

Parenting for an Age of Information

Preparing Your Daughter or Son for the Next Century

by Jamieson McKenzie, Ed.D.

Chapter 1 - Inventing

The sandbox is not what it used to be - neither is the back yard, the family room or the school down the street. Raising a son or daughter in these times calls for parents with skill, humor and inventiveness.

We must raise a generation which has embraced a *change ethic*. They will thrive on change, considering it an opportunity to stretch out into the future and grow. Flexibility and problem solving can replace the GNP as the new indicators of growth for our society. Parents can equip their children to make the most of school and life experiences. Specific strategies:

Introduction

1. Play "What if . . ." games with your children.
2. Model the spirit of inventiveness.
3. Nurture your child's imagination.
4. Encourage selective television-viewing.
5. Reward responsible risk-taking.

Chapter 2 - Questioning

One can never know all of the right answers, especially in a world of rapidly changing information. However, with proper training, one can usually fashion the right questions to get to the answers. Questions are tools of thinking that can be modified and molded to fit shifting situations.

Introduction

1. Welcome "Why?" questions.
2. Make your child's life as wonder-full as possible.
3. Guard against excessive routine.
4. Admit you do not have all the answers.
5. Collect and relish puzzles.

6. Encourage optimism, faith and the benefit of the doubt.

Chapter 3 - Puzzling

We live in a puzzling world. It is almost as if someone shakes up the puzzle pieces on a daily or weekly basis, strewing the fragments out across the world's living room floor to see if we can make sense out of all the seemingly disconnected pieces. Puzzling out the meaning of life - bringing order to chaos - is a major part of our life's work, and showing our children how to manage the often confusing process is a major responsibility of parenting. Good puzzling skills produce insight, the capacity to discern the true nature of a situation. The good puzzler can penetrate the fog, the confusion, the distortion, the mountains of data and the propaganda of modern life to catch an elucidating glimpse of reality. Specific strategies:

Introduction

1. Fill the Toy Chest with Puzzles
2. String Necklaces
3. Introduce Games of Strategy
4. Emphasize Observation, Recording and Interpretation
5. Model the Crow's Nest Perspective

Chapter 4 - Choosing

Learning to "look before you leap."

Thoughtful decisions require a careful review of options. As part of a problem-solving and decision-making framework, children can learn to generate multiple solutions and possibilities. They then test them out before making a decision to see which is best. In this way they avoid stumbling through life impulsively and haphazardly. They look ahead to assess the likely consequences of various choices.

Introduction

1. Give your child more than a single choice
 2. Develop the skill of compare-and-contrast
 3. Shop around
 4. Use role-playing to test consequences
 5. Bring your child into the voting booth
 6. Develop a family decision-making council
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Acknowledgment

These chapters were originally drafted by me as part of a larger book which was to be published with a co-author, Hilarie B. Davis, Ed.D. Much of the thinking contained in these chapters was strongly influenced by conversations held with her during those times and some of these passages were expertly edited and changed by her.

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Chapter One - Inventing

The sandbox is not what it used to be - neither is the back yard, the family room or the school down the street. Raising a son or daughter in these times calls for parents with skill, humor and inventiveness.

While today's schools stagger under escalating criticism, conscientious parents find themselves filling in the blanks, providing their children with enriched learning excursions to offset the ditto sheet diets and dreary offerings that characterize too many of today's educational cafeterias.

When change and new technologies sweep through our society, the challenge facing parents can be awesome. *Will this newest bandwagon keep curiosity and a sense of wonder alive in our children? How do we raise this generation to greet the next century with flexibility, imagination and a resourceful spirit?* As change becomes a constant, we need a generation which views change as an adventure, an opportunity and a benefit.

We must raise a generation which has embraced a *change ethic*. They will thrive on change, considering it an opportunity to stretch out into the future and grow. Flexibility and problem solving can replace the GNP as the new indicators of growth of our society. Creating and responding to opportunities is an essential skill in our world today, in much the same way reading was in the eighteenth century.

Parents have a special teaching role to play in their children's educations. As primary caretakers and teachers for only a few children, they can educate their children in powerful ways. The role of parents in preparing their children for the future is critical because many of America's schools labor under worn-out, 1950s style programs. As adults working in the world, parents are often more in tune with changes in the world than schools. With important, but rare exceptions, the curriculum of today's schools falls short of preparing students for the workplace and society of today, much less, the next century. There is a large and growing gap between the lessons learned in the classroom and the skills needed in the workplace, and the gap is widening. Our children must do more than mark time in the nation's classrooms. Parents can equip their children to make the most of their school experiences.

The Information Age has turned both education and childhood upside down and inside out. Time-honored wisdom, time-tested skills and time-valued practices no longer suffice as our world changes swiftly and unpredictably. The sandbox is the cosmos, the vehicle is change and the pilots are our children, equipped with the tools of invention. Creating a spirit of invention in your household empowers your children with a new and powerful lense through which to view the world.

Why is invention so important to your child?

Invention makes it possible to alter, modify, and shift things around us to "make them better." Strong invention skills will enable your son or daughter to successfully adapt to a changing world. Just as importantly, it will make them happy and well-adjusted because they will be able to escape the boredom and frustration of maintaining the status quo.

Inventors are the envy of most people. To be able to come up with new ideas, solve problems and create is a universally admired skill. But everyone is an inventor at heart and can become a more active one! Invention can be taught. It is not simply magic or talent. It is a frame of mind, a perspective and a set of

skills. One learns to rearrange and transform the elements of one thing into something new. Consider some familiar transformations. The crystal tube of early computer days has become a microchip. The desktop calculator has become a credit card calculator. Family conversations have moved from dinner time to the car on the way to gymnastics. Listening to a favorite radio program together has been replaced with a rented video. The inventor in all of us is always looking for "a better way." The familiar becomes novel as we make changes and adapt to changes that happen to us.

Despite the myth that inventors are a tiny group of creative individuals who slave away in little workshops, everyone can be an inventor and thrive in a changing world. In response to everyday challenges - commuting to the workplace, adapting to changing job expectations, or shifting family schedules - we create new ways to respond to the new and unfamiliar.

An inventive mind continually seeks opportunities. Instead of leaning back and cruising along, the inventor leans forward, eager to try something new, enthusiastic about the prospects of change. Sometimes this may mean rocking the boat. The inventor is on the lookout, propelled by a sense of wonder. "I wonder what would happen if . . ."

An experimenter by nature, the inventor has trouble keeping hands off. He or she cannot "leave well enough alone." A flower arrangement is impossible to pass without at least minor readjustment. When something is amiss, the inventor demands to know what is blocking the flow of gasoline or causing the roof to leak. It might be easier to call in a service person, but the inventor needs to know how things work and why they don't cooperate sometimes.

Fortunately, we parents need not leave the development of these traits to accident. DeBono, Osborne, Eberle and many other researchers have demonstrated that people can be taught to "get out of the box," to think laterally and to scamper. They can be raised as risk-takers and rule-benders who are more interested in what is possible than what is probable. Instead of a steady diet of two-step word problems and "the way it's spozed to be," they can feast upon real problems that require inventive solutions.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO AT HOME

Raising a generation of inventors begins at home with the atmosphere you set for your children. Are mistakes okay if you learn from them? Is thinking talked about as something valuable? Do the games you play with your child encourage the development of her or his imagination? In this section you will find specific suggestions about how to help your children learn the tools of invention while catching the spirit of "getting out of the box."

1. PLAY "WHAT IF. . ." GAMES WITH YOUR CHILDREN

"What if" questioning *opens up new possibilities*. The open mind is able to get out of an unexpected traffic jam and improve the quality of life by changing what makes it unpleasant. Considering the alternatives starts the process:

What if I...

turned off?

backtracked?

checked the radio?

pulled over until it breaks up?

could figure out what the holdup is?

This willingness to explore new possibilities leads some drivers to test 20-30 different routes to work. Such an adventuresome spirit also is efficient if it is balanced by the ability to assess the value of each option in order to eliminate options which do not meet the goals of the driver. Invention ultimately requires judgment. It suggests careful choices based upon values. You have the skills and can make them part of your everyday activities with your child.

The early years

"Peekaboo" may be one of the first "What if?" games parents can play. By alternately hiding and reappearing, you seem to be asking, "What if I suddenly appear? Suddenly disappear?"

From the earliest age you can show your child that things don't always have to be what they seem to be. Instead of presenting life as a set of givens, unalterably set in concrete, show your child that life is a vast block set which can be torn down, built up and changed into cities, cathedrals, gardens and garages according to the whims and fancies of the players. Pandora's Box and the Jack-in-the-box should no longer be considered threatening as surprise and change are welcomed rather than shunned.

Join your child in play. Play involves "toying around." It includes pretending and testing out the unusual. Get down on the floor and play blocks. Sit in the doll corner. Sprinkle "what ifs" into the play. "What if we put this block here?" "What if we have a party?" "What if we changed Sally's dress?" "Could we make clothes out of tin foil?" Join in your child's "what ifs," encouraging the flights of fancy and the novelties that emerge.

Make sure your child's toys and games allow for play, providing enough options so that the players can modify, alter and rearrange. The word "play" is especially important in developing an inventive mind. Not all toys, games, or children's rooms allow for play. Playpen may be an oxymoron. Not all that passes for play may allow for a playful spirit. Play should allow for flexibility and change rather than routine.

On the road to an inventive life

"What if" games can be played in the car on long trips. "What if we turned off here to spend the night? What if the car broke down? What if we arrived at the cabin and found we had forgotten the key? What if the water is polluted and they don't let us swim? What if it rains all week? What if we had no electricity? What if it were 1800 instead of 1990?"

As you read to your child, stop to ask her or him to invent the next event. "What do you suppose will happen next? What would you do?" And keep reading to your child as long as possible, at least until he or she is ten years old, shifting the material to increasingly mature themes. As the problems of other young people appear on the pages of Judy Blume or John Steinbeck or Nikki Giovanni, your child learns what might happen if they were overweight or their horse died or someone discriminated against them.

School daze . . . what if . . . ?

When children enter elementary school and high school, the toys and the games may change, but you can keep encouraging "what ifs." Survival and success in school, for example, requires constant invention as

students ask what will happen if they forget their homework, wait until the last moment to write a report, sit next to a talkative friend or test illegal drugs. What if they have a boring teacher, have already learned the lesson or don't care about the class? Will they accept each of these as givens set in concrete, or will they build a new and different set of realities?

Survival in school depends on how well your children learn to identify the expectations of the teachers, how to meet them, and what to do if they get stuck. "What if . . .?" questions can be used to clarify teacher expectations, as in, "What if I do a project on the local water purification plant with a full model and term paper? Would that be acceptable?"

"What if . . .?" questions can also be used to generate alternatives. Asking "What if I do my math right after school?" leads to the exploration of the idea - there will not be anyone home to help me, I'll be finished by the time my program is on television, I'll be able to say I'm all finished when mom asks. Such thinking leads to being inventive about alternatives as well as scheduling.

The teenage years

Teenagers are especially ripe for "out of the box" thinking. To define themselves successfully, they must find ways to do things differently than you, their parents. They need to rebel, and rebellion can be a creative outlet. Almost daily they struggle with "what if . . .?" questions. "What if I don't come home on time? What if I don't get a date for the dance? What if I don't get the newest style of jeans? You can help your teenager generate interesting answers to these questions with some tools for thinking.

Ordinary thinking is often linear. The mind moves somewhat rigidly from one familiar idea to the next. Such thinking can severely limit the ability to adjust to difficult situations. Such thinking restricts us to the obvious solutions and deprives us of novel approaches. We need to learn how to "jump the track" and escape the obvious.

For example, a sixteen year old may be having trouble with a new math class. Her grades have taken a free-fall. Usually an "A" student in math, she complains that she "just doesn't understand this class and this teacher." Her dislike for the class manifests itself in complaints about the subject, then the teacher, then her own ability to do the work. Sticking to linear thinking locks her into failure. She sees no potential for escape. She blames the teacher and the course. She stops taking responsibility. She is caught in a downward spiral.

