
HELPING PARENTS TO HELP CHILDREN GROW

by

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It is, unfortunately, a truism that the all-important vocation of parenthood is the one for which we receive the least guidance or training. Most people embark on it by conforming to or rebelling against their own parental models, and learn by trial and error or by reading the often contradictory advice of experts.

As a result, child care swings (even in the same family) between permissiveness and authoritarianism, sometimes worse. The best intentioned parents are often confused and stressed. Even loved and wanted children may grow up with unresolved emotional and relationship problems.

Beginning to fill the gap is The Parent Network, a recently formed charitable organisation which provides training in communications skills and mutual support for parents and others involved in child care. Its Parent-Link programme, consisting of 12 two-hour weekly sessions is based on the philosophy that children are innately good and potentially self-responsible, and that parents can nurture their growth in ways that are neither over-permissive nor over-authoritarian, while getting their own needs met.

"What we are working towards is supporting parents in helping their children to grow", says Ivan Sokolov, who founded The Parent Network with his wife Jacquie Pearson.

In the late 1970s, Ivan was working in the field of children's play when he began to explore humanistic psychology and the growth movement. Influenced by the work of people like Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Erich Fromm and John Rowan, he started developing ways in which these new ideas of openness and honesty in relationships could be applied to adults and children, and began running groups along these lines for play leaders.

When his first marriage broke up, he had a creative, if painful opportunity to apply his theories to his own life, when he looked after his two little boys (then aged 3 and 6) for nine months, at a time when all three were suffering emotionally.

"I started putting into practice the idea that I could actually be open and honest about my feelings", he says. "That helped them express their own feelings - we didn't have to bottle up and pretend everything was fine and dandy. And it worked".

After further training and experiences running communications courses for social services personnel, Ivan started pilot groups for parents in 1984. At that time the only guidelines were American models, which he found somewhat mechanistic.

"The big problem with skills training alone", he says, "was that people found it very difficult to break out of all the old patterns they'd been using. For some people that kind of training can come across as 'You must stop doing all the things you're doing wrong, and only then start thinking about what you can do instead', so people end up feeling rather guilty". He felt that changing behaviour also requires a re-examination of attitudes and beliefs which can necessitate some kind of emotional support.

Without turning the groups into heavy therapy sessions, Ivan recognised that parents needed more than just a set of rules. He was already interested in the possibilities of using Neuro-Linguistic Programming as a way to help people to break out of old patterns and exercise more choice, and he embarked on the NLP Diploma Training Course, with his partner (now his wife), Jacquie Pearson.

A former nursery teacher, Jacquie had not been directly involved with the parents' groups, and "doing NLP together was good because our growth then became entwined". Jacquie is now fully involved in The Parent Network, developing group leader training courses.

NLP itself has been criticised for being mechanistic, but as Ivan points out, it is a tool whose value depends on how it is used.

"You can use it with love, integrity and compassion, to give people responsibility for change". And this sums up The Parent Network philosophy. Underlying Ivan and Jacquie's work are spiritual values, not necessarily explicit in their training, but permeating their attitudes to parents, children, and their colleagues in the Network.

The growth of The Parent Network has been extraordinarily rapid. "Jacquie and I have hatched an egg, a spiritual baby, which is just growing and growing. Nurturing it into existence is going to be a full-time parenting job for the next five or ten years".

Just over a year ago, the first groups were held in Ivan and Jacquie's house in Camden, while both were working in other allied fields. In 1986 they received sponsorship from a charitable trust supporting the development of emotional growth, and The Parent Network is now housed in sunny, plant - filled offices in Kentish Town.

There is a full time staff of five, including Wendy Rose-Neil, psychotherapist and former editor of Parents Magazine, a number of part-time helpers and five computers. It now looks as if they may have to seek even larger premises, and Jacquie and Ivan are working more than full time.

Some of the parents who have taken Parent-Link have formed their own support group, and all are invited to monthly follow-up meetings in London. In the autumn of 1986, Jacquie and Ivan were running two evening parents' groups, and spending one weekend a month training the first group of a projected 1500 Coordinators. These, over the next 5 years, will set up and run their own Parent-Link groups, many of which, it is hoped, will be under the auspices of sponsoring bodies such as local education authorities.

Coordinators are parents themselves; some have already benefited from the Parent-Link training and most have experience in running groups or counselling. The ultimate aim is to form a network that will be nationwide, not only geographically but socially and culturally.

The content is "basically commonsense stuff" largely based on non-directive listening skills and methods of open and honest communication. These are taught and practised in the groups, using real-life situations and role play, and Ivan and Jacquie approach their work as group leaders with the attitudes of acceptance and trust that they want to encourage in parents.

