students. The scholarship is from \$2,500 to \$5,000 for degree or certificate programs.
 - o Transition to Adult Living Scholarship: The scholarship is designed to assist qualified youth who are transitioning out of state foster care to complete a post-secondary education program (degree or certificate) at one of the Utah System of Higher Education institutions. The scholarship is sponsored by private donors in partnership with the Utah Educational Savings Plan.
 - o Selection: Applicants will be selected based on their strong desire to complete a post-secondary program of study, potential for academic success, and financial need. Students who are awarded the scholarship are required to participate in extra-curricular activities and meet regularly with a mentor.
 - o Scholarship Amount: The maximum yearly scholarship award is \$5,000 for full-time enrollment (12 or more credit hours), \$3,750 for three quarters-time enrollment (9–11 hours), and \$2,500 for part-time enrollment (6–8 hours). The scholarship may be renewed up to four years depending on satisfactory academic progress and availability of funds. Students must re-apply each year to renew the scholarship.
- Utah JOB CORPS is a program for youth 16-25 years old who want to complete their GED and receive job training while living on a JOB CORPS campus.

TAX CREDIT INFORMATION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS ADOPTION

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQryETwRziA>

<https://www.nacac.org/postadopt>



LOVE AIN'T ENOUGH

BY KEVIN HOFMANN

Kevin Hofmann is an accomplished writer and public speaker who has a passion for adoption and especially transracial adoption. He is an adoption advocate and enjoys sharing his experiences as a biracial transracial adoptee to help other adoptive families. He has dedicated his blog(<http://www.kevinhofmann.com>), to adoptive parents where he shares his thought and feelings as a transracial adoptee. Hofmann lives with his wife and two sons in Toledo Ohio.

As she prepares her son for school, the mother peeps out the front window and watches the pregnant storm clouds flow across the dark sky. She checks the local weather report and her favorite weatherman says there is a 95% chance of a severe thunderstorm for the viewing area. He also states there is an 80% chance the rain will turn to hail.

The mother hugs her son as he walks out the door to begin his quarter mile trip to the bus stop. Her son seems out of place as he joins his friends who accompany him every morning to the bus stop. They all have on rain coats, hats, and are carrying umbrellas.

The mother decides not to prepare her son for the weather. Instead, she believes if I don't feed in to the thought of bad weather it won't happen.

I have written this piece several hundreds of times in my mind and then balled it up and threw it to the back of my mind. I have wrestled with writing it or ignoring it and I have finally decided to address it. My fear has been if I address this many will get frustrated and write me off. Up to this point I have been able to skate around it with the collateral damage being minor; minor for me.

Today, I received an email from a transracial adoptive mother asking me to write more specifically about what is necessary for white parents in raising black children. I get this question a lot and have been answering it in the most politically correct way I know how. But my real answer is much more one sided. The short answer is, "LOVE IS NOT ENOUGH."

I have found there are two schools of thought with transracial adoptive parents. One school says, "Color doesn't matter, as long as we give them a loving place to live they will be ok." The other school says, "We must prepare them for the world we live in."

I strongly side with the second group. It is important that children of color be prepared for the world they will live in and although love is important, it is not enough. Often, I get the argument that racism still exists today because we allow it to. If you teach your children about racism and that they may be treated differently because they are of-color this is feeding in to racism and will only cause racism to grow.

This is like the mother who sent her child in to a hail storm with no protection because admitting there is a possibility that there will be a hail storm only causes the hail storm to be bigger.

Whether we want to admit it or not, racism exists and it is important you prepare your children for it. Ignoring racism in your household only makes it disappear in your household. Once they step out in to the world, it is there whether it is in your face or behind your back.

So how do you prepare them? Talk about the possibility of them being treated differently simply because they are black or of-color. When do you talk to them about it? Studies have shown children notice racial differences by ages three or four and have some type of racial encounter by age seven.

You can be the one who introduces this to them or you can let the world do it. You have more control over what gets heard and how it is presented if you do it.

A few weeks ago, I spoke to another transracial adoptee and she told me about her experience growing up. She lived in a rural area where she was one of the only blacks. They never talked about racism or being different in her house but when she went to school she was treated and felt different everyday. One day she came home and poured several gallons of bleach into a bath tub and got in it. She said she was trying to bleach her skin so she could be more like everyone else around her. Her parents were shocked when they found out what she did because she never said anything about how she was being treated or how she felt. The collateral damage to me means nothing if I can prevent such a horrible experience from happening.

