

May 2010

PARENTHOOD PLUS

BY ANDREW MALEKOFF, amalekoff@northshorechildguidance.org

Executive Director of the North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center

“Will all parenting experts please leave the room!”

“We have a new word in our lexicon – parenting. The word refers to what I call the technology of being a parent. The increased usage of the term is most unfortunate, and I avoid it wherever possible.” So says La Jolla, California psychologist Richard Farson in his new book, “Will all Parenting Experts Please Leave the Room!” (Western Behavioral Sciences Institute: <http://www.wbsi.org/farson/books.htm>).

In my unvarnished view of parenthood, it is less a well-posed, still-life portrait and more a roller-coaster ride; harrowing yet fun, with unexpected twists and turns, ascents and descents. You experience anxious anticipation and vertigo-inducing surround-sound. Sometimes, however, it is not so exciting - more like a crawling commute in rush- hour traffic, enervating, meandering, puzzling and endless.

As many of us know, parenthood can bring confusion, misunderstanding and doubt. This is an inescapable reality for most parents. Parenthood is rarely neat. It is more abstract than still life, more jazz than classical. Yet, according to Richard Farson, there is a myth that one can learn parenting techniques and all will be good.

Many times parents feel helpless because their kids make noise and move about, laugh and have fun at what feel like the most inopportune times. Raw parenthood looks like it just crawled out of bed; it is a half-eaten slice of pizza, a shirt hanging out, a chair leaning back, a runny nose, mismatched socks and a dripping ice cream cone. And there are moments when it can also be compared to a sunset. Parenthood is an adventure.

At times, parents feel ashamed and apologetic; and yet, the unspoken message from the “experts,” according to Farson, is that “somewhere there exists a person, an expert, who has it all figured out and knows how [be a perfect parent]. No wonder parents feel vaguely incompetent at the very time they think they are acquiring helpful information.” Farson offers readers a fresh, if controversial, view on the absurdities and paradoxes of parenthood, in the face of a consistent downpour of advice on what has come to be known as “parenting.” For example, he says, “Most parents love their children. Most would die for them. Paradoxically, however, as a society we do not honor or respect or even like our children. We indoctrinate, patronize, ignore, mistreat, segregate, dominate, prohibit, compel and incarcerate them.”

Among his riffs is one on the myth of quality time and the belief that how much time we spend with our children is less important than how the time is spent.

Farson reasons that genuine quality time should not be measured in discrete bursts of undivided attention. Quite the contrary he says, “It is the time when you don’t have to do anything with your child, when the child simply knows that you are around and available. It is taking comfort in the simple awareness of each other’s presence. It is allowing yourself to be angry with your child, in the knowledge that there will be time to get over it and make up.”

His advice about the myriad of books on how to have quality time with your children is to ignore them. My advice: don’t ignore Farson’s book. It will make you scratch your head. It may even make your head hurt and make you feel angry. At just 107 pages, and, with such chapter headings as “Parenting is Impossible” and “Don’t Pity the Latchkey Children,” this anti-parenting parenthood book is a must read.

And, if you are really looking for a headache, you can then read Farson's "Will All Marriage Experts Please Leave the Room!"