

Kids are Puzzling by Claudia Quigg 1-18-07

I confess. I'm hooked on working puzzles. I'm crazy for crosswords, jubilant over jumbles, and stuck on sudoku. Give me a newspaper and a number two pencil (with a good eraser!) on a Sunday afternoon and I can be happy for hours.

But more than puzzles, I am fascinated by deciphering children. I'm intrigued by understanding their motivation and mental process. Why do they do the things they do? Go figure.

I have to admit it. Puzzles are sometimes more gratifying than children.

With puzzles, you know exactly what to expect. There are clear rules and a process for completion. You're cautioned ahead that they're "easy" or "challenging" or even "diabolical."

Children, on the other hand, provide us no clear warnings. You may tuck a sweet lamb into bed only to awaken to a disgruntled bear. Even if he was happy at child care yesterday, he may pitch a fit when you take him there today. Just when you think you know your two-year-old inside and out, she'll have a burst in development which leaves you feeling racked with incompetence.

With puzzles, you're either right or wrong. Only exactly the right letter or number will work in any given square. Puzzles are straightforward. Children, on the other hand, demand thoughtful analysis. Parenting involves many shades of gray, figuring out how to apply a moral certitude to a complex situation.

When it comes to puzzles, you can erase your mistakes. When you goof up with your kids, you can learn from it and do better next time. But in the meantime, you have to live with the consequences.

Finally, you get to finish a puzzle. When you fill in that last square, your work is done. There's not one thing left to do. You can't improve on it even if you want to.

But a parent's work is never-ending. Just as you fold the clean laundry, your preschooler walks in with an ominous stain on her shirt. Your teenager needs limit setting just like when he was a toddler. Your adult child needs support around the loss of a job, his health, her marriage.

Like puzzle solving, the art of parenting involves strategy and insight. But it also requires creativity, flexibility, and sometimes accepting those uncomfortable shades of gray. Our love follows our children through every complex experience of life, from the valleys of despair to the mountaintops of joy. Responsibility to care stretches as far as the eye can see, because that's how far love goes.

So give me puzzles for the end of a stressful day. They are balm for my sometimes frazzled mental health.

But give me children for satisfaction in my life. In the end, a child's embrace beats the best number two pencil, hands down.