After school the little boy returned home, soaking wet with bruises on his arms and head. Just as the weather man said it poured with golf ball-sized hail. The boy was angry at his mom for not preparing him for the storm, but he held no harsh feelings against the hail and rain that inflicted the damage.



What Makes a Good Parent?

A scientific analysis ranks the 10 most effective child-rearing practices. Surprisingly, some don't even involve the kids

By Robert Epstein

Amazon.com lists an astounding number of dieting books—more than 16,000. But parenting guides far exceed that number: there are some 40,000 of them, including books such as Jane Rankin's Parenting Experts, that do nothing but evaluate the often conflicting advice experts offer. People, it seems, are even more nervous about their parenting than they are about their waistslines.

Why is there such chaos and doubt when it comes to parenting? Why, in fact, do most parents continue to parent pretty much the way their own parents did—or, if they disliked the way they were raised, the exact opposite way? Shouldn't we all just find out what the studies say and parent accordingly?

A growing body of research conducted over the past 50 years shows fairly clearly that some parenting practices produce better outcomes than others—that is, better relationships between parent and child and happier, healthier, better functioning children. And just as we use medical science cautiously and strategically to make everyday health decisions, we can also make wise use of research to become better parents.

A new study I conducted with Shannon L. Fox, a student at the University of California, San Diego, which we presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association this past August, compared the effectiveness of 10 kinds of parenting practices that have gotten the thumbs-up in various scientific studies. It also showed how parenting experts rate those practices and looked at just how many parents actually use those practices. In other words, we compared three things: what experts advise, what really seems to work and what parents actually do.

Our study confirmed some widely held beliefs about parenting—for example, that showing your kids that you love them is essential—and it also yielded some surprises, especially regarding the importance of a parent's ability to manage stress in his or her own life.

Ten Important Competencies

To figure out which parenting skills were most important, we looked at data from about 2,000 parents who recently took an online test of parenting skills I developed several years ago (accessible at <http://MyParentingSkills.com>) and who also answered questions about their children. Parents did not know this when they took the test, but the skills were organized into 10 categories, all of which derive from published studies that show that such skills are associated with good outcomes with children. The 10 skill areas measured by the test were also evaluated by 11 parenting experts unknown to Fox and me, and we in turn were unknown to them (in other words, using a double-blind evaluation procedure).

On the test, parents indicated for 100 items how much they agreed with statements such as "I generally encourage my child to make his or her own choices," "I try to involve my child in healthful outdoor activities" and "No matter how busy I am, I try to spend quality time with my child." Test takers clicked their level of agreement on a five-point scale from "agree" to "disagree." Because all the items were derived from published studies, the answers allowed us to compute an overall skill level for each test taker, as well as separate skill levels in each of the 10 competency areas. Agreement with statements that described sound parenting practices (again, according to those studies) yielded higher scores.

The 10 kinds of parenting competencies, which we call "The Parents' Ten", include obvious ones such as managing prob-

lem behavior and expressing love and affection, as well as practices that affect children indirectly, such as maintaining a good relationship with one's co-parent and having practical life skills

In addition to asking test takers basic demographic questions about their age, education, marital status, parenting experience, and so on, we also asked them questions about the outcomes of their parenting, such as "How happy have your children been (on average)?" "How successful have your children been in school or work settings (on average)?" and "How good has your relationship been with your children (on average)?" For questions such as these, test takers clicked on a 10-point scale from low to high.

With scores in hand for each parent on all "The Parents' Ten," along with their general assessments regarding the outcomes of their parenting, we could now use a statistical technique called regression analysis to determine which competencies best predict good parenting outcomes. For an outcome such as the child's happiness, this kind of analysis allows us to say which parenting skills are associated with the most happiness in children.

Love, Autonomy and Surprises

Our most important finding confirmed what most parents already believe, namely, that the best thing we can do for our children is to give them lots of love and affection. Our experts agree, and our data showed that this skills set is an excellent predictor of good outcomes with children: of the quality of the relationship we have with our children, of their happiness, and even of their health. What's more, parents are better at this skill than they are at any of the others. We also confirmed what many other studies have shown: that encouraging children to become independent and autonomous helps them to function at a high level.

But our study also yielded a number of surprises. The most surprising finding was that two of the best predictors of good outcomes with children are in fact indirect: maintaining a good relationship with the other parent and managing your own stress level. In other words, your children benefit not just from how you treat them but also from how you treat your partner and yourself.

