

Appreciative Living

Finding What's Right With Your Child

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We all want to raise healthy, confident, well-adjusted children, and the million dollar question is, how? The key is learning to pay attention to what is right with our children rather than what is wrong with them. In this article, Jackie Kelm describes what this means on a practical level.

Our Children are Made and Imagined In Our Eyes

In a given situation, we tend to notice the same things over and over, but there are an infinite number of things we can pay attention to. What we choose to notice is a function of our past experiences and underlying beliefs. For example, as our child walks in the door from school, we can reflect on how his shoes are always untied, or how grateful we are he is home safely. We can frown at the way she runs through the house wreaking havoc, or admire the energy and enthusiasm of childhood delight. While this sounds like a Pollyanna view of parenting, the point is to recognize that we can pay attention to an infinite number of things about our children, and make them mean anything we want. Our children are made and imagined in our eyes.

Consider how different you are when working with someone who really supports you and believes in you. How does this differ from when you are in the presence of someone whom you can never please? Do our children show up differently when we are noticing what a miracle they are in our lives? Do we parent differently when we feel deep love and appreciation for them? What does it feel like to be noticed for the best of who you are?

Whatever We Focus On, Grows

Our very attention and focus creates patterns and expectations that reinforce and support the continuation of what we are noticing. Appreciative Inquiry consultant Mac Odell puts it this way, "If you focus on problems you find more problems. If you focus on successes, you find more successes." By shifting our focus, we can shift our experience. Here is a story from *The Right Questions* by Debbie Ford that illustrates how a change in focus can help deal with a common child behavior problem:

...When Erin [Jonathan's mother] arrived at Jonathan's school one day, his teacher made an offhand remark about Jonathan's habit of picking his nose. Erin was horrified...As she grew more preoccupied with her son's bad habit, Erin seemed to lose sight of the bigger picture—that she was blessed with a healthy, funny, creative, and loving child. The more Erin reprimanded Jonathan for his actions, the more he acted out, sometimes picking his nose right in front of her just to gain attention.

Finally, when Erin realized she was just focusing on what was wrong with her son, she decided to give up trying to fix his behavior and instead focus her attention on all the things that were right about Jonathan. At bedtime after she read him his good-night story, Erin began stroking his head and telling him all the things she loved about him. Within a few days Jonathan had stopped acting out and instead seemed to be thriving in the presence of his mother's approval.

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This story illustrates how Erin was able to shift her focus to what she loved about her son, and then reinforce that focus by talking about it with him at night. There were two parts to the success of this endeavor. The first was her sincere attention to and appreciation of the attributes she wanted to see, and the second was letting go of attention to what was not wanted.

Exercises for Finding What's Right

Shifting focus to the good sounds great in theory, but when we have long established habits of noticing what's wrong with our children it can be challenging. We have to develop new thinking patterns that feel uncomfortable at first, but become second nature over time. There are two exercises that can help with this thinking shift

The first is doing a gratitude list. Gratitude lists have been heralded by many, from Oprah Winfrey to twelve-step programs. There are many ways to do them, and one way is to list 2-3 different things each day you are grateful for about each child. This intentional shift in your thinking for a short time each day will begin to carry over, and you will find yourself more easily noticing the good things throughout the day.

A second exercise is to write one full page a day on everything you love about your child. This is good to do regularly, but I find it particularly helpful when I am having a difficult time with one of my children. It helps me reconnect to what I love most about him or her in the deepest way, and helps me make parenting decisions from a place of love.

These two simple exercises can dramatically alter the way you think about your children, which will shift how your children perceive themselves. Noticing the good, finding what's right, and connecting to what we love most about our children will bring more of the same. The next time you find yourself thinking, "What's wrong with this child?" pause for a moment and consider what's right. You just might find the answer you're looking for.

For more information on Jackie Kelm's work with Appreciative Living, including books, workshops, learning circles and more, or to get your free copy of "Getting Started with Appreciative Living, visit www.AppreciativeLiving.com.

¹ Ford, D. (2004). *The Right Questions*, NY: Harper-Collins. pp. 100-101.