

Parenting---Roots and Wings

by Kim Olver

I'm sure many of you have heard that old Hallmark card adage that goes something like this: Parents give their children two great gifts---one is roots, the other is wings. This is what I address in this article.

As parents, we pray for our children's safety, health and happiness. We do everything we know to help make these things happen for them.

At some point in our lives, we developed the principles and values that guide our life decisions. Our parents and/or caregivers certainly had influence over this but not complete determination. Some of us gladly adopted the values of our parents and continue to live by them today. Some of us so completely rejected our parents values that our decisions are determined by doing the exact opposite of what we believe our parents would do.

Most of us, however, are somewhere in the middle---we have accepted some of our parents values and rejected others. This is a normal process of development. As parents, though, we really fight that period in our children's lives when they are attempting to differentiate themselves from us.

Maybe it is because we fear for their safety in their decision-making. Maybe we can see that they are engaging in unhealthy behavior or heading down a life path that will ultimately lead to unhappiness. Whatever the reason, we get scared if our children's values differ too much from our own.

What can we, as parents, do? First of all, as we raise our children, we are helping to strengthen their roots. This is the first gift a parent gives their child. How does one strengthen roots? We tend, we nurture, we feed, we cultivate---all to develop strong roots.

Sharing our value system with our children is critical to this process. In sharing values, remember that people pay more attention to what they see, as opposed to what they hear. Therefore, if you are a parent who tells your children it is wrong to smoke while you are toking on your cigarette, know that their interpretation of smoking will likely be different from what you are verbally espousing.

A developmental task of adolescence is separation and individuation. This is the time when children are attempting to separate themselves from their parents to an extent. It can be a very frightening time for parents. What do we do? This is the time for the second parental gift---wings.

We want to give our children gradual "flying" lessons. Children are not ready to go from the total and complete shelter of their parents' protection to being absolutely out on their own. This must be a gradual process.

Dr. Nancy Buck, in her book Peaceful Parenting, says it best. "We limit freedom for as long as it takes to teach responsible behavior and then we give back the freedom." We

want our children learning the precarious process of making decisions while they are still under our semi-protection.

During the teen years is the perfect time to allow our teens to begin the process of deciding what their own set of values will be. If you have done a good job with the roots and you handle the next part with a minimum of confrontation, then the value process will go relatively smoothly.

Remember, your teen is doing nothing different than you did. The only difference is that you were wrestling with your parents' values and your teen is wrestling with YOUR values. It has a very different feel to it, but it is the same nonetheless. You may say that your value system works just fine for you and your teen needs to see things the same way you do. However, the reality is that you cannot know what is best for another person, including your children. You are not them. You do not occupy their skin. Only they can truly decide what is best for themselves and then they will have to live with the consequences of their decisions.

I remember when my oldest son was sixteen and working as a waiter in a local diner. He became involved in a confrontation with a customer over a racial remark the customer made. When hearing the story, I was extremely proud that my son stood up for equality and fairness but was actually mortified by his immature, locker room behavior that he displayed! No, I will not print exactly what he did but suffice it to say that it was not a proud maternal moment.

My son and I had several conversations about this incident over the next few days and I was unable to get him to understand that what he had done was inappropriate. Finally, he said to me, "Mom, I know you want me to say that I was wrong but I'm not ashamed of what I did. In fact, I would do exactly the same thing if the situation presents itself again." Wow, I guess he told me!

I had to practice what I preach. His value system was not matching up with mine. It was very clear to me that he was "wrong", however, in his world at that time, he did the "right" thing for him. When you give your child wings, you need to allow them to do things their own way even if you are sure a better way exists. You can offer your better way in the form of a suggestion, but then get out of the way and allow your child to make the decision and to manage the consequences that occur because of that decision.

This process helps our children become better decision makers. We talk with our children about all the choices that exist, and then examine the pros and cons of each choice. After that, we must step back and allow our children to make the decision that's right for them. Then, we can talk to them about how things worked out but never protect them from the consequences of their decisions. This is where the learning takes place.

You are there to support them and help them manage the consequences but don't intervene on their behalf and also don't assume that "I told you so" attitude. That does not teach your child anything but not to come to you to talk things over anymore.