Thinking divergently about the situation, on the other hand, provides new insights. Instead of considering the math class in isolation, her parents encourage her to compare the elements of this math class with other situations. Were her feelings like those she had in a recent cross country race? How does this teacher treat her compared to her coach? Compared with other teachers? How is this different from previous math classes? Where is she sitting? Can she see the board? How is she acting differently than she acts in classes where she is successful? What is she communicating with her body language?

These questions set her free from the traps causing the poor performance. She can now see strategies and changes that may improve performance and increase success. She discovers that she has been sending negative messages to the teacher by sitting toward the back of the room and showing both dislike and disinterest. She realizes the teacher is returning her negative messages.

At first the situation seems hopeless, but after thinking around and through the problem, she finds several ways to escape the downward spiral. She sets out on a new course of action to invent a new relationship with the teacher by altering key elements in her own behavior. She intentionally replaces

negative behaviors with "teacher pleasing" behaviors. She sits up front. She asks questions as the class proceeds. She acts attentive, maintaining thoughtful eye-contact throughout teacher presentations. She speaks to the teacher in pleasant tones before and after class. She comes after school for help.

After two weeks of the new approach, her grades are soaring, the teacher is treating her kindly and she is beginning to enjoy the course. She has invented a new and improved classroom experience for herself and the teacher. While it sounds too good to be true, the story is based on an actual case study.

Inventive thinking can help teenagers with social challenges, too. What teenager has not struggled with rejection, infatuation and jealousy? "What if . . .?" thinking can help them to manage their feelings. For example, a teenager who is rejected by his girlfriend can ask, "What if I get on with my life, call up Diane or Susan and put this girl behind me?" or "What if I refuse to accept this and keep pursuing her?" or "What if I am mean to her so she regrets having dumped me?" Each question leads in a different direction, so the boy recognizes his choices and discovers opportunities to invent a better situation.

We all have a tendency to "go with what we know." Rather than taking a few moments to explore the unfamiliar and even the outrageous, we jump to the familiar. Teaching your children the "what if . . . ?" game early ensures they will think twice, and maybe even three times, before acting.

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2. MODEL THE SPIRIT OF INVENTIVENESS

Think how inventive you have to be survive a morning commute to work. How often does traffic jam or public transportation break down? How do you adjust your routine to pick up someone at the auto repair shop or to stop for an errand? Basic to the skill of invention is rearranging the familiar elements of a situation.

When you change your route to work to pick up a friend or colleague, you may be systematic and review the alternatives to decide on the best route. You may use trial and error to find your way after the pickup. You may count on the person you are picking up to direct you.

The inventive mind keeps asking "What if?" Faced with a change in routine, the inventive thinker begins considering alternatives. How did you learn how to do this kind of thinking? How can you share this kind of thinking with your children? Because your children watch you and learn from your example, you can powerfully influence their commitment to inventiveness by being a good model.

Talk out loud in frustrating situations

When things just aren't going well, how do you handle it? When the washer or the car stops working right, do you immediately call for a service person to fix the problems or do you open the hood and begin hypothesizing? When you try a new recipe and the cake turns out flat, do you blame the recipe and throw cookbook and cake into the trash, or do you laugh at the new creation and try to figure out what might have gone wrong? Do you taste it to see if it just looks terrible?

What does your child see when you are in potentially experimental situations? What example do you set?

Let your child in on your "experiments"

Do you ever cook without a cookbook? Do you ever change ingredients or steps in recipes that are tried and true? What's the worst that could happen?

The kitchen or the home workshop are excellent places to introduce children to invention, that is if cooking and building still occur in either location in your home. You and your child can bake four different cakes with four different versions of the same recipe, playing the "what if" game described above. What happens if there is no sugar? a little sugar? a lot of sugar? or brown sugar instead of confectioner's sugar? As you work through this process, share your thoughts aloud so your child can hear how your mind works.

Problem solve together

You and your child can build a bookcase together, starting from scratch, consulting no professional plans. You sit down together with pencil and paper and invent the bookcase. You begin, perhaps, with "How big do we want it?" and move on to questions such as "How many feet of board and how many

screws do we need?" Along the way you may encounter unforeseen problems and you will seek inventive solutions. The bookcase may not turn out as well as if professionally planned, but then again it may be far closer to what you wanted and your child will have learned how to translate vision into reality without someone else's plan.

Share your playful side

Make up music! Create a family band with pots and pans and other noisemakers. Sing nonsense songs in the shower! Let your child see you playing around with tunes and lyrics, sometimes singing off key, unafraid to make a mistake.

You need not be handy with everything in the home. You need only model an inventive spirit part of the time in order to encourage your child's natural inclination to mess and tinker with things. Instead of teaching reliance upon others' inventions, you show your child the rich treasures buried in his or her own mind.

3. NURTURE YOUR CHILD'S IMAGINATION

Children should grow up with a full diet of fantasy and fairy tales. They should be encouraged to entertain visions of sugar plums dancing and frogs turning into princes, for this diet helps to fuel a lifetime of invention. The ability to invent what ought to be is strongly connected to the ability to imagine what could be. Wynken, Blynken and Nod had the right idea, sailing out each night to cast their nets at the stars. Ideas are free when you make them up yourself, and worth millions in the pleasure they bring.

Image building

There is an important difference between an active imagination and a passive one. When children relied upon story books to learn their fairy tales and stories, their minds created vivid motion pictures to supplement the few illustrations that appeared in such books. Today the child may well have a library of video tapes which leave little to the imagination.

Imagination involves image building and image creating. It requires free associating and flexibility. Make certain your child has many chances to create his or her own visions of what might be, for children must develop their ability to create images in order to solve problems and create something better. If they are raised on a constant diet of images processed and provided by someone else's mind, they may come to rely upon others to deliver the "big picture." Frogs may forever remain frogs and Sleeping Beauty may never awaken.

Coloring outside the lines

Supplement the ever popular coloring books with chances to scribble and draw outside the lines. What happens if you color the sky red instead of blue, the banana green instead of yellow, the skin brown or purple instead of white? Try the collection of Uncoloring Books which provide visual starting points for your child's own drawings. Keep the possibilities limitless for color, shape and texture. Saturday morning cartoons (in moderation) may actually help develop your children's visual flexibility if you start them thinking about where the characters came from and how they could evolve even further.

Encourage open-ended activities and play. Remember the games you invented in the back yard with a few friends from the neighborhood. With so many organized activities for children these days, they may

miss out on the chance to turn the street into a moonscape, or the tree in the yard into a giant robot. If you squint your eyes, can you make the fence into a parade of elves? What something could be may be more important than what it is.

Super silliness

Basic to imagination "muscle building" is "pumping irony." Raise your children on healthy doses of silliness. Suspend judgment and stuffiness. Feed them on puns and nonsense. Hold silliness contests which reward the most extreme and nonsensical idea. Who can invent the craziest sandwich, for example? Who can come up with the worst movie title? How would you describe the most mundane event, like a bath, as if it were an adventure? What nonsense can you make up about your favorite television characters? What farfetched endings to stories or television programs can you invent?

Avoiding over-scheduling

With all the best intentions in the world, some parents fill their children's afternoons and evenings, weekends and summers, with structured classes and training experiences. While many of these classes may be taught by those who value creative play, there is a danger that the adult may dominate the learning so intensely that personal inventiveness is virtually prohibited. Anyone who reads the biographies of great painters and poets can find ample evidence of teachers of painting or poetry who try to impose their own visions and voices upon the young talents entrusted to their care.

Make certain that your child has plenty of unstructured time as well as the equipment or materials to fill the time with creative play. Since the best equipment requires the child to do a great deal of inventing, emphasize collections of "raw material" which can be transformed into some new version. A box of old hats, coats, shirts, ribbons and scarves becomes the raw material for costumes as the living room becomes a stage for childhood plays. A box of egg cartons, packing material, empty coffee cans, paint and assorted cast-off objects becomes the raw material for building space cities and skyscrapers. Every child should have access to a large table/work shop area where painting, cutting, pasting, sawing and inventing is encouraged.

But why not just buy the costumes, the space cities and the skyscrapers? Our toy stores are filled with gleaming toys that outshine anything a child can throw together in a home workshop. Why go to all the trouble? Why not let the child paint by numbers and finish with a painting that looks like a "real" sail boat? Inventiveness is a natural tendency for children unless we train it out of them. Given half a chance, children can turn an empty lot into a jungle or the courtyard of a palace. Their imagination can work wonders. If we supply them with finished products, we begin to discourage improvisation, adaptation, innovation and invention.

4. ENCOURAGE SELECTIVE TELEVISION VIEWING

Television and home videos are decidedly a mixed blessing. They can enrich your child's imagination and knowledge base by providing a rich feast of visual images and by carrying him or her to distant lands and times. At the same time, the viewer is spectator rather than participant and there is danger that children will become consumers of fantasy rather than producers. TV fosters many attitudes which can undermine the careful steps you have taken as parent to emphasize values such as honesty, fairness, and cooperation. The fast lane world portrayed by *Dallas* hardly represents the kind of world we want for our children, yet it is possible to watch hour after hour during which violence, greed and deceit are paraded before the viewer in a vivid fashion show.

Select the content with your child

Children who watch 5-6 hours of television daily lose out on opportunities to develop their own talents and to explore the world outside. This is not to say that the television set should be banished from the home. Far from it. Television provides a wonderful window on the world. We suggest viewing should be restricted to an hour or less per day with substantial attention paid to the selection of content. Teach your child to use a viewing guide and establish a communication process which requires parental approval in advance.

With a little planning, you can have meals, study times and bedtime cut out some unrestricted viewing. During the times available to your child to watch television, make it a point to know what is on and talk about the choices. Show enough interest in the kinds of programs you approve of to watch them and discuss them with your child. Encourage them to view programs you think are consistent with your values. Talk about why some programs are off limits and why you would not recommend others. Make television a subject for discussion. If your children are viewing something worthwhile, it should be worth talking about too!

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Provide alternative activities

Changing the culture of your household in relationship to television may be tougher than you think. Be prepared for the times you do not see any alternative to using the television as a baby sitter. You may ask, "But what do we do on a rainy day? How about Saturday morning when we want to sleep late?" Early encouragement of your child's inventiveness and independence will pay off at these moments. If the house is filled with the "raw material" mentioned earlier, a rainy day can be a welcome treat and Saturday morning can be a chance to build a vast castle out of blocks.

"But what do I say when my child says he/she is bored?" We can teach our children that boredom is not a disease like the chicken pox. Boredom is the mood which results when one is not being inventive. Very early in life teach your child that he/she is the only one who can fix the boredom problem. Otherwise you will find your elbow being tugged on a rainy day as a whining voice complains, "I'm bored! What can I do?" As you helpfully list alternatives, the same voice will whine, "No, I've tried that." or "I'm tired of that game." You may go through a hundred suggestions without luck! Turn it around and make excitement (the arch enemy of boredom) the responsibility of the child, not the parent.

Make television viewing active

The value of television as a window on the world is limited by its entertainment format and the low demands placed on the viewer. You can make a difference in how your child views television by making it the object of analysis. Talk with your child about the programs you watch together. Read about the actors. If it is a serial, follow the plot. Talk about the writers. Who are they? Where do they get their ideas? While you are watching a program, talk to your child about the acting. Is it convincing? Is it exaggerated behavior? Is this character someone you would like to know? Why or why not? Point out camera angle, lighting, set design and costumes. Reveal the anatomy of television to make your children critical consumers of the images.

Encourage your children to watch documentaries about countries, animals and people. Help them to explore the world of "how to" programs for cooking, housebuilding and painting. Let them experiment with developing some of these skills.

Use educational programs to explore the many faces of television with your children. How does television educate? How much do they learn? Teach them to take notes, reflect and sum up a program, rather than just watching. Convince them that activity is more fun than passivity!

5. REWARD RESPONSIBLE RISK-TAKING

Being sincerely concerned about their well-being, we devote considerable energy to teaching our children safety in their early years. We warn them about touching hot stoves, we set strict rules about staying in the yard, and we punish them firmly when they show signs of disregarding our structures. We want them to learn "the limits" so they can navigate independently and manage the trip from home to school or store without being hurt or kidnapped. We read them stories like *Peter Rabbit* to underline the importance of obedience and boundary lines, offering up the specter of an enraged Farmer MacGregor as

a warning of what happens to children who don't listen to their parents.

