Lighthouse Parents Have More Confident Kids

Sometimes, the best thing a parent can do is nothing at all.

By Russell Shaw
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When my son was a toddler, he liked to run in our driveway until he fell. He would then turn to me to see if he was hurt. If my face betrayed worry or if I audibly gasped, he would wail. If I maintained equanimity, he would brush himself off and get back to running. Learning that I could so powerfully influence his mental state was a revelation. Here was this human being who was counting on me to make sense of the world—not just how to tie his shoes or recite the ABCs, but how to feel.

Years later, when he was in middle school, this lesson came back to me. One night while doing homework, my son told me about a classmate who had been unkind to him. My first instinct was to rush to fix it—email the parents, call the school, demand action. (Calling his teachers would have been complicated, given my role as the head of the school.) But instead of reacting, I paused. “That sounds hard. What did you do?”

“I decided not to hang out with him for a while,” my son replied. “I’m going to try playing soccer at lunch instead.”

“That’s a great solution,” I said, and he went back to his homework.

These otherwise ordinary parenting moments crystallized for me an important truth: Sometimes, the best thing a parent can do is nothing at all.

Parents of any age can conjure up the feeling they had when they first held their child and thought, *Oh. Here you are, this person whom I'm in charge of.* And they can tell you that no single piece of parenting wisdom can prepare you for this new, magical, terrifying endeavor. Parenting is joyous and challenging and sometimes stressful. In fact, a recent advisory from the surgeon general argues that parenting is hazardous to people's mental health. The report cites a range of factors that are contributing to a perilous parental landscape—from the complexities of social media to worries about children's safety. It goes on to propose an array of solutions, including investments in child care and federal paid family leave.

There's no question that many American parents desperately need more support. Yet the surgeon general is missing one important strategy that is within the control of every parent: a look in the mirror. What if the ways in which we are parenting are making life harder on our kids and harder on us? What if by doing less, parents would foster better outcomes for children and parents alike?

I've spent the past 30 years working in schools, and I've watched thousands of parents engage with educators and with their children. Too often, I watch parents over-functioning—depriving their kids of the confidence that comes from struggling and persevering, and exhausting themselves in the process. Although this has been true throughout my career, it's growing more acute. Most Americans now believe that young people will not be better off than their parents. They see greater competition for fewer resources—be it college admissions, jobs, or housing. Parents are scrambling to ensure that their kids are the ones who will be able to get ahead.

We're biologically wired to prevent our children's suffering, and it can be excruciating to watch them struggle. A parent's first instinct is often to remove obstacles from their child's path, obstacles that feel overwhelming to them but are easily navigable by us. This urge has led to pop-culture mythology around pushy parenting styles, including the "Helicopter Parent," who flies in to rescue a child in crisis, and the "Snowplow Parent," who flattens any obstacle in their child's way. A young person who grows accustomed to having a parent intervene on his behalf begins to believe that he's not capable of acting on his own, feeding both anxiety and dependence.

I want to make a case for the Lighthouse Parent, a term that the pediatrician Kenneth Ginsburg and others have used. A Lighthouse Parent stands as a steady, reliable guide,

providing safety and clarity without controlling every aspect of their child's journey. Here's an example: A child comes home feeling overwhelmed by school and frustrated that she is doing "all of the work" for a big group project that is due next week. The overfunctioning parent is ready with an array of next steps: "Why don't you assign the other group members what they each have to do?" "You should put your name next to all of the parts that you did so the teacher gives you credit." "I'm going to email the teacher so she knows that you're doing all of the work." These tactics may address symptoms, but they fail to get at the underlying issue. They also inadvertently communicate to a child that what's needed is parental involvement. Sometimes what a child needs is simply to be acknowledged: "Wow, that sounds like a lot." "I can tell you are working really hard." "Do you have ideas about what you want to do?"

Like a lighthouse that helps sailors avoid crashing into rocks, Lighthouse Parents provide firm boundaries and emotional support while allowing their children the freedom to navigate their own challenges. They demonstrate that they trust their kids to handle difficult situations independently. The key is learning when to step back and let them find their own way.

One of the most important shifts that parents can make is learning to substitute our impulse to fix problems with the patience to listen. A fix-it mindset is focused on quick solutions, at quelling or containing emotions or discomfort; listening is about allowing emotions to exist without rushing to solve a problem. Listening teaches resilience; it communicates confidence in your child's ability to cope with challenges, however messy they might be.

As children grow, parents must move from the role of boss to that of consultant. When our children are young, we make nearly every decision for them, from what they eat to when (in theory) they sleep. Little by little, we remove the scaffolding, creating freestanding adults who have internalized our values and have the capacity to embody them in the world. At least, that's the idea.

If children never have the opportunity to stand on their own, we risk setting them up for a collapse later on. They must experience struggle, make mistakes, and learn from them in order to grow. In fact, learning any skill—whether it's coding, painting, playing a sport—requires repeated missteps before mastery. And yet, in an educational landscape fueled by perceptions of scarcity, students can absorb an unconscious and unintended message that mistakes are permanent and have no value. Too many kids
think that their parents want unblemished transcripts, and in pursuit of that unattainable goal, they sacrifice opportunities for growth.

An aversion to owning mistakes can be most visible when it comes to student discipline.

Adolescents cross boundaries—this is part of growing up. When they do, they receive feedback on their transgression and ideally internalize that feedback, ultimately making the desired values their own. When a teenager plagiarizes a paper or arrives at a school dance under the influence, one part of a school's response is disciplinary—it's a way of providing feedback. In the moment, students don't thank us for administering a consequence. I have yet to hear a student who has been suspended say "Thank you for helping me learn a lesson that will serve me well in college and beyond." Instead they say "This is unfair" or "Other kids were doing it too." This is when parents need to stand shoulder to shoulder with the school, communicating a clear and aligned message to support their child's growth. But parents are often more worried about their child's future college applications than they are about having their child internalize valuable lessons. When parents seek to control outcomes for their kids, they are trading short-term wins for long-term thriving—they're trading the promise of a college bumper sticker for a happy, well- adjusted 35-year-old.

In the 1960s, the psychologist Diana Baumrind described three parenting styles, which researchers building on her work eventually expanded to four: authoritarian, permissive, uninvolved, and authoritative. Authoritarian parents make all decisions for their children with little room for negotiation. Permissive parents avoid conflict by setting few boundaries, often leading their children to struggle with discipline and focus. Uninvolved parents are disconnected, providing minimal support or structure. Authoritative parents allow for some flexibility, combining clear expectations with the willingness to listen. Authoritative parents are Lighthouse Parents. They are clear on values, but open to a range of ways in which those values can be put into practice; they balance structure and autonomy. The research shows that authoritative parenting yields the best outcomes for kids, and tends to produce happy and competent adults. Although this framework may seem simple or even intuitive, too many parents struggle to adopt it.

All parents show up as authoritarian, permissive, uninvolved, or authoritative at different times, depending on the situation and on what's unfolding in their own lives. But remembering to put parenting in perspective, focusing on long-term outcomes over short-term saves, can reduce some of the stress of parenting while also yielding better outcomes for children.

Yes, parenting can be stressful. But when we trust our children to navigate their own course—with us as steady and supportive guides—we lighten our own load and empower them to thrive.

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