



Parenting: A skill that has to be taught **Author-William Raspberry**

WASHINGTON – No one thing can fix everything, and anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to sell something.

Let me try to sell you something that won't fix everything but might make a lot of our problems a little easier to handle. Let me try to sell you the idea of teaching parents how to be parents.

I don't have to convince you that too many of our youngsters are falling into the category we have lately started labeling "at risk". Not just the sexually careless adolescents, the high school dropouts or the teenage hustlers who are, admittedly, easier to worry about than to set straight. I'm thinking about the 6-year-olds starting school in a few weeks who will be "at risk" from their first day in first grade, their younger siblings who will be "at risk" even in pre-school and kindergarten, the babies who are in fact born "at risk."

I'm not talking about the tough cases: the crack babies who may be permanently damaged by their parents' drug abuse, the abandoned infants languishing in the foster-care system or the abused and brutalized children who have never known a parent's love. I'm talking about the children whose parents love them and want the best for them but simply don't know how to give them a chance for the best to happen.

I'm proposing we teach them how. Parental love is as natural as rain. Parental skills have to be learned. The simple truth often escapes those of us in the middle class who consider ourselves pretty good at the parenting game although we don't remember anyone teaching us how to do it.

Well, someone did. We learned what we know about parenting from our own parents and, in most cases, it serves us pretty well. But an awful lot of young parents – themselves the children of teenage mothers, half-formed families and unskilled parents – don't know what we know.

They love their children, and will sacrifice their own interests in order to buy them expensive toys and dress them in cute clothes. But they don't know how to get them ready for learning, or for life.

Interesting enough, there are people who are expert in teaching these things: child psychologists, early childhood educators, and people like Dorothy Rich of the Washington-based Home and School Institute, who has made a career of teaching parents how to give their children the skills and attitudes that make for school success. I suspect that there are a few school districts in America that don't have access to some of these experts.

What is lacking is any routine way of drawing on their expertise. We need to have parenting centers in every city and hamlet where parents can go, without charge, to learn how to get their children off to a good start. We need to teach them the importance of reading to their children, talking to them, teaching them not just such "academic" skills as in color and shape and letters but also self-confidence, perseverance and personal responsibility – the things that make school learning possible.

We need to start thinking of our children – all our children – as a natural resource and their academic, emotional and moral health as a national priority. The children need a better chance, and we who talk so much about national "competitiveness" and changing demographics need them to have a better chance.

SLS Archives: William Raspberry
Washington Post Writers Group
1150 15th St. NW
Washington D.C. 20071

Student Leadership Services, Inc. * 1150 Scott Lake Rd, Waterford, Michigan * Phone: (248) 706-0757 * Fax: (248) 706-0750

Website: www.slsToday.org or www.studentsleadingstudents.org; www.facebook.com/SLSTODAY; www.twitter.com/SLSTODAY