Sizing up a situation

How, then, do we justify teaching children risk-taking? Note the emphasis upon the word "responsible." The key to this kind of risk taking is assessment, the careful measurement of the degree of risk. We must teach children to ask, "What's the best that could happen?" And then to ask, "What's the worst that could happen?" Then, "What else might happen?" Finally, "How likely is each to happen?"

We don't begin teaching this process with life-threatening activities such as rock climbing. We start with relatively safe activities such as cooking or block building. Risk taking is closely associated with the "What if" games mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Looking for potential

Necessity is the parent of invention! Identifying situations with potential for change can encourage responsible risk-taking. Many family situations can serve as a model for everyday invention. For example, it seems modern work life leaves little time for cooking. As the economy has called millions of women into the workforce full time, many have become inventive about balancing traditional roles with new ones. No longer free to spend long hours at the stove preparing food, many have chosen to substitute microwave cooking, fast food or "takeout" for traditional cooking. Others entice their spouses and children into learning cooking. Still others win time for cooking by streamlining, "farming out" family tasks such as laundry or yard care. Some avoid time-consuming shopping trips by ordering clothes from catalogues and home-delivered groceries over a computer modem. Children in your household can become part of the problem or part of the solution. Involving them in the problem-solving helps to identify the risks associated with any change. Will the new system work? Will we like the food just as much? Will we eat on time?

Faced with the necessity of doing many more things in less time, the inventive mind seeks a shortcut, a new route, altering, modifying, elaborating and shifting the elements of family patterns until all the jobs are done within the amount of time allotted. Children today face many of the same scheduling problems adults have. How do they fit in sports, school, friends, homework and television every day? What are the alternatives? What are the risks associated with each?

Assessing risk - worst case scenarios

"What's the worst that could happen?" is a useful question in assessing risk. If the answer to this question is something you can live with, the risk is acceptable. When your child is debating about whether to try out for a play or a team, can he or she accept the worst case scenario - not being chosen? When they choose to stay up too late, can they deal with the consequence of being tired the next day? Being able to accept the consequences of a situation is critical to taking responsible risks.

Later in life as teenagers facing life threatening choices, they may bring "responsible" risk taking skills to those choices. Unlike peers who may drift into danger without conscious thought, your children will assess the dangers associated with climbing into a car with a driver who has been drinking and will think twice about the risk. Similarly, when selecting a career path or job, they will look past the salary and benefits to assess the other prospects of such a position. Once employed, they will be the kind of employee who takes responsible risks to improve productivity, suggesting changes to management that will be prized during a century of rapid change. They will approach both work and family life with a "change ethic."

Conclusion

The most important contribution you can make to teach your child invention is to value and practice invention yourself. Take pride in your own creative thinking and problem solving. The time you invest in making your own thinking visible for your children will be repaid many times in the skill and ease with which they adapt to their changing world.

Model inventiveness for your children by being willing to acknowledge your frustrations, think aloud and solve problems together. Play "what if . . ." games with your children throughout their lives. Make it a part of play, work and tough situations. Nurture your children's imaginations with fantasy. Share with them your dreams and the fairy tales of yesterday as well as the science fiction of tomorrow. Let them know that sometimes you have to build castles in the air before you can build the foundations under them. Make television viewing a conscious decision, not an accident. Let it serve the purpose of enhancing a child's vision, not dulling it. Encourage your children to be responsible risk-takers - to push themselves within limits. Show them how to do it, and be by their sides as they take chances.

You can raise your child to see life with a mind open to new possibilities and a spirit willing to try something new and different. If you make exploration and invention part of your home, your child will greet the next century with confidence and skill, riding the waves of change with the enthusiasm and style of a world class surfer!

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Parenting for an Age of Information

Chapter Two - Questioning

"Why does it get dark at night?"

"Where does the sun go?"

"Where does God sleep?"

"Can the Sand Man be a woman?"

Children begin life with profound questions. So much needs explanation. Much like a huge jigsaw puzzle with its pieces scattered across a living room carpet, the world is confusing and hard to put together. Questions help make meaning out of what seems like nonsense.

Your daughter or son starts asking questions as soon as words begin . . .

"More?" (Upon finishing up favorite food.)

"Da-Da?" (Upon seeing a strange man.)

And then the questions become more complex as the toddler starts joining words together into phrases and sentences . . .

"Boddle all gawn? (Bottle all gone?)"

"Mummy sad?"

"Mummy come back?" (Upon arrival at child care.)

Why is questioning so important to your child?

One can never know all the right answers, especially in a world of rapidly changing information. However, with specific tools, one can usually fashion the right question to get some answers. Questions are tools of thinking that can be modified and molded to fit shifting situations. Knowing how to fashion questions may be more important than knowing all the answers.

We parents want a child who is an independent learner, one who asks essential questions and persists with such questions until insight takes the place of confusion. We want a child in whom a sense of wonder flourishes - a child whose curiosity springs forth with full vigor from moment to moment as the world presents a feast of opportunities for exploration and discovery.

Unfortunately, when your child goes to school, questions may mostly come from teachers. School is sometimes a place where children may memorize and repeat answers provided by adults and textbooks. While there are exceptional schools and exceptional teachers, researchers paint a fairly gloomy picture of the kinds of classroom questions which prevail.

Many teachers and some school systems prize student questions, but if your child's does not, you can encourage questions at home from the very beginning. You can teach your child to be a skillful questioner as well as when to use this powerful skill. Children must be skillful and savvy enough to "survive in their native land."

Questions are essential tools for real problem-solving. When faced with surprising, intriguing and baffling challenges as a child or adult, we will find the most effective solutions and answers by applying good questioning skills.

Solving the unfamiliar and surprising problem is like untangling a fishing line that has become snarled in a seemingly hopeless knot. You pull here first, then there. Through trial and error, hunch and intuition, you begin to make sense of the mess. Problem-solving demands a similar spirit of inquiry and lots of questions. It is the questions which drive the process - What happens if . . .? How about . . .? What would make this more . . .?

Children must learn that one question leads to other questions, that there are families of questions and that there are questions within questions. If your child becomes a skillful questioner, he or she will find the many different pathways to answers easier to follow. Questions will help clear away the baggage, the prejudice and the "conventional wisdom" which often obstruct vision, restrict the way to a single path and hide good solutions.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO AT HOME

Raising a generation of good questioners begins at home with the atmosphere you set for your children and the response you give to their questions. Are far-out, off-the-wall questions greeted with enthusiasm and encouragement? Do you take the time out to nurture the curiosity of your daughter and son? Are you willing to roll up your sleeves to help explore questions you cannot answer? Do you share your own curiosity and your own questions with your children, including the unanswerable questions with which most of us struggle throughout a lifetime?

Your attitude toward questions and questioning, along with the opportunities you provide, will do a great deal to shape the questioning behavior of your children. Even if you live where the schools do not prize this kind of inquiry, you can teach your child to ask questions all through life if you model good questions and welcome them when they come your way. In this section you will find specific suggestions for how to help your children develop the questioning skills that will make them effective and resourceful problem-solvers during the next century. You will know you have been successful when you find wisdom flows "out of the mouths of (your) babes."

1. WELCOME "WHY?" QUESTIONS

Most of us promise never to answer a child's *why* question with *because I said so*. Yet most of us tire at one time or another of the seemingly endless series of questions which can flow from the mouths of our children. No sooner than we have answered one extraordinary question than the child is ready with an even more challenging follow-up. It can seem like a presidential press conference.

How do children sense so accurately when we will not have the time or patience to answer a long string of questions? Sometimes it actually seems as if they have waited for the parent to be deeply involved in a newspaper, wood-working project or delicate bit of food preparation before asking, "*Why does Santa Claus still use reindeer?*"

Remembering our own promise to be patient, we make a weak stab at an answer like, *"Because it's a nice tradition,"* carefully keeping our eye on the sauce we are stirring. Like any good news reporter, the child senses empty rhetoric and probes further. *"But why not use a helicopter? Wouldn't that be faster?"* Really concerned about our sauce boiling too hard, we tend to give in all too quickly. *"What? Oh, yes. You have a point, sweet heart."* The child is apt to stare for a while, hands on hips, at the raised newspaper or the body hunched over the saucepan, and then shrug, sigh and depart frustrated with the parent's lack of engagement.

"Why?" questions arise for many reasons at many different times. The pattern parodied above probably involves more than the child's curiosity. Questioning is more than a device to satisfy curiosity. It also serves to gain attention, to put someone on the defensive or to stir things up.

Sometimes family members feel that sharing thoughts, feelings and curiosity is a waste of time because nobody really listens or engages in a way that the speaker feels heard. Unfortunately, research on family dialogue in the 1980s showed that few parents spent much time talking with their children each day and even less time listening.

Grab those "why?" questions early in your child's life and seize them as an opportunity to listen. These questions may be the opening to what can be a delightful, prolonged joint search for meaning that will endure past the days of high school graduation and marriage well into the days of grandchildren and new generations. The gulf between child and parents normally associated with the teenage years actually may have its roots in early childhood when the foundations for mutual exchange of ideas are not firmly established.

Before you answer your child's question, breathe deeply, pause and take the time to figure out what might lie behind the question. Answer the question with a question . . . *"Why do you ask? What made you ask that? Where did that question come from?"*

In each and every exchange with your children, you have the opportunity to accomplish two important goals. First, you can support them in their most compelling work - figuring out the world for themselves. They need help in developing confidence that they can make sense of the world. Secondly, you can help develop the questioning skills which will allow them to invent their own futures. By teaching them to ask both answerable and unanswerable questions, you prepare them psychologically and practically to take charge of their lives.

Your real purpose is not to answer questions but to welcome them. You want to explore the thought behind the question and to reward the child for showing curiosity. It is the beginning of a collaborative search and the development of a pattern to sustain it. Think of your child's questions as a serve in tennis. You would hardly return it with a smash.

Because most of us were raised in schools where answers were prized more than questioning or thinking, we must unlearn old behaviors and resist the temptation to blurt out some facile explanation. Toy with the question. Try out your backhand or your spin. Work on your form. Enjoy the exchange. Forget the killers and put-away shots. Concentrate on smooth ground strokes. See if you can hit it back and forth a dozen or more times. Show your child that questions are nearly as welcome in your home as hugs. If you work at your family questioning game, you will find that questions and hugs will both increase in frequency and quality.

2. MAKE YOUR CHILD'S LIFE AS WONDER-FULL AS POSSIBLE

"Playpen" is an oxymoron. Make the world your child's playground. Questions feed upon rich and varied experience - plenty of opportunities to run through fields and forests, wander through museums full of bones and paintings, stroll along through a crowded city sidewalk sale, dig down through the sand of an island beach clear to China, wade through a quiet tidal pool, or taste a dozen different chili recipes.

We must, as the saying goes, "take time to smell the flowers," but being fully alive means we also will notice the unpleasant garbage which has accumulated along a city street, the heavy barbecue smell which lingers on the grill and the crispness of falling snow. Enjoy your child's curiosity about many of the things you have ceased to notice.

What does it take to strike your fancy? Awaken your sense of wonder? Make you curious? Not much really, if you look around and notice the world. It does not take the snows of Kilimanjaro or the roar of the Pacific Ocean crashing on a rocky shore. Lean down close to the grass on a summer morning and watch the sun reflect through the dew drops captured there for a few brief moments. Watch the same sun sparkle on the dew studded web of a spider. Notice the butterfly sampling this strange morning brew. Your child is a willing partner in these adventures. If you set the stage and provide the safety net, your child will probably even take the lead.

What makes something wonder-ful? It is probably more a matter of your perspective - how you look at any thing - rather than something resident in the object or scene itself. There are undoubtedly special locations with an eerie atmosphere or spectacular vistas, but one need not travel to Mont St. Michel or the Grand Canyon to find something stimulating or wonderful. Your own backyard at sunset can hold secrets, if only in your imagination.

