

The Eyes Have It

Robert Fulghum, author of “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,” may have had it right when he wrote, “Don’t worry that your children never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you.”

From infancy through adolescence, children learn what they need to know in a variety of ways. They listen and taste and touch and smell people and objects in their environment. They use every sense they have to figure out the world. Through it all, they are watching.

Babies are fascinated by what they can see with their rapidly developing vision. When awake they spend about 80% of their time simply staring at things. Door knobs, chair legs, ceiling fans—they literally have an entire world to learn about. Gazing at objects is one way.

Preschoolers watch other people to see how they make things work. They study others carefully to learn how to hold a pencil, wind up a toy, open a juice box. These skills are desirable, and they have to learn them from observing the methods used by bigger people and then trying them out for themselves. Preschoolers know they need to watch in order to learn them, too.

Older children watch other kids to learn how to navigate the social structure. They especially watch other children who seem to be successful. How does that girl get people to play with her? How does that boy operate on a team? How does the funny kid make our classmates laugh?

Adolescents continue to watch their peers, but they add in the media icons like musicians and sports figures. They do their hair like Britney and dress like LeBron. They are influenced by television and movies and videogames. They are looking at it all in their quest to figure out who they are and who they want to become.

But through it all, they watch us, their parents. Even when they act mad. Even when we could swear they don’t know we’re alive. Even when they seem to resist all that we stand for.

They may have their heads buried in a magazine, but they watch us when we call a sick friend and offer to bring dinner. They look like they’re watching television, but they watch us when we come home from work tired and give them a hug and a smile anyway. They watch us when we mess up, but they also watch us when we succeed in the tiny opportunities of each day.

They watch us. Because, bottom line, they are learning to navigate life through the model we represent.