

About Deborah Hage:

Drawing on 50 years of experience, both as a parent of 14 foster and adopted children and as a reactive attachment disorder therapist, working with emotionally and behaviorally impacted children (resulting from early childhood abuse and neglect), Deborah specializes in coaching parents help their children adjust and heal from past traumas, overcome their fears, and effectively integrate into their new families and environments. As a lecturer, author, therapist and coach, Deborah has helped thousands of families overcome the impacts of past neglect, abuse and other traumas; providing the support and tools they need to create for themselves a happier and more connected life.

The ideas and interventions presented here have not been developed solely by Deborah. She has worked with numerous other therapists and parents over the years, notably Nancy Thomas, whose continued partnership and collaboration she appreciates.

To learn more about Deborah, her practice and her family, please visit deborahhage.com

Parenting - Developing the Capacity to Mean Business without Being Mean
by Deborah Hage, MSW

Scott Peck opens his book The Road Less Traveled with, “Life is difficult.” No truer words have been spoken when it comes to parenting. Parenting is difficult. Adoptive parenting, foster parenting, parenting in general, is difficult. It is difficult for the wealthy and difficult for the poor. It is difficult for those with healthy children and those whose children are behaviorally, physically and/or emotionally outside the norm. The acceptance of that fact is foundational to approaching the task in a way that is healthy for both parents and children. It is the precursor to accepting that no one gets to choose what happens to them, we only get to choose how we will respond. When we accept that parenting is difficult then we can set aside the unrealistic expectation that the path will be easy. We can set aside the expectation that our children will be the way we envision or behave the way we desire. It is when our children don’t meet our expectations or the parenting experience is not what we had hoped for that parents can become angry or upset. We are unhappy because our expectations have not been met. The most direct approach to becoming happy is, therefore, to set aside our expectations and accept what IS, not what we hoped for or believe we are entitled to. In other words, happiness or unhappiness is all in our heads. We can’t choose how our children behave, but we can choose how we will respond to that behavior. We can’t choose happiness for them, but we can choose happiness for ourselves.

If we lose site of this basic principle we then project onto our children that they are the source of our happiness or unhappiness. We communicate to them that control of our well-being is vested in them. The problem with this is obvious. If we blame others for our unhappiness then they can blame us for their unhappiness. If we believe our personal happiness is up to those around us, those who, for the most part, are out of our ability to control, then happiness will always elude us. Anyone who has been a parent for any length of time knows we cannot make our children do anything, least of all make us happy. All we can do is set up situations where appropriate choices are rewarded and inappropriate choices have consequences. In this way everyone in the family has access to the same well of happiness. Some will choose it, some may not, but those who don’t choose it need it made clear that their choices are about them, not about the parents. If parents become unhappy because of their child’s behavior then the child is in control of the tone of the home and the parents have abdicated their responsibility. If everyone goes down when one child goes down then the child does not have a model of what happiness looks like. They believe that if happiness is not accessible to the adults, who are supposedly powerful, it is therefore not accessible to anyone. The family environment needs to remain overall positive so the child has a goal to reach for. It is the parents’ responsibility to maintain a high emotional tone in the home by maintaining their own equanimity.

It becomes of primary importance for parents to take good care of themselves. Sleep long. Eat well. Exercise. Get filled up by association with others. Don’t be “therapeutic” at your own expense. Don’t let a child sabotage the good times of the entire family in order to teach that child a lesson. Consequence and discipline in such a way that no matter what the child chooses you are ok.

When parents take good care of themselves and keep an emotional distance between their happiness and their child’s behavior they have the ability to mean business without being mean. They can remain dispassionate about their child’s behaviors and see them as separate from themselves. Because their child’s behaviors are not about them they can give directions to the child in an appropriate tone of voice. Choosing a tone of voice is critical to “meaning business without being mean.” Police officers don’t start yelling at the person getting a speeding ticket. Whether or not the speeder violates the law does not affect the officer personally. There is no emotional involvement. He just tells the violator what the law is, how they violated it and what the consequence is. Gate agents at the airport don’t start screaming at the person who runs up after the door has closed, “What, did you think the whole plane was going to wait for you? Why didn’t you leave in enough time? You should have been here 10 minutes ago.” Whether or not the traveler catches the plane has no affect on their day whatsoever. They simply tell the traveler they missed the plane and what they need to do to catch another flight.

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