Exploring Consensual Living
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I came to unschooling from consensual living/attachment parenting. I found it the perfect fit. I know many come to unschooling first and then move into consensual living, what some people call radical unschooling. I'm not even going to try to offer any official definitions because we all know that never works.

What I decided to talk about today is what are the components to our parenting that I think help create a climate for living consensually in our home.

I came up with a lot of things but have narrowed it down to 5 to cover today.

1 - Trusting our children
2 - Golden Rule
3 - No punishments or rewards
4 - Tools and information
5 - Validation

I'm going to talk about each of these, as they relate to my family and our journey.

TRUSTING OUR CHILDREN:

Trusting my babies was no problem for me, I had been exposed to attachment type parenting as a teenager and got my degree in Child Development. In Child Dev. 101 they said – pick up a crying baby, it's trying to communicate. So it never occurred to me NOT to feed my child on demand, hold her when she cried, listen to her ques, etc. Following my heart and what I had learned was working for my child. I could see her blossoming before me, a child who, due to a brain injury after birth was never expected to walk or talk or function in the world – or so I was told. They had just never met the likes of Afton.

I read my first John Holt when Afton was around 3. I could see him applying the same philosophy to older children and learning. He said it all to me with the two words "Trust Children". I could do that, I'd been doing that and I could see how it was working. They really were 'learning all the time'.

It took me a bit longer but I finally realized that I wasn't the expert on another human being, even if that other human being was my child. At first, this was hard to swallow but then I realized that it wasn't about not sharing my thoughts, experience and opinions with my kids in fact I should share all those things - they just had the right to make their own decisions about what was right for them. I might be cold and need a jacket, and they might not. I might be tired and ready for bed, but they might not be. I couldn't arbitrarily enforce my beliefs without taking in to consideration their feelings. In fact, I couldn't 'enforce' anything at all. Well, I suppose I could but I decided I didn't want to. What I found when I trusted them was that they rose to the challenge, they took information and made leaps and connections that I hadn't even considered. They were learning, growing, blossoming, basking in that trust.

GOLDEN RULE

I guess we're all familiar with the 'golden rule'. For me I apply it by saying to myself – would I say this to my friend, husband, neighbor, or would I want this said to me. If they answer is no to either then I don't need to be saying it to my child. I've found as I have treated my children with this respect it is given back to me. I love it because it serves as a quick litmus test. Our society is really comfortable with not giving children this respect but expecting it back. I decided I wasn't comfortable with that at all. I needed to model respect and compassion before I could hope anyone would return it to me.

This applies to so many scenarios. Let's say my friend is over having lunch and knocks over her drink. I would run to get paper towels and help her clean it up without a word of criticism. When a child does this somehow it seems ok to say 'go get a paper towel and clean up your mess'. I would NEVER say that to a friend so why to my child?

I've found happily cleaning up has model just that 'happily cleaning up'. They want to help not only when it happens to them but when it happens to me!

Marshall Rosenberg the founder of NVC talks about an exercise he uses at his seminars. He divides the group in two he asks each group to write down on a large sheet of paper a dialog between themselves and another person in a conflict situation. He tells one group the person is their child, the other group that it is their neighbor. They come back and post the papers not knowing they were given different information. He then asks if they see a difference between the groups. Every time he has done this, the group in the situation with the child is seen as less respectful and compassionate in their communication than the group with the neighbor. It shows the group, quite painfully, how we dehumanize someone by simply thinking of him or her as "our child".

So, I use the golden rule to check myself and make sure that I am giving my children the respect they deserve and that I would give to any other human being.

NO PUNISHMENTS, NO REWARDS

We have no punishment in our family – no time outs, no privileges taken away, no "or else".

This is a shocker for some. Especially, when they find this out after knowing me and my kids for a while. You see, most people assume that they would be out of control maniacs without 'control' and 'punishment'. I have found this not to be the case at all. I think punishments restrict the flow of ideas and solutions. I've not come across anything that my kids have done that couldn't be handled by talking and coming up with solutions together.

The very process of talking about these incidents helps us develop the tools we need for solving problems. I don't want my children to do something because I told them to do it, or not do it or out of fear of punishments. I want them to make thought out decisions and when they make a mistake feel comfortable talking about it and set about finding a better way. They are endlessly creative and always amazing me.

Because this is such a huge part of our daily life they just get better and better at coming up with solutions and avoiding problems the next time. I'm grateful for the chance to practice this myself. We all make mistakes. Our 'school driven' culture tends to label mistakes as 'wrong' or 'bad'. We just choose to reframe them and look at them as learning experiences - as opportunities.

Rewards are just the flip side of the manipulation coin. When they are used to manipulate behavior is alters the intrinsic motivation. It never gets at root cause of behavior and doesn't help with critical thinking or problem solving. An example from Alfie Kohn's book "Punished By Rewards" is of the child who doesn't want to go to bed. The punishing family says 'you better go to bed now or you can't do xyz tomorrow', the rewarding family says 'if you go to bed now, you can have xyz tomorrow'.

Neither family finds out WHY the child isn't sleeping. Could it be they aren't tired, they are scared, they aren't feeling well. Those things become secondary to the parent being in control of the situation. It's those lines of communication that I want to keep open in my family.