Getting along with the other parent is necessary because children inherently want their parents to get along. Many years ago, when my first marriage was failing, my six-year-old son once led me by the hand into the kitchen where his mom was standing and tried to tape our hands together. It was a desperate act that conveyed the message: "Please love each other. Please get along." Children do not like conflict, especially when it involves the two people in the world they love most. Even in co-parenting situations where parents live apart, it is crucial to adhere to practices that do not hurt children: to resolve conflicts out of sight of the children, to apologize to one another and forgive each other (both can be done in front of the kids), to speak kindly about the other parent, and so on.

Stress management is also important for good parenting, just as it is vital in all aspects of life. In our study, parents' ability to manage stress was a good predictor of the quality of their relationship with their kids and also of how happy their children were. Perhaps more telling, people who rated themselves as great parents scored more highly on stress management than on any of the other nine parenting competencies. There is, possibly, a simple lesson here: parents who lose their temper around their kids know that that is bad parenting. Keeping calm is probably step one in good parenting. Fortunately, stress management practices such as meditation, imagery techniques and breathing exercises can be learned, no matter what one's natural tendencies. People can also learn better organizational skills and even ways of managing stressful thinking.

Keeping children safe—a matter of almost obsessive concern among American parents these days—seems to have both positive and negative outcomes. On the bright side, in our new study safety skills did contribute to good health outcomes. But being overly concerned with safety appears to produce poorer relationships with children and also appears to make children less happy. A recent study by Barbara Morrongiello and her colleagues at the University of Guelph in Ontario shows how complex the safety issue can be. In their study, young people between the ages of seven and 12 said that even though they were generally conforming to the safety rules of their parents, they planned to behave like their parents when they grew up, even where their parents were, by their own standards, behaving unsafely. Had they detected their parents' hypocrisy?

AST FACTS

Essential Parenting Skills

1 >> Decades of research reveal 10 essential parenting skill sets. A new study of 2,000 parents determined which skills are most important to bringing up healthy, happy and successful kids.

2 >> Giving love and affection tops the list. Then comes a surprise: managing stress and having a good relationship with the other parent are more helpful than some child-focused behaviors.

3 >> All types of people are equally competent at child-rearing—and anyone can learn how to be a better parent with a little effort.

The Parents' Ten

Here are 10 competencies that predict good parenting outcomes, listed roughly in order from most to least important. The skills—all derived from published studies—were ranked based on how well they predict a strong parent-child bond and children's happiness, health and success.

- 1. *Love and affection.* You support and accept the child, are physically affectionate, and spend quality one-on-one time together.
- 2. *Stress management.* You take steps to reduce stress for yourself and your child, practice relaxation techniques and promote positive interpretations of events.
- 3. *Relationship skills.* You maintain a healthy relationship with your spouse, significant other or co-parent and model effective relationship skills with other people.
- 4. *Autonomy and independence.* You treat your child with respect and encourage him or her to become self-sufficient and self-reliant.
- 5. *Education and learning.* You promote and model learning and provide educational opportunities for your child.
- 6. *Life skills.* You provide for your child, have a steady income and plan for the future.
- 7. *Behavior management.* You make extensive use of positive reinforcement and punish only when other methods of managing behavior have failed.
- 8. *Health.* You model a healthy lifestyle and good habits, such as regular exercise and proper nutrition, for your child.
- 9. *Religion.* You support spiritual or religious development and participate in spiritual or religious activities.
- 10. *Safety.* You take precautions to protect your child and maintain awareness of the child's activities and friends.

—R.E.

Another surprise involves the use of behavior management techniques. Although my own training in psychology (under the pioneering behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner) suggest that sound behavior management—providing lots of reinforcement for good behavior, for example—is essential for good parenting, our new study casts doubt on this idea. Behavior management ranked low across the board: it was a poor predictor of good outcomes with children; parents scored relatively poorly in this skill area; and our experts ranked it ninth in our list of 10 competencies.

In general, we found that parents are far better at educating their children and keeping them safe than they are at managing stress or maintaining a good relationship with the other parent, even though the latter practices appear to have more influence on children. Getting along with one's co-parent is the third most important practice, but it ranked eighth on the parents' list of actual abilities. Even more discouraging, stress management (number two in importance) ranked 10th.

Who Make Good Parents?

Setting aside "The Parents' Ten" for the moment, our study also shed some interesting light on what characteristics a good parent has.

A general parenting ability appears to exist—something

like the "g" factor that exists for intelligence. The g factor for parenting emerged very strongly in our study using a statistical technique called factor analysis, which organizes large amounts of test data by clustering test items into a small number of highly predictive variables. Some people just seem to have a knack for parenting, which cannot be easily described in terms of specific skills.