It might simply be something "out of the ordinary," something extra-ordinary. You encounter a sight which is either unusually majestic or unusually delicate. There may be a touch of magic which surrounds a scene or object, or it may be something which has sat before your eyes all along, lying unnoticed until it appears in focus for the first time because you have changed your lense. The bark on the tree in your front yard may hold a beautifully swirling pattern that rivals the Oriental carpet in your living room for grace and complexity, but it takes noticing to bring this natural art into everyday consciousness.

Changing lenses is easy once you and your child practice a bit. You might begin with real lenses at first, exploring the world with magnifying glass or binoculars until the metaphor takes hold and you can "zoom" in and out with your "naked eyes." The trick is to break the remoteness which characterizes "life in the fast lane" of this technologically driven society.

Our sense of wonder depends upon sharply awakened senses, yet we live in an urbanized culture which cuts us off from our agrarian roots, separates us from nature and turns us into couch potatoes. Certain senses are bombarded by TV images and sounds while others lie dormant. The bombardment engenders passivity and dulls the senses so that the subtleties of life go unnoticed.

After years of high volume media, we seem to lose our hearing. We slip into our cars, turn on the ignition and find the blast of the radio nearly deafening. Did we really have the radio cranked up so high last time we sat in the car? Were we listening to both the commercials and the music at such a high volume?

We spend so much time letting someone else frame our pictures or jangle our senses that we allow our own skills to lie dormant. In far too many cases our skills for looking at and tasting the world wither away, become emaciated and atrophy. But it is never too late for some "*wonder therapy*."

Make a point of organizing daily trips and excursions during your child's early years and then keep them coming on strong through the teenage years. The excursion can be to the library, the milk store or the back yard. *"Come on. Let's see if the flowers are sleeping!"* The voyage of discovery need not be elaborate or expensive. Even the simplest thing can be wonderful if we look at it in the right way. As your children grow, expand their adventures to include places farther afield. Take your 13-year-old and friends to the nearest city. Go up to the top of the highest building, walk across a big bridge or sit on a park bench and watch the people. With teenagers, focus on music, sports and people. Find out where the "with-it" people go.

Revive some special childhood adventures, like building sand castles or exploring on bicycles. If you encourage adventures like these, your teenager may not need to push some of the limits with drugs or sex. They can learn about risk-taking and the questions to ask which determine acceptable risk.

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3. GUARD AGAINST EXCESSIVE ROUTINE

Routine, rigidity and tight boundaries snuff out questions before they achieve a glimmer of light. The national trend toward standardization contributes to the problem as chains and franchises spread a bland veneer of sameness across the landscape. If we wander through the seaport shopping areas of Boston, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia and San Francisco, it is hard to tell them apart or remember where we are. The same stores offer the same goods through the same windows no matter where you go. Drive down the shopping strips of Anytown, USA and try to find a restaurant which offers a real hamburger, the kind the cook shapes with his or her own hands. Cookie cutters are in vogue!

This cultural trend presents parents with a special challenge. Faced with a bland, name-brand dominated landscape, you must find ways to liberate your child from the merchandising, the shaping of tastes and the peer pressure for sameness. Conduct a search for the idiosyncratic, the unique, the curious and the eccentric. If you can sharpen your daughter or son's appetite for the unusual during the pre-school years, it will help protect him or her from the cookie-cutter standardization so typical of today's schools. Malvina Reynold's 1950s song about "Little Boxes" warned long ago of suburban lives of quiet, standardized desperation. We can free our children from such a future by teaching them to be good questioners.

While hard-working, two career parents must necessarily seek the comfort of predictable child-care arrangements and routines, these routines and schedules can wage a subtle war against wonderment. We must carefully guard against moving through the paces of our schedules without being fully alive or fully awake.

The drive to child care in the morning offers a feast of visual experiences, especially if we make a point of varying the route from day to day. Rather than slipping into a quiet, yawning ride of silence, try turning the trip into a game. Help your child notice the people along the route. Give them names and make up stories about them.

Parent: *"Where do you think Mrs. Hamilton is headed this morning all dressed up and waiting for the bus?"*

Child: *"I think she is having lunch with an old friend from school."*

As you drive along, pull out the details of the landscape into "high relief." Identify the "for sale signs" in front of houses, track their progress and compare their style and messages. Start looking for the flowers to pop out of the ground as soon as spring arrives. *Which ones come up first? How long do they last? Where are gardens along your route? What does each one offer? What are the traffic patterns along the route? How do they change with the time of day or day of the week?* Teaching your child to observe, question and hypothesize can happen every day in many ways.

Encourage your child to add novelty to everyday routines. Make change a fun and creative part of each day. Within the routines of getting up and dressed, having meals, and traveling to and from places, ask, "What could we do differently just for fun?" or "How could we do this faster? or better? or more safely?" Keep your child's eyes on the horizon of what could be with questions like these.

Once your child feasts on life and learns to break through the routines which may dull the senses, he or she will never lose an appetite for experience. Questioning will become "second nature."

4. ADMIT YOU DO NOT HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS

The goal we hold for our children is teach them how to find or fashion satisfying answers to life's puzzles by learning to ask good questions in effective sequences and combinations. There is no such thing as "the right question" or "the right sequence" because effective questioning often requires a certain amount of "muddling around." There is bound to be some trial and error, some intuitive play with tough questions. Dilemmas, paradoxes and quandaries all deserve and require some messy questioning balanced by a degree of disciplined, logical inquiry. The thinker who can shift gears back and forth between logic and license, from right to left side of the brain, will emerge with the richest insights.

If children grow up surrounded by adults who provide immediate, facile answers to every question, they gain the false impression that answers are stored inside the brain - like some organic encyclopedia - where they have been carefully memorized until they are needed. They get the idea that answers do not require thought or ingenuity. They fail to see how the initial question spawns additional questions, which eventually lead to a fresh answer. They lose out on the opportunity to observe an adult mind searching, analyzing and deciding.

Make a point of answering some questions, especially the complex or wide open questions, with an admission of ignorance or uncertainty: "Why aren't we exploring the moon anymore?" might provoke a quick response about economic priorities, or something like, "It really depends. There could be a lot of different answers. Some people might answer one way and others would disagree. Let's see how many different answers we can come up with."

Children often ask some of the most profound questions of all. "Why can't people live together without war?" is a questions we have all been struggling with for many, many years. These kinds of questions deserve to be praised and explored with your child. If the question has no right answer, if it allows many plausible answers, or if it depends upon circumstances or opinion, make that clear in your response: "I don't know. I'm really not sure. A lot of people have been struggling to answer that question for a long time. Let's think about how we might answer that one. That's a great question!" Bring your own way of asking and answering questions out in the open so your child can see how your mind works.

It is easy to forget that answers are actually conclusions. They are statements or judgments which are made at the end of a thinking process. You are most helpful when you join your child in that thinking process or exploration. As you take these voyages over and over again, your child will learn from the model you set as a thinking person. There are many environments to explore. You can get on the computer together to explore databases which hold partial answers. You can drive to the library, go out into the garden and dig up the soil or visit the ocean to observe the fiddler crab first hand. You can set up experiments with window boxes or pets or tools. You can demonstrate through your actions that some answers are based on a long string of questions and data collection over a considerable period of time.

And then there are questions which may seem unanswerable. "Why are some people homeless? Why don't people vote? How can I keep up with my older sister?" When we encounter these questions we

must balance the child's need for reassurance with our own respect for the truth. We can teach our children that some questions have bothered people for hundreds of years and that we must each answer them as best we can. We can confess that being alive sometimes involves pain and sadness. We can acknowledge that life is not always fair and that not everybody plays by the rules. This prepares children to deal with the reality that they will not always have the answers to some very important questions.

5. COLLECT AND RELISH PUZZLES

Without trying very hard, we can find an endless supply of anomalies, paradoxes, dilemmas, predicaments and quandaries to perplex, bewilder, astonish and intrigue us. These puzzles arouse our curiosity and stimulate questioning. While we may be confounded at first glance, our questions begin to break up this mental log jam, unlock our frozen thinking and set us on the road to understanding.

From a very early age you and your child can begin collecting such puzzles. You may want to use stories like *The Ugly Duckling* (*) or *The Selfish Giant* (*) to help set the stage and define the kinds of puzzles you seek. In your weekly visits to the library seek out books and stories like the *Phantom Tollbooth* (*) which are filled with word play, paradoxes and predicament. As you and your child develop skill with puzzles in literature, you can begin seeking them in the world around you.

As you start hunting for puzzles, create an **I Wonder Why . . .** book with your child. Each night as part of the evening story reading and discussion, ask if there are any new wonders to be added to the list. Keep track of these wonderful questions and plan excursions to help find answers to some of them.

You may want to encourage family members to bring puzzles and questions to the dinner table for family discussion. It may be an ambiguous photograph. "What is happening in this picture? What is going on here? What's missing? What's different?" It may be data reported in the newspaper from a survey of people's attitudes toward homelessness. "What do these numbers tell us? How would you answer the survey?" It may be something strange a child noticed on the school bus on the way home from school - the fact that the driver pulled away even though one of the children slipped and fell getting off the bus.

Life presents us with an endless supply of puzzles. The only problem is that many people spend their lives avoiding puzzles and serious questions. They seek stability, predictability and certainty in an uncertain world. Instead of learning to use good questions to adapt and adjust to a changing world they adopt a "bunker" mentality.

Puzzle avoidance leads to stagnation. A healthy society keeps its head out of the sand and tries to see what is coming in order to be prepared. A healthy person learns to wrestle with difficult questions and predicaments rather than rely upon recipes and formulas which may have worked in the past. If you raise your child on a diet of puzzles, she or he will grow up feeling confident and resourceful. Ingenuity and skill will grow year by year. Confronted by a dilemma, a quandary or a paradox, she or he will not be shaken or cowed. She or he will greet the dilemma as a challenge, a test of ingenuity.

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Chapter Two - Questioning (continued)

6. ENCOURAGE OPTIMISM, FAITH AND THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

The purpose of teaching good questioning is to support the development of an honest and authentic relationship between your child and the world. But questions sometimes can lead to discovering harsh realities and discouragement. As you teach your child to question, teach them to use what they learn to construct rather than to destroy. As they learn to question, make it clear that you believe in goodness and the ability of people to create a positive way of life.

Optimism is a choice. Questions can be asked in positive or negative ways: *"Is the cup half full? or half empty?"* The tone of the question can influence the answer dramatically. Optimistically phrased questions invite collaboration and expansive answers. Negatively phrased questions can cause concern and result in meager information. Looking forward with a positive spirit results in constructive questions which propel the questioner toward solutions.

Where does optimism come from? Are you optimistic? How do you know? Optimism is often based on faith that things will work out for the best. Many times there is insufficient information to make even an educated guess about an outcome, but thinking the best pays off. Thinking the best is not Pollyanna thinking. It is being prepared for the worst but believing the best will happen. To avoid being unprepared for the unpleasant, the key question to keep in mind is, *"What is the worst that could happen?"* Answering this question provokes preparation while supporting the forward momentum of positive thinking.

Boxing shadows can drain away enormous amounts of energy your child could be using to learn and grow. Just as you provide a safe physical environment to nurture your child's growth, you can provide a safe psychological environment by encouraging him or her to develop a "benefit of the doubt" attitude. When all the questions might otherwise lead to a negative conclusion, this attitude allows you to step back and consider other explanations.

Parents have an important role to play in establishing the positive spirit that carries us through the tough times and the disillusioning moments. An optimistic view of life is essential, especially in times of uncertainty and rapid change. How each family chooses to establish that optimism or faith is, of course, a matter of individual conscience or persuasion, but every child deserves an opportunity to grow up with a set of ethical and moral principles which will guard against the cancerous growth of cynicism.

Conclusion

You can make questions as important as answers in your child's life. Begin by welcoming all those "why" questions and asking a lot of them yourself. Be content to leave many of them unanswered, but create a collection that testifies to the prominent place of curiosity in your family.

Make your child's life as curious and wonder-full as possible. Your questions about the world mirror your child's sense of the adventure of just being alive. Noticing and questioning the world around you establishes a magnificent sense of teamwork.