Listening can be practised by rota: far more important is the attitude behind it. Really listening to and accepting a child with an emotional problem, allowing him or her to work through and resolve emotional issues for herself or himself, without jumping in to provide ready-made solutions goes against all our conditioning, and requires a radical leap in trust.

"Trusting children to help themselves is perhaps the single most important thing that we cover, and sometimes the most difficult", says Ivan. And . . .

"Children model themselves on adult behaviour. Unfortunately, without realising it, most of us have been teaching our children the skills of judgment, evaluation, put-downs, blame and accusation, from the moment they're born! And the pattern is repeated in schools. So of course they grow up to do that to everybody else around them".

Conversely, breaking that pattern of child-denigration, respecting and accepting children's feelings, avoiding labels like "naughty" and "good", allowing them to solve their own problems (they are far more capable of this than most adults believe) enable them to grow into responsible adults, capable of the self-discipline and responsibility which society demands.

Parent-Link groups are designed to support parents in putting the skills into practice, with all the uncertainties that this can bring up. Time is devoted to feedback and sharing, of both problems and successes. And successes there are: there are reports of happier children and better family relationships. Mothers who take time to listen fully to a child's worries after school not only improve their children's and their own self esteem, but also encourage their children to begin listening to **them**.

The mother who gets down on the floor with her screaming child and, rather than screaming herself, reflects: "You **are** angry, aren't you", may break a regular pattern of

tantrums. And the parent's behaviour rubs off on the children. One breakthrough recently occurred when a harassed mother of five heard her children of 8 and 6 break off a shouting match to say: "Now come on, let's sit down and **talk** about it".

We are so conditioned to a power-based society that some parents fear that giving their child responsibility means "giving in", or "giving away power".

"Power doesn't actually come into it", says Ivan. The egalitarian philosophy of Parent-Link means that while children are 100 per cent important, so are parents. "It isn't a choice between being the boss or being the loser: there is another way. We say: 'My needs are equally as important as my child's needs and together we can find responsible democratic ways to make sure that everyone wins'."

For example, recognising that a child's unacceptable behaviour arises out of un-met needs does not mean accepting that behaviour, or becoming a permissive doormat. Permissiveness doesn't work, Ivan points out - hence the backlash of authoritarianism currently widespread in America. Authoritarianism doesn't work either, but there is a third way.

In order to give, parents need their own cups filled, and the programme encourages them not only to value themselves as parents but to look at and nurture their own, inner child. Children are well able to meet their parents' needs when these are put to them - clearly and without blame.

The programme includes presentation and practice in self-disclosure and assertion, and where parents' needs conflict with those of their children, negotiation skills to arrive at mutually satisfying agreements - what the Americans would term "a win-win situation".

Again, it works. Parents often resent their children for not meeting their own needs, without thinking of telling them clearly what these are. One example is the mother who went home from a Parent-Link session and told her 9-year-old daughter that she was tired of tidying up after her, and that it made her feel like a slave. The astonished child answered, "But I thought that's what you were!"

If a mother acts as a "supermom" and does everything for her child, she cannot blame the child for assuming that that is what mothers are for. And not only does she become drained and resentful; the end result is a young adult who leaves home totally unequipped for real life.

What is striking about the Parent-Link work is its combination of practical skills and spiritual attitudes of love and acceptance. Skills on their own are not enough.

Ivan says: "If parents walked out of Parent-Link sessions just finding the ability to love, trust and accept their children, they would discover and develop the skills for themselves". Love allied with conscious skills creates new options in relationships, leading to the integration of head and heart which is needed to bring about change in society.

And social change is ultimately and inevitably what this is all about. As Ivan says: "People say to me - 'My God, this stuff's subversive'. And it is subversive. If you start trying to teach people the practical application of what we're doing, the effective practice of loving on a global scale, we can't go on living the way we're living - things have to change!"

Learning to value our children is particularly appropriate at this time when society's distorted attitudes to

childhood are bursting painfully into public consciousness. Many of the contemporary pioneers of change have suffered as children themselves, and have had to work hard to integrate themselves before moving forward. What would a generation of people be like who were allowed to grow up with their powers of loving and creativity unimpaired? It would be good to think that the seeds are being sown for an age when the sins of the fathers no longer have to be visited upon their children.

For details of Parent-Link programmes and the next Co-ordinator Training Courses, contact Wendy Rose-Neil at The Parent Network, 44-46 Caversham Road, London NW5 2DS, telephone 01-485 8535.