We also found that a number of characteristics that people often associate with good parenting are probably not very significant. For example, women appear to be only a hair better than men at parenting these days—a huge change in our culture. Women scored 79.7 percent on our test, compared with 78.5 percent for men—a difference that was only marginally significant. Parents who were older or who had more children also did not produce significantly better parenting outcomes in our study. Parents seem to perform just as well whether or not they have ever been married, and divorced parents appear to be every bit as competent as those who are still married, although their children are somewhat less happy than the children of parents who were never divorced.

Neither race nor ethnicity seems to contribute much to parenting competence, and gays and straights are just about equal in parenting ability. In fact, gays actually outscored straights by about 1 percentage point in our test, but the difference was not statistically significant.

One characteristic that does seem to make a difference is education: generally speaking, the more the education, the better the parenting. This might be because better educated people also work harder to improve their parenting skills through parent education programs (confirmed by our data). It is also possible that good parents—those with a high parenting g—are also generally competent people who are better educated. In other words, the g for parenting might be the same as the g for intelligence, a matter to be explored in future research.

The bottom line on such findings is that if you really want to know about an individual's competence as a parent, you should measure that competence directly rather than default to commonly held stereotypes. In the U.S., after all, women did not get the vote until 1920 because of faulty assumptions about female limitations. I believe this is one of the main lessons of our study: there is simply no substitute for the direct measure of competence.

Perhaps the best news is that parents are trainable. Our data confirm that parents who have taken parenting classes produce better outcomes with their children than parents who lack such training and that more training leads to better outcomes. Training programs, such as the evidence-based Parenting Wisely program developed by Donald A. Gordon of Ohio University, can indeed improve parenting practices. Programs are available in major cities around the country, sometimes sponsored by local therapists or state or county agencies. The National Effective Parenting Initiative, which I have been associated with since its inception in 2007, is working to make quality parent trainings more widely available (see <http://EffectiveParentingUSA.org> for additional information).

Where Experts Fail

Although parenting experts do indeed offer conflicting advice at times (perhaps because they don't keep up with the studies!), our experts generally did a good job of identifying competencies that predict positive outcomes with children. There were two notable exceptions: First, they ranked stress management eighth in our list of 10 competencies, even though it appears to be one of the most important competencies. Second, our experts seemed to be biased against the religion and spirituality competency. They ranked it rock bottom in the list of 10, and several even volunteered negative comments about this competency even though studies suggest that religious or spiritual training is good for children.

Historically, clinicians and behavioral scientists have shied away from religious issues, at least in their professional lives; that could explain the discomfort our experts expressed about religious or spiritual training for children. Why they were so far off on stress management is truly a mystery, however, given psychology's long interest in both the study and treatment of stress. I can only speculate that stress management is not widely taught in graduate programs in psychology-related

fields as an essential component of good parenting. It should be.

Bringing It Home

Tempering one's parenting with relevant scientific knowledge can truly have great benefits for one's family. It can reduce or eliminate conflict with one's children, for one thing, and that in turn can improve a marriage or co-parenting relationship. It can also help produce happier, more capable children.

I have seen how this works in my own parenting. I am a much better parent with my younger children (who range in age from four to 12) than I was with my older two (now 29 and 31). The more I have learned about parenting over the years, the more loving and skillful I have become, with obvious benefits. These days I really do hug my children and tell them I love them several times a day, every day, without exception. When love is never in question, children are much more understanding and tolerant when a parent needs to set limits, which I do regularly. I have also learned to stay calm—to improve the way I react to things. When I am calm, my children are, too, and we avoid that deadly cycle of emotional escalation that can ruin relationships.

Most important, I am much more a facilitator now than a controller. While building my own competence as a parent, I have also put more effort into recognizing and strengthening the competence of my children, helping them to become strong and independent in many ways. My 12-year-old son is now a calm, helpful role model to his three younger siblings, and before I get out of bed these days, my 10-year-old daughter has sometimes already made scrambled eggs for all of them—and cleaned up, too.

(The Author)

ROBERT EPSTEIN, a longtime researcher and professor of psychology, is a contributing editor for *Scientific American Mind* and former editor in chief of *Psychology Today*. His latest book is *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence* (Linden Publishing).

(Further Reading)

- The Encyclopedia of Parenting Theory and Research. Edited by Charles A. Smith. Greenwood Press, 1999.
- The Positive Parent: Raising Healthy, Happy, and Successful Children, Birth-Adolescence. Kerby T. Alvy. Teachers College Press, 2008.
- The Process of Parenting. Eighth edition. Jane B. Brooks. McGraw-Hill, 2010.
- To take the author's parenting test, visit <http://MyParentingSkills.com>



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