Guard against excessive routine. Questions about how, why and what if . . . introduce just enough change into stable routines to make them interesting. Any system that cannot tolerate change is open to destruction. The influx of questions keeps the routines alive and the people flexible.

Admit you do not have all the answers. If every question has an answer, the frontiers are gone. Without experience in the realm of the unanswerable, your child will not be prepared to deal with the riddles of life. Share your wonderment at the vastness of what is unknown.

Collect and relish puzzles. Your child will inevitably find parts of life puzzling. Will they relish the challenge? Will they be able to deal with the ambiguity? If you prize the enigmatic, your child will be prepared to deal with the puzzles of life.

Encourage optimism, faith and the benefit of the doubt. As with most powerful tools, questions can be used to construct cathedrals or destroy civilizations. You can shape your child's questioning skill toward building a positive life by teaching him or her to consider the cup half full, rather than half empty.

Questioning is at the heart of effective thinking, yet many schools provide too few opportunities for your child to ask or investigate questions flowing out of his or her own curiosity. If you begin to encourage questioning from the very beginning of your child's language development, you can establish a foundation which will serve him or her well throughout life. These questioning skills can become the basis for successful adult development and adjustment in a rapidly changing, uncertain world.

The question is . . .

The question is

how come the teacher asks all the questions

when I'm the one who needs to know things.

The question is

why I'm supposed to have the answers

to all my parent's questions when they can't answer mine.

The question is

why scientists ask ten questions for every answer they get

but I have to answer seven out of ten to pass.

The question is

why politicians learn not to answer questions

while I must learn how to answer them.

The question is

why questions have to be answered fast in school

when philosophers take years to answer them.

The question is

why there are so many little questions in school

when Marie Curie spent her whole life on one big question.

The question is

why I must find answers to already answered questions

when I have questions that have not yet been answered.

The question is

why can't I be in charge of the questions?

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Parenting for an Age of Information

Chapter Three - Puzzling

We live in a puzzling world. It is almost as if someone shakes up the puzzle pieces on a daily or weekly basis, strewing the fragments out across the world's living room floor to see if we can make sense out of all the seemingly disconnected pieces.

Unlike those long rainy days on summer vacations during our own childhoods, there is no picture on the box of this puzzle to guide us. There is no straight edge along the sides to give us clues. There is no limit to the number of pieces, and they do not all lie flat or even fit together. Sometimes we must bend and hammer and tease the pieces to help them into a meaningful pattern.

This puzzle will keep us busy for a life time and will continue to challenge philosophers, pundits and commentators for centuries to come. Puzzling out the meaning of life - bringing order to chaos - is a major part of our life's work, and showing our children how to manage the often confusing process is a major responsibility of parenting. Good puzzling skills produce insight and the capacity to discern the true nature of a situation. The good puzzler can penetrate the fog, the confusion, the distortion, the mountains of data and the propaganda of modern life to catch an elucidating glimpse of reality.

Why is puzzling so important to your child?

Our rapidly changing world offers up a steady diet of chaos and fragmentation. The frameworks, customs and traditions that served for generations now bend, shake and sometimes even collapse under the pressures of change. The shift in the economy to employ both parents of most school aged children and the related alteration of family systems is but one example of major transformation. Many of these changes take place gradually and subtly while others may hit like a thunder squall. In any case, we need to manage such changes consciously and thoughtfully, employing the questioning, inventing and cooperating skills described earlier in this book to develop effective coping strategies.

Our children will weather these storms of life and will skillfully manage the transitions accompanying vast social changes if we teach them how to search through fragments and puzzle things out. Parents may equip daughters and sons to be observant, to occupy a crow's nest throughout life, an elevated perspective from which they may keep an eye on the horizon to navigate and make wise choices. As they scan the horizon, they must know how to interpret the details or fragments of information, converting the color, the size, the shape and the movement of the clouds into a forecast of approaching weather.

According to Toffler, power and influence will flow during the Information Age to those who are skilled at converting data - seemingly disconnected fragments - into information and then knowledge. The process requires pattern identification. The observer or analyst must know how to identify relationships and connections, transforming the swirl of data into trends, cause-and-effect associations, and general laws or principles.

Our workforce has split into two groups: service workers and "symbolic analysts." The nation's bounty flows generously to the second group. Reich comments that, "Most of their jobs consist of analyzing and manipulating symbols - words, numbers or visual images." He points out that this kind of thinking is in high demand by a world economy which stresses problem identification and problem-solving.

The argument for puzzling as an essential skill rests on much more than power, influence and career.

The argument for puzzling as an essential skill rests on much more than power, intelligence and career implications. Mental health may also depend upon this crow's nest perspective. The turbulence and uncertainty of a rapidly changing society can produce emotional upheaval if individuals see themselves as powerless and victimized by forces outside their control. Instead of investing in coping strategies, these individuals may turn to other ways of coping such as substance abuse to dull the sharp edges of life and make the puzzle pieces seem to fit together. They may find themselves struggling with bouts of depression as life appears to have little meaning. Even the affluent may wrestle with angst, anomie, anxiety and alienation flowing from the sense that social structures have collapsed and left them an existence without meaning.

In order to thrive, young people must learn how to make meaning out of chaos, drawing connections between seemingly disconnected ideas and events. In school they will too often encounter neat little packages explaining such chaotic events as the beginning of the Civil War in a few concise paragraphs. They will learn a law of science and then "discover" the law in a canned laboratory "experiment." Rarely will students make meaning by studying fragments and putting puzzles together for themselves. Since they are usually shown the whole picture before they may start working on the puzzle, they rarely experience puzzling it out. Puzzle aficionados would consider looking at the picture a form of cheating, and so must we.

Because the future will be filled with puzzles, our children must also learn how to maintain human connections in an increasingly alienating society. Like jig-saw puzzles, communities are difficult to hold or put together, yet the skills of community building are central to the survival of civilization. How many months can a friendship subsist on tape-recorded messages? How many months can a family survive on silent microwave meals consumed in separate rooms before separate television screens?

As with all of the other skills identified in this book, parents are in a particularly strong position to influence the growth of competence in their sons and daughters by providing a rich diet of experiences and opportunities. We need not wait for rainy summer days to make puzzles and puzzling an important part of childhood.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO AT HOME

As mentioned in the chapter on questioning, life presents us with an endless supply of anomalies, paradoxes, dilemmas, predicaments and quandaries to perplex, bewilder, astonish and intrigue us. That chapter suggested ways of using those puzzles to sharpen questioning skills and keep a sense of wonder alive. This chapter builds upon the puzzle finding skills mentioned in Chapter One by emphasizing the making of meaning and the development of insight - the conversion of data into information, knowledge and understanding. Once the puzzle is identified, the task of identifying patterns and relationships becomes paramount.

1. Fill the Toy Chest with Puzzles

The proper selection of toys, games and play material has been stressed throughout this book. Seek items which invite active participation and thought from the child as opposed to those mechanized marvels which do all the work, make all of the sounds and put the imagination to sleep.

From the earliest months of your daughter or son's life, make physical puzzles available, whether it be the simple square-peg-in-square-hole workbench or a picture of farm animals which allows the child to fit each animal where it belongs. As the skill level increases, the number of pieces and the complexity of the design may increase until the elementary school aged child is joining you in 1000 piece puzzles that

require half a day or more of family effort.

While these physical puzzles may eventually be augmented by puzzles of other kinds - the paradoxes and quandaries which jump out of young adult fiction, the front page of the newspaper and life itself - it is important to start with concrete references which will serve as a strong foundation for later puzzling of a more figurative nature. Visual references established early in life with physical puzzles will some day assist with the solution of puzzles of metaphorical substance.

Get down on the floor and join in the play. Teach strategies and tactics. Call upon your own childhood tricks. If the toddler is trying to fit the farm animals where they belong, show how to turn the animals upright. Point out key shapes in the outline. Help your child recognize the reciprocal shape. Show the importance of size. "How big is the empty space? Which animal might be that big?" Playful discussion teaches important characteristics (size, color, shape) and relationships (reciprocal, complimentary, mirror images, scaling).

As the puzzles become more complex, so do the relationships which provide clues. An early strategy might be to seek recognizable objects or items in the final picture, each of which might attract its own pile of puzzle pieces associated by common colors, lines and shapes. Instead of trying to match each piece with every other piece, the puzzler can concentrate on the much smaller pile of associated pieces.

You are providing early training in identification of attributes - the elements which define the uniqueness of something. The ability to identify attributes will serve as a foundation for analogical reasoning, a fundamental reasoning skill comprising a major portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test.

When asked to complete the analogy, "SCALPEL is to SURGEON as _____ is to TEACHER," the child begins by asking what attributes the main pair have in common. Highly skilled in searches after years of puzzles, the young adolescent searches for more than one attribute, more than one relationship. Thus, when confronted with the following multiple choices, the puzzler realizes the answer must be a sharp tool of some kind which is used to cut below the surface to explore or repair something.

- A) CHALK
- B) BLACKBOARD
- C) QUESTION
- D) TEXTBOOK

While all four answers are tools a teacher might employ, QUESTION is the only answer with the correctly matching attributes of sharpness and cutting below the surface for exploration.

In a similar fashion, the ability to notice what is missing from a picture represents a major component of some intelligence tests. Puzzling enhances performance on both scales.

As the child grows older and the puzzles become more complex, the emphasis upon strategy should expand and a greater percentage of the puzzles should be games. Checkers is a fine proving ground for puzzlers as the game combines an array of pieces whose positions relative to each other have great strategic importance. The child must learn that each of the pieces may be tied or associated in some significant way to other pieces and that moves must be made with full awareness of those relationships. In addition, he or she learns that it pays to look ahead and test out the likely consequences of various

moves.

In some respects, playing checkers is an early introduction to algebra as it requires children to test out various equations, variables and relationships. While staring at the checker board and considering various moves, the child is posing "What if?" questions, hypothesizing and theorizing about outcomes.

There are dozens of great games which help to teach strategy, games which require your son or daughter to calculate the odds of various events and develop plans to confound an opponent, but there are also dozens of games which rely almost entirely upon chance. Here is a parental opportunity to steer selection in a different direction. If the outcomes rely solely upon the spinning of a pointer or the rolling of some dice, there is much less to be learned. These games are too much like the lives of the alienated citizens mentioned early in this chapter who cannot make their own meaning from life and spend their days cursing their fate or waiting for the lottery to hit.

Scrabble, *Monopoly*, poker, chess, backgammon, and many other games provide an ample diet of puzzling games which sharpen the wits and prepare your child for a chaotic world. The important thing is to involve yourself in playing such games with your child with some frequency so that you can encourage a reflective or strategic mode of thought.

But what if you find yourself always winning? How much fun can it be if your child is always overpowered? Some adults honestly believe they should let their children win upon occasion so they will feel encouraged to keep playing. We would argue on behalf of authentic play with an emphasis upon the fun of wrestling together rather than a focus upon winning or losing. When we wrestled with our parents at the husky age of four or five, how many of us honestly expected to overpower or pin these huge people? We enjoyed the contest, knowing full well that we would lose. As long as the winning and losing is played down, the game becomes the important thing.

Chapter Three - Puzzling (continued)

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Chapter Three - Puzzling (continued)

2. Stringing Necklaces

An understanding of patterns and structure is basic to good puzzling. One especially good foundation for such thinking is the actual stringing of beads on strings in various patterns. Instead of leaving your child to random stringing, introduce a pattern game in which each player creates a string with a repeated pattern of beads in various shapes and colors, allows the other person a minute or so to memorize the pattern and then hides the model while the other player attempts to recreate the pattern. You may begin with very simple patterns and large beads for the very young child, alternating between two colors, for example, but you may proceed with increasingly complex patterns with advancing age and skill, moving up to 16 and 20 item patterns which require recognition of key attributes and considerable memory skill.

As with the attribute skills mentioned earlier in this chapter, the replication of patterns, both numerical and symbolic, are subtests on many intelligence and aptitude tests. The tasks require the ability to analyze complex relationships quickly. Performance can be enhanced through practice and discussion of strategies.

