

Soulful Parenting

“Soul is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart and personal substance.” -Thomas Moore

Soulful Parenting requires that you to step into your parenting experience with an openness and willingness to accept that parenting is difficult. The concept of Soulful Parenting came to me when I was having a hard time with my four year old son. Physically and emotionally exhausted, I was unsure if I could endure another day. I realized I needed to open up the experience of parenting him. That is when I thought of Soulful Parenting. Simply saying those two words relaxed me immediately. My shoulders loosened up and my anxiety decreased. If those two words could help me so quickly, what more could I do with this idea? I began writing what those words meant, and found myself moving from despair to hope. Hope that this experience of parenting is about more than something to just be endured. Hope that many things can be learned about this experience. Hope that my child will turn out okay.

Yes, parenting is a hard job, but it comes with an opportunity to learn not just techniques and skills, but to also learn about yourself. To learn how your child can provide opportunities for your growth as a parent, and as a human being. I emphasize three key components in this process: nurture vs. nature, larger stories, and the role of our village.

Nurture vs. Nature

So many child-rearing and discipline books in our culture disregard the importance of recognizing our children’s intrinsic traits and what makes them unique. For years I followed all the books’ recommendations, only to be extremely frustrated when they did not work with my son. Further, well-meaning friends and family insisted my husband and I were not doing it right. For if we were, our child would not be having tantrums every day, he would be sleeping through the night, and he would not be so willful. Neither the books nor our family and friends, however, took into account the characteristics that are innate to our son.

What I realize now is that “one size fits all” cannot apply to a child’s behavior because each child is intrinsically different. What works for a willful child, may not work with a child who is not willful, but instead is bashful. There is a very delicate balance between providing the structure and discipline kids need without crushing their spirit. A soulful parent realizes the importance of this when developing a parenting style for his or her child. Finding a parenting style that works for your family can be tough. Trial and error are a normal part of this path.

It is also important to give up the fantasy of controlling everything. Children are living systems, changing all the time. These changes will provide you with more opportunities to stay closely connected to yourself as you learn to adjust and accept. Things can get easier over time, but it will be because of a combination of the right parenting style for your child coupled with his or her development. Yes, you can do everything right and your child may still be challenging! This is because we do not control everything. Our children have their own temperaments, developmental challenges, and free will.

It is impossible to completely demystify our children. Part of our job as parents is to accept this reality. Do the best you can, support your child the best you can, and then let go. As we allow ourselves to let some “just be”, we can stop feeling anxious, as if there is something broken that needs fixing. For me, this has been the hardest part. Letting go almost feels like I am giving up on my son. His behavior has improved slightly over time but he is still a challenging child. I am learning that letting go means I can't let it consume my life. I can still seek answers and find support for my son, but I cannot allow it to define me. I am still allowed to take care of myself; exercise, go out with my friends, meditate, practice yoga and go on dates with my husband.

Larger Stories

The second component, Larger Stories, involves developing a “larger versus smaller” story about your experience with your child. A small story begins with statements such as, “This kid is a pain!” or “How come my friends have the easy-going child?” or “Poor me.” These are normal thoughts and there is value in indulging in them, but only for a short period of time. We are better served by telling ourselves larger stories about our children. For example, questions such as: “What is my child calling me to learn about myself?” “What childhood issues are being triggered when my son has a temper tantrum?” and, “Am I taking care of myself and do I need to ask for help?” We can also ask ourselves questions about our parenting skills. “What is my definition of an effective parent?” “Am I attached to the idea that parenting skills should come naturally?” “How do I feel about asking for help and gaining new knowledge that can help me parent more effectively?” By looking at the larger stories, we are open to the many rich opportunities for personal growth. I know my son triggers some of my childhood issues. And to be perfectly honest, it would just be easier for him to change than for me to work on that stuff. But he is who he is, he is in my life for a reason. And, I can ignore this fact and just continue focusing on how hard he is, or I can take an honest look at what he is triggering in me. This approach also helps me keep a larger vs. smaller story about my situation.

It Takes a Village

Most have heard the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Soulful Parenting requires a high level of self-care and involves other caregivers. Our lives have become so nuclear family-focused that the process of parenting can be very isolating. Many parents feel alone, especially when parenting a challenging child. Though it can be difficult, it is time to include grandparents, and aunts and uncles into your parenting circle. If they are not available, then ask yourself, “How else can I broaden my village?” Do the best you can while remembering that the better you take care of yourself, the easier it will be to take care of your child. Our village, our extended family and friends, can help in two ways. First, they can help with child care so that you can make time for self-care. Second, your village can help support you as you parent. When you are at family gatherings, let a few family members know how alone you feel, and that you would like their support during the gathering. With friends, pick those who will not judge you, friends with whom you can enjoy a playdate. Know that it is fine to leave when your child is done; even if that means leaving a half hour after getting together. One thing I have also found helpful is letting family and friends know how I want to be approached with feedback about my son. It is obviously a very sensitive topic for me, and some days I am open to feedback and some days I am not. I ask people in my life to be gentle and ask me, “Are you open to hearing some feedback right now?” I have learned it is best to be honest. Too many times I have let people give me their opinion, only to feel angry, hurt, and like a bad parent. It's better for me to hear feedback when I can receive it. When the message might actually leave an impression because I am not feeling like I need to defend against it.

Soulful Parenting is not easy. It is my experience, however, that parenting in general is not easy. At the very least, when you approach parenting soulfully, or “*with depth, value, relatedness, heart and personal substance*”, you have a new way to define your parenting. Hopefully the new definition creates a sense of freedom to find the style that works for you and your family – to accept what is hard, and enjoy what is easy. And most importantly, to know that you can make mistakes while being a good parent.