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Romanticism

For almost all of human history, people didn't particularly worry about being 'good parents'. The expectation was, rather, that it was the children who needed to be good. It was the child who carried the burden of living up to the demands and expectations of their parents – not the other way around.

In the olden days, the role of the parent was easily defined and sharply limited: your job was to punish the children's failings and errors; pick a marriage partner for them; select and guide their career and (if they behaved well and deserved your approval) leave them something in your will.

Then, gradually, in Europe from the late 18th century onwards, things began to change. The catalyst was a movement of ideas known as Romanticism. According to this ideology, a child was a special, privileged entity born with a native wisdom and insight. The small glorious creature was someone whom society in general and parents in particular could fail. All of a person's later problems were to be viewed as symptoms of parental neglect and confusion. At the same time, Romanticism stressed that marriage should be based on love – so it was a matter for the child, not the parents, to decide; a career was to be the expression of one's true nature and, therefore, not a matter for parental interference. The age-old injunction that children should honour their parents gave way to the idea (which now feels so natural) that parents should serve their children – and may fail them in multiple ways. It began to be much, much harder to be a good parent.

Saying NO

We dream of always being able to say 'yes' to our child; to give them whatever they want; to always keep them happy. The problem is, though, that the child will sometimes want to do things that are dangerous or drastically unhelpful. They'll want to stay up even when they are very tired; they'll want to eat four bowls of ice cream (even though they'll feel ill later); they'll want to watch 25 episodes of a favourite programme or hit another child or put toothpaste in your hair when you have to work; they find the electric socket fascinating; maybe it would be interesting to spoon-feed bleach to their baby sister.... If you say no, they will not understand that you are being reasonable and have their best interests at heart - they will feel you are simply horrible. You are a tyrant; their enemy.

We are encountering the radical divergence of perspective that defines what it is to be a parent. We will romp and join in and share - but at some point we have to occupy a position of radical inequality. We can see it; they can't. We understand the consequences; they don't. And our loyalty to their long-term future will come at an unavoidable, and occasionally rather grim, price. We will have to say no.



The good enough parent

The mid-20th-century English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who specialised in working with parents and children, was disturbed by how often he encountered in his consulting rooms parents who were deeply disappointed with themselves. They felt they were failing as parents and hated themselves as a result. They were ashamed of their occasional rows, their bursts of short temper, their times of boredom around their own child, their many mistakes. They were haunted by a range of anxious questions: are we too strict, too lenient, too protective, not protective enough? What struck Winnicott, however, was that these people were almost always not at all bad parents. They were not, by some ideal standard, perfect, but they were – as he, came to put it – ‘good enough.’

Strangely, ‘good enough’ is better than perfect, because a child will live the rest of their life in a very imperfect world. We cannot get on if we are dependent on those around us living up to the highest imaginable ideals. The good enough parent is at times irate, stupid, a bit unfair, a bit tired or a touch depressed. There will be delays, confusions, mistakes, outbursts of irritation – and always (or almost always, which is enough) a background of deep love and good intentions.



Setting an example

We naturally have high hopes for our children. We imagine that if only we could set them the right example, they'd instinctively learn to be happy, wise, moderate and full of adventure (yet not take too many risks). They'd be patient (yet energetic and efficient); modest (yet successful); successful (yet not preoccupied by success); fulfilled in their work; clever (but not snooty or pompous).... We picture their ideal development. But there seems to be one major obstacle: we can't set them the example that ideally we want to. As we have to honestly admit, these beautiful ideals have eluded us. We are irascible, anxious, frustrated, disappointed in certain key ways in our own hopes - and very loving towards them. We worry that by seeing and knowing us, they will learn the wrong lessons about life.

The paradox of love is that we want (via our love) to free our child from the ordinary pains of existence. Our more realistic and helpful motive would be to equip them to cope with (rather than magically avoid) suffering. Our own suffering and failure isn't an impediment to teaching them what they need to know. It's the essential playbook. If they are very lucky, they may suffer a little less than we do.