The stringing of necklaces is analogous to the composition process required for the development of music and writing. Musicians and writers learn to string notes or words together in interesting patterns which combine structure and meaning. Editing of either music or writing involves the modification of those "strings" of notes and words, inventing new versions by substituting, combining, adjusting, modifying, eliminating and reversing elements. Long before a child gains fluency and flexibility in either of these complex tasks, a firm underpinning may be laid through the concrete task of moving beads around on a string. "How many different ways can you change the pattern of this necklace without adding any beads?"

Block play holds some of the same promise to strengthen puzzling skills. Frank Lloyd Wright attributes some of his inventive thinking to the time he spent playing with blocks with the thoughtful support and encouragement of his mother during his early years. Purposeful arrangements of blocks require thought about balance, proportion, harmony and juxtaposition. The child learns to test out variations on themes in repeating patterns throughout a structure. The child learns to experiment with alternatives until the puzzle is solved.

The question of how much parent involvement is desirable requires good judgment. The extreme picture of a parent dominating a young toddler's play is an unpleasant stereotype, but one which must be kept firmly in mind. The goal is to add spice to the play, elevating consciousness and introducing levels of thinking and challenge which the child might not discover independently, but the greatest proportion of time should be play without parent involvement. The child explores and applies, extends and elaborates. You can keep the reflection high if you ask for tours of the structures your child builds. One time, pretend to be a fellow builder, another time, a client, and yet another time, a child who wants to play in the structure. As you tour, ask questions, "What were you thinking about when you did this?" or "What is this for?" Ask about the puzzling your child did as he or she constructed the masterpiece.

Stringing necklaces can result in pattern-building, puzzling and invention. Whether the beads are round and wooden, carefully chosen words or moves in a game, you can provide your child with a chance to

struggle with ambiguity, face a challenge and enjoy it through puzzles. You will be preparing them to look for patterns and connections to fit disparate elements together. This life skill will serve them well intellectually as well as interpersonally.

3. Introduce Games of Strategy

Board games such as checkers and chess elevate puzzling and connecting skills several levels by introducing the need for forecasting and strategizing based upon interpretation of the patterns lying on the board. A strong player looks ahead several moves - perhaps as many as a dozen - and tries to see what is coming, tries to anticipate the moves and counter moves of an opponent. This kind of thinking requires careful generation and evaluation of multiple options - a basic foundation for problem-solving.

As with block play, the parent may help the child understand these extra dimensions of play by articulating the strategic process aloud. Let your daughter or son hear your thinking process. Take the time to simulate various combinations of moves. As with the "what if" activities outlined in the chapter on invention, this is an opportunity to show how to anticipate the consequences of various strategies, to assess the relative merits of choices. The physical patterns on the checkerboard have tremendous symbolic significance which the young child must learn to interpret. *What is the significance? What follows?*

The task of interpretation has a strong human element. The pattern of checker pieces is a reflection of the other player's strategy. The child learns to "read" the intentions of the other player by watching the evolving pattern and asking, "What is she/he trying to do here? What's coming next? Is there a trap here some place? What does she/he want me to do?"

The chapter on empathy (in process) substantiates the importance of understanding the motives, the needs and the patterns of other people in this global village. It promises to throw us together with many people from different cultures and backgrounds during the course of our lives and careers. Games of strategy lay the foundation for the kinds of thinking which will support effective relationships and transactions with partners, opponents and strangers. The child learns early that success in the game of life often depends upon understanding of other people - their tendencies, habits, preferences and inclinations.

As the child grows older and more skilled, it is possible to move on to increasingly complex and demanding board games such as chess or to card games such as bridge or poker which add new dimensions to the challenge of developing strategies. In poker the young adolescent learns that things are not necessarily what they seem to be as players indulge in bluffing or sit passively with poker faces even as they hold winning hands. Poker teaches risk management as one figures the odds of drawing certain cards and the costs of remaining in the game. "You've got to know when to hold them and know when to fold them," is advice to cover countless adult quandaries far from the card table. "Don't throw good money after bad," applies as well to the business person worrying about a poor investment as it does to a poker player who sits with poor cards.

In contrast to these human intensive games, many computer games offer children strategic practice which is solitary. While requiring astute reasoning, the child cannot see or meet an opponent. The computer mind is opaque. These games provide little practice in the skill of "sizing up" another player. One cannot learn to read the anxious body language of a personal computer. Computers are remarkably passive and unemotional even during the most trying circumstances.

The game playing mentioned in this section is only a small sampling of the many opportunities which

can develop strategic reasoning. Field hockey, basketball and soccer all offer similar opportunities to interpret patterns and size up opponents. They also introduce the extra dimensions of team work and communication which are discussed in considerable depth in the chapter on cooperation. How does one develop strategies in a group under such enormous time pressure when one cannot even discuss them with teammates? What is the importance of "plays" memorized and practiced ahead of the game? How does a team decide which plays to use when and with what modifications?

The goal of all these game activities is to help your son or daughter develop a "systems approach" to strategy making, moving from the interpretation of data through the evaluation and implementation of plans. This approach requires an understanding of the many different variables involved in a particular situation and how they are related. Success depends upon the ability to see the "big picture," how all the parts work together in a system. As a systems analyst and developer, your child will be equipped to invent new approaches to meet the unidentified challenges of the future.

4. Emphasize Observation, Recording and Interpretation

Many people move through life without really noticing the colors, patterns and events swirling about them. Ask a group of kindergarten children the color of the sky and they will invariably say "blue" until asked repeatedly. Suddenly one child will pipe up with "orange stripes" or "grey." We are so often accustomed to living without observing carefully. As the chapter on visualizing points out, the ability to analyze visual data is critically important during the Information Age since more than half of what we learn probably comes to us visually.

Parents can fine tune their children's observation skills by setting a good example on car trips and during walks. The process may begin with casual references like "*Look at that mountain!*" or "*Look at that ant caught on the leaf floating in that puddle,*" but the habit can lead to increasingly complex observations as the children develop, "What do you suppose caused that mesa to develop there?" or "What clues can you find that will help us figure out how to get on Highway 64?" As with all of the puzzling mentioned in this chapter, the goal is to take the fragments of data or the details and convert them into something more meaningful, to change them into information and insight. The parent can urge the child to look for patterns and relationships by using good questions.

"Why do you suppose that big puddle has formed here?"

"What's going on here?"

"What do you think about that?"

"Notice anything unusual here?"

As the child grows skillful, the parent can introduce long range collection and recording of data, eventually encouraging written and systematic observations and drawings in a journal or notebook. Reading from abridged versions of naturalists' journals might provide a good model of ways to describe the changing of a pond or a forest through the seasons. The child can learn to measure and record depths, sizes and colors. Samples of stream water may be collected from different points and then taken home for analysis.

"What's in it?"

"Why is there more fecal material in the stream at Point C than at Point A or Point B?"

"How has the fecal content changed since last summer?"

"Would you drink this water or swim in this stream?"

The child quickly learns once again that not everything is what it seems to be, just as she/he learned in poker. Some puzzle pieces wear disguises. Sometimes there is important information just below the surface requiring the observer to probe with special tools or instruments. The child also learns the power of collecting data over time. What seems to the naked eye to be a simple little stream running through a suburban subdivision and a farm becomes something far more complex as the magic of chemistry and microscopy transform the data into a different picture. The casual observer may miss important information which may ultimately prove life-threatening or life-protecting.

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Chapter Three - Puzzling (continued)

5. Model the Crow's Nest Perspective

Captains sent observers to the crow's nest, a perch high up on the mast, because the added height provided an unusual perspective from which to view the water, the land and the challenges ahead. They recognized that what we see when we are close to the surface may be distorted. From the crow's nest one can see over the curvature of the earth's surface to identify objects such as islands that might otherwise escape notice. One can also see below the surface to greater depths than from the deck of the ship, reducing the chances of running aground. The crow's nest affords the observer an excellent "vantage point" from which to interpret data and create a reasonably clear picture of the future.

Many children and young people are never shown how to climb the mast to the crow's nest. They spend their lives on the surface being surprised by life's storms and shoals. They come to feel that their destinies are predetermined and outside their own personal control. They ascribe power to institutions, leaders ("they") and magical forces. They leave the steering, the navigating and the planning to others.

On the other hand, many young people do learn to climb the mast, and the evidence is fairly clear that they most often learn this skill and spirit from a parent or mentor who shares the perspective and shows them how to climb.

You can teach your child the attitude of adventure and the skills of perspective-taking used by crow's nest climbers. To climb the mast for that 360 degree view, a person has to keep her/his eyes on the goal. Climbers do not look where they have been, but where they are going. They keep focused on the goal. Such singlemindedness and concentration is often the deciding difference between competitors, whether it be on the tennis court or in the boardroom. In life, when the puzzle pieces do not seem to be fitting together, the climb for a crow's nest perspective makes saying "no" to distractions worthwhile.

To teach your child to focus on a goal, allow uninterrupted play time. When your child is working or playing, avoid interrupting her or him. Compliment sustained attention on projects, or intensive reading that blocks out distractions. Encourage your child to do activities of increasing length, so she or he may taste the experience of time flying by. This level of concentration can translate into being "lost in the work" later on in life.

This crow's nest metaphor may make you nervous if you have a fear of heights. Puzzling requires facing the unknown and dealing with the lack of knowledge about what will happen. If you teach your child to look forward to the unknown as an opportunity for something new, a fear of the unknown may not develop. Being "out on a limb" can be exhilarating as well as scary, depending on how you look at it.

To teach your child to look forward to the unknown, have lots of pleasant surprises in his or her life. This will develop confidence that the unknown can be very positive. Make, "What a nice surprise!" part of your own attitude toward the unexpected. Make holidays and birthdays a time for surprises, as well as everyday events like shopping or even meal preparation. Prepare or buy unusual foods, "just to see what they are like." Encourage your child to try new foods, new routes to school, new friends and new ways of doing things every day.

Because the crow's nest perspective is so exhilarating, you will also need to teach your child to integrate it with the perspective from the deck. Puzzlers often envision solutions for which the pieces have not yet been invented. As they return to the ground, they have to reshape their vision to fit reality. They need to take the knowledge and insight they have gained from their trip to the crow's nest, to make a more limited vision work.

To teach your child to integrate vision and reality, always build sand castles in your mind, before committing them to bucket and shovel. Engage your child in thinking about "all the ways we could do this," and then choosing one that will work. Be careful not to make the solution seem less than desirable because it is not the most elaborate or ultimate plan, but celebrate it as a solution incorporating parts of the vision. Both the crow's nest and the deck perspective are needed to steer the ship.

The strategies in this chapter provide good practice in the skills required to view life from the crow's nest, but the power of example emphasized throughout this book must be repeated once again. In order for your son or daughter to embrace this perspective as a lifetime commitment, you must share the spirit as well as the skills. You must demonstrate your own commitment by sharing how the crow's nest has helped you with events in your own life. Tell stories, give examples and identify the process as it is happening. Bring your child into the crow's nest with you and point out the shoals or new worlds visible ahead. Show her or him how you change course when you see the squall coming. Point out the bright stars which guide you through life.

Conclusion

When thousands of puzzle fragments threaten to turn life upside down and topsy turvy, when Chicken Little runs around screaming that the sky is falling, and when yesterday's truths become tomorrow's lies, your child will need good puzzling skills to make sense out of all the non-sense. Magic or sleight of hand will not be sufficient for them to move ahead.

The Information Age greets us with what amounts to a flood of data, rushing in upon us before we have time to grab a life preserver or even think about building an ark. Because the meanings passed down to us by prior generations may not "float" in this new world, our children will need to develop their own insight, fashion their own meanings and find their own truths. Like Ishmael floating with Queequeg's coffin after Ahab and the ship have been destroyed by Moby Dick, our children may grab hold of some useful objects which rise to the surface, but they can rest assured that self reliance is mandatory for getting to shore.

Because smokestack education persists in emphasizing memorization and departmentalization of information in most places, the family's role in teaching puzzling and connecting is primary. As emergent technologies undermine much of the human communication and the social fabric which once tied families and communities together, the urgency of making good connections is at a peak. While the climb up the mast to the crow's nest may leave one somewhat queasy, the view is worth the trip for you and your child.

