The Fallacy of Parent Responsibility[1]

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The popular belief that parents are entirely responsible for their children's behavior and learning is one of the most mistaken assumptions in parenting. It is frightening indeed to observe how universal this belief has become and how it is now considered unquestionable common sense. As impossible as it is for any one person to be responsible for the behavior of another person, there continues to be an attempt to hold parents accountable for the behavior and achievement of their children. It is as if we believe that parents are accountable for turning out preconceived packaged products rather than, as we all very well know, children who turn themselves into an infinite number of different and unique human beings. We often behave as though we are trying to make them all alike rather than to encourage and enhance their uniqueness.

Today's parents are the new group to blame for the failure of our educational system. Parents are told they need to be more involved and spend more time helping their children with homework, resolving discipline problems that occur at school, and limiting their children's exposure to television (the root of all evil). It seems when a school does not know how to handle homework or discipline problems; it simply passes these problems on to the parents who are given the responsibility for their child's performance.

There is no way a parent can be responsible with any significant degree of validity for what a child decides to learn or how it chooses to behave in school. Parents have enough difficulties with being overly responsible with what a child does at home which includes bedtime, mealtimes, chores, sibling rivalry, and getting up in the morning.

Essentially, only the child can decide "yes" or "no". A child elects whether to be "parent-deaf" or to allow the parent to enter his or her perceptual field. Parents can neither force a child to do something he or she chooses not to do nor prevent a child from doing something he or she does want to do. Even if a parent succeeds in coercing a child to perform perfectly while in the parent's custody, the child can decide not to use the information or skill in life and, ultimately, sabotage the parents' efforts.

It is very discouraging to impose on parents a task impossible to carry out. In the final analysis, a parent can only be responsible for his or her own behavior. Although parents can learn effective ways to influence or win over their child's cooperation, in the end, the decision to cooperate and contribute rests first and foremost in a useful manner or whether to allow a parent to provide him or her with guidance and leadership. Parents who learn ways of behaving which are inviting and facilitative increase the likelihood of being selected by their child as helpers and leaders. Therefore, such a commitment to learning and growth by a parent is not being personally responsible but responsible and accountable in a different way, and is certainly an uncommon and unique process for each parent.

Unfortunately, most parents firmly believe they are totally responsible for their child's behavior. While they may ask for help with small tasks like taking out the trash, they virtually do all the planning, direct all the work, and do all the evaluating. When a child misbehaves or does not perform the task properly, the parent feels responsible for solving the problem. What happens is that the more responsibility a parent assumes, the less a child is involved in the endeavor and the less if feels the need to be responsible.

This counters the very purpose of parenting which is to help children become more self-directive, creative, and cooperative human beings (Meredith & Evans, 1990).

It is this belief in parent responsibility which has most parents locked into many mistaken goals and considerable senseless behavior. When parents believe they are responsible for their child's mistaken behavior, they invariably come to the conclusion that they must intensify their efforts to control and evaluate the child. If the child resists, then the goal is to subdue. When rewards are not effective, then punishment often follows. The result is almost certain through brute strength and others through a combination of demanding and caring, both styles control and judge children, invariably inciting conflict. As long as there is conflict, there is little opportunity to develop friendly and helping relationships between parents and children.

Closely associated with the belief in parent responsibility is the almost universal belief that human beings are naturally lazy, which is based on a rather hopeless view of human nature and especially the conviction that children are weak and helpless. With these beliefs, many parents convince themselves that they have to control and coerce children to behave, learn, and obey. This results in a demanding and judging relationship which again becomes a recipe for senseless conflict.

Parents can learn to become more effective. This will undoubtedly require a change in the belief system of many parents and professionals. Parents must realize their children will move away from and not toward them if they insist on controlling and evaluating. We must give up our belief in the value and necessity of reward and punishment, and learn instead the use of natural consequences. Our foundation is to

develop a more hopeful and encouraging view of human nature (Evans & Meredith, 1991).

Parents must learn a new concept of responsibility diametrically opposed to the traditional concept of obedience and respect for authority. Essentially it is the belief that the more children are involved, the more responsible they become, and the more responsible they come, the more they feel that they belong. This means that parents from the very outset invite children to become involved as partners in a friendly and cooperative atmosphere relating as equally worthy and dignified human beings. Children should share responsibility in planning, choices of chores, and self-evaluation (Dreikurs, 1964). Of course, the more they belong, the more they have opportunities to contribute in their own creative and unique way. This can add up to extremely strong feelings of being useful and having a place. In such an atmosphere of involvement, commitment, and cooperation, parents would frequently find themselves selected as leaders, being asked by their child to provide guidance which would truly result in a more facilitating and caring parent-child relationship.

As parents free themselves of fallacious beliefs and resultant useless behavior, they will have more time and energy for the process of becoming their fully functioning selves. They can develop more positive views of themselves and others, and become more open to their experience. As they become more and more their unique selves, they will find themselves more unique helpers. This requires parents to act in a courageous manner, overcoming the demands by many professionals and politicians to be wholly responsible for their children.

Parents can feel responsible by merely being in the process of becoming themselves. They will invariably be more informed and knowledgeable about human behavior; share "responsibility" with their children through involvement as partners in a cooperative atmosphere; do what they can to facilitate, encourage, and help; know how to resolve the inevitably conflicts which arise and how to build friendly relationships; know how to encourage children's commitment and contribution and a true feeling of belonging. This is the creation of a new democratic tradition for which parents can truly be accountable.

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