

Parenting Without Training Wheels

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Remember when you first rode your bike without training wheels? You were taught, you practised, you watched others, you fell down and brushed yourself off but eventually you did it. What a feeling this accomplishment gave you!! You were wobbly at first but then with practice it became second nature.

This very same principle applies to parenting. Most parents come with parenting “training wheels”: the innate ability to care for a child’s basic needs. But what about when the four year old stomps his foot and shouts, “NO!” when you’ve asked him to do something or when you constantly have to remind the older child to pick up his toys or when the teen breaks curfew? Learning how to deal with these issues with kindness, which shows respect for the child, and firmness, which shows respect for ourselves, is the key to more joy in parenting. The more parents practice and refine these skills, the more confident they will become. They’ll start to notice the positive changes in the family atmosphere and overall functioning of the family unit. Not only have the training wheels come off—parents feel steadier. They recognize that in gaining new skills and a new way of looking at parenting, raising a family may actually be enjoyable, albeit a lot of hard work.

By attending parenting groups, parents get consistent information and step-by-step guidance while learning effective ways to raise responsible, respectful, independent children. Participation in these groups not only acknowledges the skills parents already possess but also provides them with additional tools that assist in parenting children. These tools include: understanding the child’s temperament, personality and behaviour, using encouragement instead of praise, effective communication, how and when to use consequences and using family meetings as a platform for building cooperation and cohesion among family members. Of equal value in these groups is parents get to connect with other parents/caregivers who share similar challenges (sibling rivalry, bedtime struggles, lack of respect, etc.) in a non-judgemental, inclusive group setting, facilitated by trained parenting educators. In response to the question “What was especially helpful or meaningful to you?” on our course evaluation given out at the end of a parenting series, the majority of parents replied with some version of “...to be able to talk to other parents who share the same or similar challenges with their children.”

Each class in a series is designed to introduce a specific skill set. Parents leave at the end of each class with new tools to use and have the option to share their successes or challenges with other parents the following week. As they gain new skills and children take more responsibility for themselves and their actions, parents start to notice that their job is actually getting easier. After the first week of one of our sessions, a father reported that by learning about temperament and personality and how it relates to behaviour, he recognized how similar his and his daughter’s temperaments were. This discovery allowed him to be able to relate more to his daughter and



empathize with her while dealing with the behaviour in a kind, but firm manner instead of getting angry. During the opening exercise in week three, a single mother told the group how intrigued her seven year-old daughter appeared to be by the changes in this mother’s approach. This mother was no longer allowing herself to be triggered by her daughter’s misbehaviour. She was managing the behaviour with firmness and kindness instead, which allowed for a more harmonious family environment, hence more joy! Another mother shared this experience: by applying the skills that she had learned, her 12 year-old not only baked cookies on his own but also put the kitchen back as he found it. The experiences of these parents show that by taking parent classes and learning new, efficacious ways of dealing with children and their behaviours, children flourish. Parents are now able to set reasonable boundaries and limits all the while encouraging children to be responsible, respectful, independent contributing members of the family. Within this framework, the child is empowered and recognized for having a valuable voice within the family.

Families come in all shapes and sizes and good parenting skills help build a healthy family environment. Parenting courses expand parents’ knowledge base and help them establish an arena within the family for open dialogue and ongoing positive relationship building. These courses are an investment into one of the most important things we do as adults, which is to raise children. Don’t become dependent on only the training wheels. You know how to use them, now expand your experience, venture out on two wheels, refine your skills and feel the excitement and joy of navigating the road with confidence and ease. Feel the wind in your hair! ✖

Eleanore Elton and Johanna Simmons are counsellors and owners of Partners in Parenting. They provide parenting skills education, Parenting Without Training Wheels, in West Vancouver. They have 20 and 35 years experience, respectively, working with children and families in a variety of settings. www.partners-in-parenting.ca