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Chapter Four - Choosing

"Make up your mind!"

People have been using that phrase for generations now.

"Will you please make up your mind?"

What does this sentence really mean?

Sometimes an edge of impatience creeps into the phrase as one person waits for the other to make a decision, to select something, to choose between several options. Sometimes the person making the decision jumps blindly, rushing headlong into a choice without careful review and consideration. At other times, people make no active, conscious choice at all but slide instead into whatever Fate brings, drifting along with the river or casting their Fates to the winds. Another way of handling decisions is to rely upon tradition and custom to inform one of the proper path. Still another is to flip a coin or toss the dice. Many people simply rely upon their group . . . "the blind leading the blind."

During the decades of rapid change which lie before us, "smart" choices will be based upon thoughtful, deliberate decision-making . . . "making up one's mind" . . . which will require analysis and research as well as the skillful application of intuition, instinct and insight. The well-informed hunch will become a prominent tool. In addition, all important decisions had best be grounded in personal values, preferences and beliefs so that one's actions will stand centered in harmony with one's core being. When the winds of change and the roar of rapids encircle future citizens, those who have learned to choose upon such a personal foundation will find the heart and the courage to persevere, while those who rely upon blind leaps of faith, the tossing of coins, the blind leading the blind or archaic traditions will lose their way, swept off their feet by turbulent conditions and surprises.

Why is choosing so important for your child?

In this society of ours, children can count on a bombardment of advertising "to be continued" from cradle to grave. Saturday mornings and weekday afternoons are renowned for a barrage of commercials aimed at children. And now it is even difficult to escape the onslaught in schools where students may begin their days with Channel One's morning news programs and commercials. Following homeroom TV, they may walk to classes past billboards promoting deodorants, mouth sprays and hair sprays.

The messages are usually emotional rather than rational.

"Buy our deodorant so you won't be embarrassed."

"Buy our mouth spray so you won't lose your friends."

"Buy our hair spray so you won't be alone Saturday night."

"Buy *Brand X* because that's what cool people buy."

Often the messages are imbedded in subliminal content - non-verbal messages which creep inside the child and seek out core feelings like a computer virus worming its way into the operating system of a computer. Barring parental intervention, these commercial messages threaten to undermine the basis for your child's decision-making systems before they are ever established. They attempt to program your child to equate well-being with the possession of certain products. Self worth is defined by what kind of car one drives, what kind of house one occupies and what kind of beer one drinks. According to Engelhardt (1991), even the best selling children's literature seems to have joined in the chorus promoting this high consumption life-style.

Years of advertising teach the child:

"Say Yes to our deodorant."

"Say Yes to our mouth spray."

"Say Yes to our beer."

"Say Yes to our sleeping pills."

And then well meaning folks try to turn it all around with a much weaker, poorly financed campaign to teach the adolescent to "Say NO to drugs."

Unfortunately, with the advent of the Information Age and multimedia's powerful tools, the bombardment is likely to grow more intense, more subtle, more persuasive and more pervasive during the next decade as computers and marketing experts have combined forces to develop potent campaigns designed to persuade us to choose products and candidates without regard to quality, value or track record. These campaigns rely increasingly upon appeals to fears, base emotions and anxieties rather than reason.

Choosing skills can equip your child to resist such emotional appeals and propaganda. They equip her or him to make decisions which are healthy. Choosing skills provide your child with "virus protection" They form the basis for an adult life which provides satisfaction through deeds and natural highs rather than a closet full of the right clothes and the right sneakers.

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WHAT PARENTS CAN DO AT HOME

1. Give your child more than a single choice

Virus protection begins early in life as a child learns that actions are really choices among several options. While it may not seem that way to a one-year-old, grabbing a treasured toy away from another toddler is not the only way to handle a conflict. Nor is throwing a spoon on the floor the only way to signal the end of a meal. The toddler engages in hundreds of experiments to find out how things should be done, testing a variety of behaviors to see what they produce, learning along the way that some choices work better than others.

The primary selection process employed by most children (and many adults) is impulse buying. Driven by strong appetites and emotions, the child is drawn to the flashiest, most attractive option. Instead of making a rational, careful selection from among several possibilities, there is a blind leap of enthusiasm as the picture on the box grabs hold of the senses or the electrical outlet acts like a magnet attracting the exploring child.

Caring and attentive parents shelter their children to some extent from this impulsiveness by teaching rules or boundary lines which curtail the exploration and limit danger. Early in life the child learns from parents that certain objects of desire like electrical

parents that certain objects of desire like electrical outlets and stove tops are, in fact, "no-nos." They learn that certain places like Farmer MacGregor's garden are off limits. Another form of sheltering is "child-proofing" a room or house so that it contains no dangerous or fragile items.

All of these parental strategies are wise and healthy as long as there are areas in which the child can still make choices. Much behavior should be conducted on a semi-automatic basis as a child learns to do what is right in a given situation without paying it much thought. This is especially true when it comes to matters of safety. Touching the stove is an unnecessary and highly undesirable childhood experience.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to raise a child thinking that we can pass through life with our minds "already made up." We must all learn when it is appropriate to set our auto-pilot and when it is dangerous. Because there are many decisions which should be made upon the basis of careful analysis, our children deserve practice with situations offering more than a single choice.

As with inventiveness, choosing skills cannot easily thrive in a play-pen. The parent must offer situations which combine safety with choice. Fortunately, the world offers far more choices than may readily meet the eye.

Watch parents and children enjoying a playground or a wide expanse of lawn. Who is making the

choices and the decisions about what to do next? In some cases the parent sits back at a distance while the child runs from slide to see-saw to sand box, deciding what they want to do and how long they wish to concentrate on one task or another. In other cases, the parent hovers nearby, takes the child by the hand and seems to manage the progression of events.

Much of the apparently random and impulsive decision-making displayed by children on the playground is a precursor for the later development of thoughtful decision-making. Underlying the behavior is a basically unconscious trial-and-error process which involves the child in doing something which catches her or his fancy until something else seems more attractive and worthwhile. It may seem as if the child is flitting from one activity to the next without ever settling down with any one thing. Under these circumstances, the parent may wonder when the child will learn concentration on task.

The child is simply testing out preferences, browsing if you will, playing "what if" games with the playground, tasting a bit of one experience before moving on to the next. In a similar fashion, when the child builds towers out of blocks, there may a great deal of testing going on. What happens when you place a block this way? and this way? How long before it all comes toppling down?

This kind of exploration leads to the discovery of basic principles of balance, proportion and harmony without any real adult assistance or interference. It is

sometimes called "the school of natural consequences." The child uncovers rules through trial-and-error. The "what if" questions lead to relatively consistent answers which stick in the child's mind at some unconscious level where they may guide future actions.

The gift of parent to child is the freedom and the opportunity to explore choices through experience. If your child must spend time in a play-pen, fill it with toys or objects which truly support exploration, choice and experimentation. At other times, make certain that his or her life is filled with wonderful playgrounds, meadows, seashores and gardens, places which offer delightful and fascinating choices. As you wander down the beach together, step aside and let the young one decide which shell to notice, which rock to collect, which hornpiper to watch. Take turns sharing a sense of wonder.

Limit the amount of time allowed with television programs which place your child in a passive role. Even though the camera may take your child to the beach or a jungle, the camera person, the director and the narrator make all of the choices about what to notice. There is no browsing or selection allowed.

The transition from impulsive exploration to careful analysis is well served by an early childhood unhampered by too much abstract reasoning and adult interference. This free play is a foundation for wise decision-making later in life as the child discovers how the world works in a basically intuitive fashion. Viewing the world in essentially

concrete terms, the child determines relationships and laws of that universe by building towers, digging tunnels and testing out slides. These relationships and laws find their way into the child's mind with few if any words attached to them. They are unspoken understandings which play an essential role in helping the growing child to make up his or her mind. In many respects this early way of making sense of the world is associated with what adults commonly label "common sense."

Piaget's work with developing children suggests a parental strategy to help young children begin thinking about how they make decisions. Ask them "why?"

"Why did you go that way?"

"Why did you make that choice?"

By explaining their thoughts after-the-fact, children learn to back into decision-making on a conscious level. The act of attaching reasons shifts their level of awareness.

As the child matures and adds increasingly abstract reasoning and verbal agility to the toolkit with which decisions can be made, these early years will prove extremely valuable. The ultimate goal is to produce a young adult capable of making wise decisions which reflect common sense as well as careful reflection.

2. Develop the skill of compare-and-contrast

Just as free play and exploration is a foundation for later decision-making, so is the skill of comparing and contrasting. How are these two rocks the same? How are they different? How are these two breakfast cereals the same? How are they different? How are the two characters in the story the same or different?

The opportunities to practice and develop this skill abound. At the earliest age the parent may begin with concrete objects and keep the comparisons simple, making it into a game. At any age the goal is to figure out the attributes of each object and then see how they match up. What is the color? the size? the shape? the texture? the weight?

Which is brighter? duller? smoother? rougher? more intricate? more simple?

Pairs or groups of objects provide excellent practice for the skill of compare-and-contrast, but the child can graduate to more abstract comparisons.

Which story had the saddest ending? Which character would make a better friend? Which song had the most interesting lyrics? the strongest rhythm?

The purpose of this kind of thinking is to develop a critical thinking foundation for making wise and thoughtful choices. Buying a car or some other product should set in motion this kind of comparing and contrasting, as the shopper assesses the qualities

of each product - the price, the repair record, the gas efficiency, the road handling, etc. - in order to identify the one which most closely fits her or his preferences and needs.

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3. Shop around

How do we make up our minds about which cereal to buy? which automobile? which life insurance policy? which political candidate?

Take advantage of your shopping trips to help your child learn to make careful consumer choices based upon the common sense and compare-and-contrast skills mentioned above. You may also introduce values-based buying in contrast to the wants-based, impulse buying promoted by Madison Avenue. Rather than sweeping through the store pulling items from the shelves in what appears to be automatic or impulsive behavior, explain how your decisions have been made over time and actually lead your child through the comparison process a number of times. Demonstrate how you consider price, quality and previous experience in making your choices.

The cereal section of the grocery store provides a good practice area. Because this section is the subject of so much television advertising, if your child has absorbed much of that advertising, chances are good that some of those powerful messages will surface in this aisle. Even the placement of boxes increases the likelihood that the child will pressure parent to buy certain heavily sugared brands.

It is the parent's job to introduce the importance of

values in making consumer decisions, values which may sometimes run counter to the needs and wants which are created by Madison Avenue's messages. Good health should be a priority as you and your child select cereals, and that value should be made explicit.

Express the value openly so the child understands your reasons for avoiding some boxes and selecting others. Point out the high sugar content on the box label. While your child may not agree with the outcome of your decision, it is essential that the decision not appear arbitrary or unreasonable. That is why your thinking must surface and your values must become evident. While advertising is hoping your child will pressure you into wants-based, impulse buying, you will model thoughtful, values-based buying.

Because the sugar cereals are promoted with heavily emotional arguments, it helps to express your good health values in terms which can compete with some dramatic impact. Parents can focus upon the consequences of diets which are overloaded with sugar - the impact upon teeth, the hyperactivity, the excess weight - recognizing that in our society various forms of substance abuse begin very early in a child's life, long before illegal drugs surface and tempt the adolescent. High on the list are sugar, fat and caffeine.

Early on Madison Avenue pushes unhealthy products upon young children with an emphasis

upon good feelings and good taste in the present. Consequences are ignored and hidden. The message is a simple, "Do it - if it feels good."

Instant gratification is glorified and young children are trained to maintain energy highs throughout the day with a series of sugar products starting with breakfast cereal and moving on through candy, sugared soda water and heavily sugared desserts. Before very long the child adds caffeine to the list of artificial stimulants which keep them revving through the day, as well as items that are heavily loaded in fat. It is a rare child who emerges from school without some degree of addiction to sugar as well as an excessively fatty diet, but you can create a different fate for your family.

Once you and your child have identified cereals which are basically unhealthy, focus decision-making and choice among the remaining, healthy boxes. Demonstrate how preferences and wants may come into play within this narrower group. Encourage your child to select a box from within the acceptable group and then ask why they picked it. Encourage application of compare-and-contrast skills.