TOOLS AND INFORMATION:

Here, I think, it my most important role as parent - providing tools and information. I don't want to just stop or control or illicit a behavior. I want them to understand and question the 'whys' of a situation. By providing them with tools and information I can feel more comfortable that when I'm not around they will still make an informed decision.

This applies to crossing a street, playing with friends, any situation they might come across. When I see parents yelling to stop a behavior they don't like – I just cringe because I'm thinking 'if you don't give them information about what's happening and tools to do it differently – how to you think they will make a change?' Examples of tools would be things like labeling emotions – this is very powerful for the child and for the person they are dealing with, that coupled with using words to discuss feelings can give everyone a much better idea about what is going on and how to find a solution. Listening is another big tool – really hearing what the other person is saying is critical to solving problems. Understanding body ques is also an important tool – this can mean understanding when we are hungry before we start getting crabby, to listen to our 'gut' when we enter a situation.

My oldest child is highly sensitive (to use Elaine Aron's term) it is critical for her to listen to her body and assess what she needs in a given situation. If she doesn't she tends to get overwhelmed and the situation can deteriorate quickly. Listening to her body can tell her she needs some space alone or a change of venue.

Information would be things like explaining cars, streets, parking lots, why someone is upset, what the temperature is, what's going to happen next, how things work . . .. Information is also my personal feelings on things, morals, beliefs, things that are important to me. This information is just that *information* for them to use when making a decision. They can take that information and information from other sources and make their own decision.

It doesn't have to be the same decision I would make. I need to be ok with that – goes back to the trusting piece.

VALIDATION

I believe we ALL want to be heard and have our feelings validated. Validation is really just another tool for good relationships. I've found so many situations that can be diffused by listening and validating. It is so common to want to fix things for our children and our spouse but the bottom line is that isn't what most people are looking for including our children.

We may be very well intentioned but to jump in a fix or distract isn't really hearing what our child is saying. An example would be when we moved to Charlotte my oldest daughter really missed her old home and life. Honestly, I couldn't understand it, here we had more friends in 3 months than the 3 years we lived there, we have a pool and an amazing yard – things we didn't have before.

But when she said “I want to go back to Kennett Square” I could have said “ but think of all your new friends and the cool swimming pool, it’s so fun here” sometimes I did and the situation just escalated.

When I was remembering to validate I would say “ You really miss Kennett Square, you wish we could go back.” You could see her physically relax, sigh and then she would often say ‘well I guess I don’t really want to go back, I do miss it though. Remember the back yard and Jonathan’s house” What had been a moment of anxiety turned into a moment of connection.

So you might be thinking I can do that – and you can! I do want to point out that we also need to validate even when we don’t like what is being said. That is harder but SO worth it. Situations like that come up between siblings. “I never want to see my sister again”. The first thing that often comes to mind is “oh, you love your sister, she didn’t mean to upset you” or something along those lines. That never works but next time try “You are really angry and wish you never saw your sister again” Again you will most likely see the relaxation and then a dialog will start. “Well, I am really mad, she shouldn’t have done that” Then you can say “I can see how mad it made you, you really wish she hadn’t done that”. Usually a couple exchanges like that and they are off playing happily. I’ve seen it handled the other way in families and there is anger and hurt feelings for hours, sometimes days turning into bitter sibling rivalry. The key is releasing and processing the feelings and feeling heard. We all want it. By the way, this works great with husband’s too. It’s called reflective listening. Faber and Mazlish talk about it a lot in their books “How to Talk so your Kids will Listen, How to Listen so your Kids will Talk “ and in “Siblings without Rivalry”. I highly recommend reading these books. They are easy with lots of information and tools you can put to use right away. Kids, Parents and Power Struggles is also a great one. Marshall Rosenberg also uses it in his Non-violent communication books.

All of the things I just talked about are key pieces in creating a climate in our home a climate of trust and respect. That climate keeps the lines of communication open. It also means that we become a trusted advisor for our kids. I know they feel safe coming to us when there is a problem.

At a conference in May, Jan Fortune Wood shared the following story: Two boys are in the woods behind their houses when they find a run down building. They both think immediately at how many cool things they could do there – their secret hide out. One boy says – ‘let’s go get my dad and show him, he can help us check it out and make sure it’s safe. I bet he’ll even have some cool stuff for us to use.’ The other boy is like ‘NO way, my parents will yell at me for even thinking about it. Let’s just play here anyway, they will never know.’

So here’s the thing – who’s safer. I say safer specifically because that is the reasoning that many parents use to control their children “I’m just looking out for their safety – it’s for their own protection”. But the boy in the consensual living household views his parents as trusted advisors, he knows they wouldn’t lie to him and that they want it to work for him. The other boy has been told what to do his whole life, he has also seen that some of the things he has been told will happen – don’t and some of the things they told him they can’t do he can - so it really doesn’t trust his parents.

I want the members of my family to trust each other and work together to help everyone get what they need and want. Consensual living for us is an evolving process but it starts with the fundamentals of trusting, listening and respecting each other. It’s all part of living mindfully and I’m so grateful to my children for teaching me these lessons. It has brought such joy to my life. And for those that are wondering - it really can work ☺