

Getting Smarter as Parents

If I had a dollar for every mistake I've made as a parent, Bill Gates would be asking me for a loan. But if the stories I hear from parents are any indication, I think I'm in pretty good company.

Parents have the opportunity to fail hundreds of times every day. The incessant demands of children bombard parents at the same time they are besieged by daily responsibilities of home, career and community. There is no end to what children need from their parents, but parents' resources are finite.

Parents get tired. And sometimes, parents fail to think things through. They are, after all, human.

Case in point: One late evening a few years ago my 15-year-old son asked me for a haircut in preparation for an important event the following day. Weary and distracted, I forgot to put the attachment on the clippers, and managed to give him a bald swath up the side of his head.

When your four-year-old whines for a cola at bedtime and you have been strong and wise all day long, you might just give in. The results could be disastrous. (You may discover this when your child asks you to read her a story at 2:30 a.m.)

My friend and mentor Dr. T. Berry Brazelton teaches that "children learn the most from their mistakes. And so do their parents." Being up all night with a four-year-old is a powerful learning experience—far more convincing than any advice ever could be.

But don't despair. Children are amazingly resilient. (No one ever died from one night of lost sleep, and my son's hair did grow back.) And parents learn how to be parents from doing it wrong.

So does this mean that parents of older kids make fewer mistakes? Probably not. We may not make the same ones (I always check and recheck the clippers now), but children present us with new challenges at every age. Four-year-olds rarely ask to borrow your car, for example, but 16-year-olds do. (You might say yes without first learning about the icy weather forecast, but probably only once.) You surely never get too old to mess up.

But for every mistake there is the learning that follows, if we pay attention. The years spent raising children can almost be graphed by the mistakes we make, the lessons learned and the competence gained as we figure out how to be parents. Feeling successful one moment and completely at sea the next is pretty much the job description.

As time goes by, there is satisfaction in looking back over the lessons your children have taught you through your lapses of judgment. You may chuckle and you may shed a tear over precious memories—missteps and all—through which you learned to be a parent.