"Why do you like it better than Cereal X?"

Instead of vague statements such as "I just like it better," you try to promote more specificity.

"Is it the taste? Did the last box get soggy too fast?"

When your child begins to pick out boxes which include nuts and dried fruits, demonstrate how easily the same effect can be produced for far less money by buying the nuts and fruits separately. If convenience is part of what a product offers, be it microwave dinners or cereals, make certain that the additional price is worth it, both in dollars paid and in quality delivered.

As your child grows older and acquires the necessary math skills, you may start teaching about deceptive packaging, labeling and pricing practices. Engage her or him in selecting the best buy when picking out a box of pasta. As the level of skill increases, give your child a short list and send her or him out into the aisles to make selections based upon the decision-making model you have developed together. Independent practice early in life helps set the stage for responsible behavior later in life. If you can turn values-based buying and healthy decision-making into a childhood habit, you will have helped your child climb to the crow's nest mentioned in the chapter on puzzling. He or she will rise above the surface level of decisions to view choices with perspective and good judgment.

Raising her young fawn in wilderness, the mother doe devotes considerable attention to survival skills, showing the young one how to avoid the many predators which would love to make a meal of her wobbly legged offspring. Fortunately, we can arm our own offspring with critical thinking skills which

will protect them from mass marketing and high powered sales pitches. "Peter and the Wolf" makes an excellent story to share with your child as a metaphor to express the temptations and the dangers which await the modern consumer.

4. Use role-playing to test consequences

Think before you act!

Look before you leap!

How often we hear this advice during our lives. Role-playing is a kind of thinking before acting. It allows us to test the consequences which are likely to follow from the choices which lie before us. Play-acting thereby helps our children to explore without pain or suffering what might happen if they make certain choices.

If a child breaks a neighbor's window while playing baseball and wonders how to handle the situation, he or she might simply follow rules of good behavior or he or she might turn to role-playing to see how it might feel to pretend ignorance or make some other choice. In this kind of role-playing it is important to play more than one's own role. Imagine the neighbor arriving home to find a broken window with no explanation. What will the neighbor do? How will the neighbor try to find out who did it? What will be the consequences of leaving the scene of the accident?

Children are taught many rules and principles as they are growing up which are meant to govern their decisions when they encounter difficult moments. Most children, however, will question at least some of these rules upon occasion and will challenge the wisdom of some. Role-playing provides them with a tool to explore the implications of their own choices, to discover their own rules of behavior, many of which will mirror the rules and principles they have been taught. The important thing is to encourage some kind of thoughtful decision-making rather than action by default or impulse. When adolescents begin to challenge the adult rules and beliefs they have been taught throughout childhood, it is important that they have an alternative system for steering and deciding.

5. Bring your child into the voting booth

How do we make up our minds about the candidates and referenda which confront us in these turbulent and often confusing times?

How do you raise your child to be a thoughtful citizen, one who participates in the political process with eyes open and a belief that a single citizen can make a difference? Once again we turn to the power of the parent as model. To the extent that you shoulder your citizenship opportunities with conviction and commitment, your child is likely to follow in your footsteps, making political decisions with much the same style, commitment and consideration as you demonstrate.

Why does citizenship appear in a book on preparing children for the next century? Because our democratic system is in considerable danger. Even though we count that system one of our distinct blessings and even though our voting decisions are among our most important, many Americans have let their citizenship lapse. They have stayed away from the voting booths and polling places in droves. In many elections, winning candidates are selected by fewer than 25 per cent of those eligible to vote.

The younger the citizen, the less likely they are to bother with voting. When asked the cause for this absenteeism, many respond that they see little difference between the candidates, or they complain that politicians end up doing the opposite of what they promise. Cynicism and scepticism run strong in these times of Madison Avenue's heavy involvement in marketing candidates. We find widespread popular disgust with campaign tactics that stress negatives, and yet the evidence is strong that such appeals are effective in swaying public opinion and voting behavior. Campaigns persist in using such approaches because they are rewarded by those who do vote.

To make matters even more serious, participation falls off dramatically when it comes to local elections, school elections or political actions other than voting. Very few people attend meetings or public hearings, leaving policy-making and influence to highly organized pressure groups,

lobbyists and special interests.

If the disenchantment with the political system progresses, many of the social niceties which we take for granted - such as freedom of speech and religion - may be lost. History provides us with many instances of what happens when an alienated citizenry is mobilized by a demagogue. Hitler came to power in Weimar Germany, for example, by converting unregistered voters into a powerful and ultimately victorious political force which turned around and dismantled the democratic machinery which had brought them to power. Authoritarian regimes seem to thrive in countries where democratic behaviors have fallen into disrepair.

Active involvement in the political affairs of your community and state will go a long way toward developing feelings of competence and efficacy in your daughter or son. Bring your children along when you go into the voting booth. Show them how you pull the lever. Explain how you made up your mind. Better still, share your thinking aloud long before Election Day as you are seeking to make up your mind about the candidates. If you sometimes vote by party label because you don't know much about the individuals, explain how you came to believe in that political party. What are the ideas that party holds dear? When, if ever, do you break with that party and cross lines to vote for a candidate from another party? How do you make up your mind to do that?

Take your child along to public meetings, exercising some discretion as to the age of your child and the type of meeting. Give your child a taste of the wide range of political activities which take place on a daily basis in between the big elections. How are statutes dealing with pollution of streams and ponds developed and passed on a local level? How is the school budget decided? If someone doesn't approve of those decisions, how might they influence or modify the decision?

A word of caution is in order. Because real political decision-making often follows serpentine paths and because elected officials often attempt to limit their responsibility for unpleasant events, the young child might quickly become disillusioned if expecting quick and sensible results. Because politics is necessarily the business of compromise, we must find ways to show our children a thread of progress running through what might often appear to be the theater of the absurd. To see this thread, one might need to climb with the child to the crow's nest mentioned earlier in this book to gain the long view, to win the perspective to see how the pieces of this particular puzzle fit together to make a sensible picture. A school budget defeat may seem to be a disaster as it is happening, but it might just mobilize enough previously passive and uninvolved citizens to establish the basis for a decade of forward movement and progress.

In learning to make up her or his political mind, the young citizen struggles with gray issues rather than

clarity, often voting for "the lesser of two evils" rather than any pure choices, selecting a referendum outcome which is better than nothing but far from one's dream. Citizenship often requires a tolerance for ambiguity and outcomes which fall far short of ideals. Making up one's political mind may require some bending and twisting of the puzzle pieces. Perhaps that is why so many citizens stay home and avoid the polls. When theirs is but a single hand pulling on the great civic rope, it is difficult to see their own impact upon the much larger tug-of-war.

Perhaps the best armor against disillusionment is fore-warning. Parents who raise children with fanciful notions of how politics work are likely to see their children respond to reality latter in life with bitterness, cynicism and apathy. Children raised on the pieties of the 1950s often turned off and tuned out when facing the difficult decades of the 1960s and 1970s.

Sustained political involvement requires the perspective of the old man in *Zorba the Greek* who persists in planting saplings which stand little chance of becoming large trees during his lifetime. When asked to explain such seemingly foolish behavior, he explains that he chooses to live his life with the passion of one who might die tomorrow yet with the planning of one who might live forever. We plant seeds in soil which might sometimes seem unfriendly and infertile, ever hopeful that some of those seeds will sprout and flourish. We learn patience and perseverance rather than expecting

immediate gratification.

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Parenting for an Age of Information

Chapter Four - Choosing

6. Develop a family decision-making council

How does your family make up its mind about basic issues like where to go on vacation? what time to set for curfew?

Family decisions provide an excellent training ground for thoughtful group decision-making. You and your children can pose the issue, generate a menu of choices and then apply careful research to compare, contrast and ultimately choose one. By sharing the discussion and review, you increase the likelihood that the group will build consensus around the final decision.

Begin by clarifying the group's goal. In the case of a family vacation, the written goal statement might emerge as something as simple as,

"We want to spend a week together in an interesting place with lots of activities to choose from as well as the chance to settle in and get some rest."

A clear goal statement should be followed by an attempt to agree upon basic selection criteria, recognizing that some of these issues must wait until the end of the decision-making process.

Try simple pairs like these . . .

"Should it be a hot place or an cold place?"

"Should it be a city or out in the country?"

"Do we want to camp or stay in a hotel of some kind?"

If everybody agrees without argument on some of these basic questions, the selection process is simplified. The original goal statement is modified to include the answers.

"We want to spend a week together in a ski resort with lots of activities - a resort which is close enough so that we can save money by driving."

The family can then narrow the search to perhaps a half dozen resorts.

Edward DeBono suggests an excellent system to review such alternatives or options. He calls it **PMI**. You make one list with three columns for each option under review. The first column is the **PLUS** column (**P**), and here you list all of the benefits and advantages you can identify that belong with that option. As a family you follow the rules of brainstorming now, listing all ideas without comment or criticism at this stage so that many ideas will surface. Disagreements over the items can be entertained later.

The second column is the **MINUS** column (**M**) where you will list all of the problems, concerns and

disadvantages you can attach to that option. Again you allow all responses without comment. The goal is to remove inhibitions and get the contributions flowing freely. Comments may cut off the flow and restrict contributions to obvious and safe issues. The more controversial and unusual the ideas, the better your chances of picking up on something critical but submerged.

The third column is the INTERESTING column (**I**) where you will list all of your questions, the unknowns that require further research, the issues which are unclear and need more study. This column will help your group expand its study beyond its present knowledge base, avoiding the trap of deciding something out of ignorance. This is your chance to avoid the blind leading the blind.

Remember that this process of filling out **PMI** sheets is a beginning stage of deciding. After conducting further research, which may be split up among family members, all must put their heads together again to review what has been learned and begin weeding out options which are clearly unattractive.

The hard part may come when you are narrowing down the list to a few prime prospects and you find strong conflict over one or two criteria which relate to basic values differences. As children turn into adolescents this phenomenon becomes ever more likely. Because different people are operating with different preferences, it is nearly impossible to find a location or a solution which makes everyone

completely happy.

Teach your child "tie-breakers" - conflict resolution strategies to end deadlocks. One way to resolve such conflicts is to try "enlarging the pie." Instead of fighting over the existing list double your efforts to find a location which meets all needs. Another way is to "split the difference." If you differ over two criteria, let each side win on one of their two key issues. Yet a third way is to "take turns." One side gives in on this trip with the promise that their criterion will be given preference the next time. Flipping a coin may be a last resort.

Some parents shudder at the thought of such group decision-making, holding with the philosophy that the parents make the rules and the decisions, especially about issues such as vacations and rules for behavior.

Especially as children become young adults, they may view such an approach as an arbitrary use of power, and it may well drive a wedge between parent and child. These adolescents will complain that they "can't talk to" their parents, that their parents "don't listen." They may flirt with "marginal compliance," keeping up good behavior on the surface while experimenting with boundary lines in secret.

Given an opportunity to participate in family conferences and decision-making, many young people will help formulate reasonable standards of

behavior by which they are willing to abide because they feel a degree of ownership. As long as they are taught how to review the implications of choices early in life, they are more likely to make reasonable decisions about the issues, the temptations and the challenges which will face them as young adults.

Conclusion

If we can teach our children to make up their minds thoughtfully, we have shared a wonderful gift. The highways and byways are littered with the wreckage of those who have taken the easy path, followed the blind or relied upon automatic steering and traditions. Changing times require people who, like Robert Frost in "Two Paths Diverged in a Yellow Wood," take the time to see more than a single path or choice. Our society needs humans with the capacity to weigh alternatives with care, applying the skills of compare and contrast to a complex menu of opportunities and challenges. We will need consumers who shop around rather than buying by impulse, making selections of appliances, automobiles, spouses and presidential candidates with values-based thinking, looking before they leap and testing out the consequences of their decisions before they are set in concrete. A family that nurtures the growth of decision-making as a joint enterprise will find they have made a wise choice for the future.

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by Jamieson McKenzie, Ed.D. in 1997
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