

## **Parenting For Peace**

by **Marianne Littlejohn**

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**M**ore than ever, at this time, we need a new philosophy that embraces all practical aspects of our lives. The year 2002 was a year of horror, tragedy, and mourning as we watched the aftermath of the suicide bombings in New York and wars in Afghanistan and Israel. The war in Iraq and its terrible consequences for Iraqi children were not far behind. In 2003, global terrorism is becoming a daily reality and the future of the globe is at stake as environmental disasters continue to wreak havoc on our precious earth. Can we create a future in which our children live peacefully and in harmony with each other and with the earth?

### **Peaceful Beginnings**

How many of us can remember fighting with siblings, being shouted at and hit by parents, or feeling bad, jealous, angry, and hurt in our primary families? Often what we learned was that temporary peace was achieved with threats or violence while underneath, our feelings smouldered, only to resurface at another opportunity.

It is my view that we start spreading peace with our unborn babies, our growing children, and ourselves. It is from each other that we learn how to have mutually enhancing relationships rather than conflict-ridden ones. Children learn from the example of their parents (and often parents learn from their children) that there are differences between needs and wants, and that the meaning of what is enough changes as we feel the childhood pain that drives our needs.

It is from the adults around them that children learn what it means to be a man or a woman, and how to be parents themselves one day. It is in the family that children are guided in a tradition, learn spiritual values and concepts, and are taught to either hate-or love-and accept others by being loved and accepted themselves.

### **Peace Within**

First of all, we need to begin with our relationships with ourselves. Who are we, where do we come from, and where are we going? What repressed pain do we carry, handed down from the previous generations, our family ancestry, and our childhood experiences? We need to be able to resolve our own pain before we are able to truly love ourselves as well as those who share our world with us.

As co-creators with the Divine, we bear within us the potential for harmonious and peaceful living; for compassion and loving acts toward each other. Part of our journey on earth is to reconnect with this potential, this capacity to love and be loved and to live together in social harmony. To do this we need to reconnect with all our experiences and the full range of our feelings. When we hold our feelings in and are unable to express anger, hurt, or fear as children, we may later act out these feelings in non-peaceful ways, which may hurt others and ourselves.

When hurtful memories are remembered and relived, and anger, hurt, and loss are expressed, our feelings become integrated. We are then able to connect with the parts of ourselves we had hidden away. For this we need a listener, a shaman, a therapist-someone who provides a safe space and can mirror to us the love that we should have been given, but never received.

From this darkest nights of our souls (revisiting our childhoods and resolving the pain) can shine the brightest illuminations, as this process of finding and recreating ourselves brings us to compassion and self-love.

## **Peaceful Children**

Second, we need to be reverent toward the power we bear to create new life and bring in new souls consciously. Every baby deserves to be a planned and wanted child. An unwanted baby is imprinted with the trauma of rejection, and healing this trauma is difficult, though not impossible.

Where pregnancy is unplanned, every effort needs to be made to understand why this child has come at this time. Feelings of being overwhelmed, of having to cope with the demands that a small baby will bring, need to be felt and resolved. We need to explore these issues with someone caring enough to listen and facilitate our pain.

Elizabeth Hallett has written a book about souls who communicate with their parents before they are born (*Soul Trek: Meeting our Children on the Way to Birth*, 1995, Light Hearts Publishing, Hamilton, MT). More and more couples are having experiences where their future children contact them prior to conception or birth, sometimes through dreams, visions, or inner voices.

This phenomenon is not new. The Bushmen peoples of Southern Africa as well as the Aboriginal peoples of Australia were aware of their coming children, sometimes years before conception. Future babies have brought reassurance, conveyed love, announced, persuaded, offered guidance, and sought to prepare mothers for their arrival.

A friend of mine, whose second pregnancy was unplanned, felt her baby move and respond strongly to her touch at eighteen weeks of pregnancy. She distinctly "felt" him say, "It's okay mom, I understand and love you, and we'll get through this together." This mother was able to feel a deep love and acceptance for her unborn son after that.

## **Peaceful Parenting**

As parents we need to commit ourselves to resolving and transforming conflicts within, so as not to act out our own pain on our children through physical or verbal violence. We need to understand from where our own unresolved childhood feelings of frustration and despair arise, and to relive and resolve them.

We can also help prevent violence by educating ourselves about our children's stages of development so that we will be able to understand what behaviours are appropriate at various ages. We need to be able to touch our children in age-appropriate ways that promote peace and teach them to touch other living beings, including animals, in the same way.

Children also need to be taught appropriate ways to express anger without hurting other people, plants, or animals. Whether we are mothers, fathers, co-parents, step-parents, married parents, or single parents, our task is to lay the foundations for building a culture of peace, based on non-violence, tolerance, and respect.

How do we do this when our baby won't stop crying, or our toddler is screaming for chocolate in the supermarket, or our two-year-old is blatantly saying "no" to a simple request, or our ten-year-old gets sassy and our teenager lives in a bedroom that looks like a slum? There are no easy answers, but I have started a list below of ways to begin promoting a culture of peace. Please share with us your views or suggestions and add to this list.

## **Parenting For Peace**

1) Know thyself. Seek help, therapy, or counselling when you are struggling, when you feel violent toward your children, or when you are depressed, in pain, or in despair.

- 2) Love each other. If you are in an intimate relationship with a partner or the parent of your child, be kind toward each other, and work through any unresolved feelings between you. Destructive relationships are also destructive for the children involved. Children grow better in an atmosphere of love rather than discord.
- 3) Connect with your baby while pregnant. Sing, touch, and talk to your unborn child. Massage your unborn baby while listening to soothing music, breathe clean air, and eat good food to nurture your unborn baby's body.
- 4) Create a peaceful environment. Stay calm and relaxed during the pregnancy by dealing with your own painful childhood feelings as they emerge. This will mean that your body does not become stressed during the pregnancy, and will be a peaceful environment for your unborn child.
- 5) Provide touch and closeness. Touch infants frequently in the first days and months of life by using Kangaroo Mother Care (skin-to-skin-contact and unrestricted access to breastfeeding). Hug your children warmly and often, even when they are bigger.
- 6) Talk to your children. Tell them about your world and let them tell you about theirs. Dance with them, sing with them, laugh with them, and play games with them. Hum and sing to them too, and rock them when they are babies. When they are older, read them stories.
- 7) Listen to and watch your children. Really listen to their body language and cues when they are babies, and their verbal communication when they are older. They may need to tell you what they are feeling, and not know how.
- 8) Never hit, slap, beat, or shout at young children (or anyone for that matter). This only frightens them and teaches them that violence is acceptable and that they are victims.
- 9) Help and allow children to express their feelings. This is very important. They need to be allowed to cry when sad and to rage when upset or angry. Provide a safe environment for them to do this.
- 10) Provide age-appropriate activities and games for them to play. Play with your children, too. They need to be allowed to have fun, enjoy themselves, and be happy.

*"Promoting peace is a journey and demands that we respect all forms of life, especially human life, and that love, compassion, human dignity and justice are preserved."*

--Threshold 2000, Gerald O. Barney, with Jane Blewett and Kristen R. Barney, 2000, Conexus Press, USA

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