

There's a growing concern in this community about the welfare of our children. I am hearing it in the remarks of other columnists in this newspaper. I hear it from teachers and friends, clients and participants in workshops I conduct.

I'm not talking only about what we might typically think of as "at risk" children, either. What I'm picking up on is concern for children who come from less overtly risky environments, yet they are clearly being affected by their environments in ways that concern us all. Children pay for what they can't control in the world around them.

Children have no power over adults. Think about their vulnerability. They are wholly dependent on the authority figures in their lives for food, clothing, shelter, medical treatment and education. And that's just the visible needs children have.

Also critical for the long-term well-being of our children is their emotional providence. We adults are responsible for what we warm children up to becoming as they move toward adulthood. Ideally we'd be warming our children up to knowing themselves quite well and to knowing others, to having the courage to feel deeply as well as the capacity to think clearly, to trusting their judgment and being fairly resilient when they make missteps, to feeling adequate as human beings, and to managing their anxiety and being able to come up with new workable options when plans fall through, as they will at some point. That's an inevitable aspect of being human.

I am deeply concerned about what many of our children are being warmed-up to, however, not out of any kind of overt abuse on the part of parents and other authority figures, but because we adults frequently missed out ourselves on that emotional providence we needed. Without that, it's hard to be fully emotionally present for the children we've been given responsibility for. Adults can't give what they don't have.

A booming business exists in books about how to raise children and especially how to "fix" problem children. And there are several parenting programs out there in the world of family support and psycho-educational training. Over the years in the assortment of jobs I've had, I've been trained in several of them, in fact. I've seen a bit worthwhile in most of them. But something has also been unsettling.

For me, the troubling piece has always been the cookie-cutter approach: the one-two-three lists of steps to take to change a child's behavior. Books and written programs lend themselves best to these kinds of approaches. Children aren't like cookies, though, and to put them in a box and to try to make them all vanilla cream is to deny the wonderful individuality and spirit of each child.

Each child needs to be known as a unique human being, constantly changing.

As my interest has grown in expressive therapies and in putting concerns into action rather than sitting and talking for a fifty-minute therapy session, I've developed the concept I think of as "Compassionate Parenting." That's my own terminology for meeting each child where he or she is and recognizing that even within the same family system, each parent/child relationship is unique.

By the way, this expands to other adult/child relationships, such as teacher/student, grandparent/grandchild, coach/player, etc. Every adult/child relationship places considerable responsibility on the adult, because of the control and influence that adults wield. Sadly, we adults may not be mindful of our own power in the life of a child.

In this age of rude, disrespectful behavior proliferated on reality TV and talk shows, violence and gore commonplace in movies and video games, and music lyrics that degrade whole groups of people, children desperately need adults who can enter into their world and understand what messages this gives the child.

Children need adults who can understand and take responsibility for the messages they are receiving at home, too, when words and actions from parents don't match up, or when parents aren't comfortable with their own emotions and retreat into silence, over-control, addictions, or depression.

Fortunately, there are some creative and effective techniques that can help us as adults move out of the realm of words and into the realm of expression, wonderful ways of knowing our children as the individuals they are, so that we don't have to resort to cookie-cutter relationships. Can you imagine the difference it will make in the lives of our children when we can step into their small shoes and see us as they see us? When we can feel from the heart of the child the deep desire simply to be known, not left alone or shamed, but protected and respected? Nothing other than what we each long for.

The capacity to reverse roles is only learned by experiencing it with competent assistance. It's a powerful technique and it can't be learned by reading a book. It will cost us money, time, and effort to learn how to reverse roles with the children for whom we are responsible.

It might cost us missing some golf games or hunting trips, giving up manicures and going to the movies, or skipping eating out. It might cost us a couple hours out of our weeks and it might mean looking at some things about ourselves we'd rather not see.

But what will it cost our children if we don't?