



base. This has certain advantages for a parenting program for the Bahá'í community.

One major advantage is that Bahá'ís are committed to and value these writings, and by using them one can attract a motivation which otherwise may be lacking if the philosophical base of the program is less respected or less congenial. The philosophy of the program can be a basis both for changing of values, and for changing of practice. This is a particular advantage of a spiritually based program in a religious community, but I believe that every program has some theoretical or philosophical base which one ought to think about.

My personal belief is that sometimes the philosophical base is less important than the values and the practice of the program. When it actually comes down to parenting, I think that what the child first becomes aware of is the practice, and the feelings behind it, and sometimes if things are done with the right spirit, then they can overcome a philosophy which may not be perfect. I say this because when I was an undergraduate psychology student, the reigning philosophy was Behaviourism, which seemed to me profoundly philosophically inadequate. Yet often when it was put into practice through programs based on principles of behaviour modification, the people who did it, did it with a great deal of love and concern, and it came out quite well. In fact, the principles involved such as reinforcement of desired behaviour, and "time out" to remove reward for unwelcome behaviour, actually require considerable patience, thoughtfulness and commitment on the part of parents.

This brings us to the values which are involved in a parenting program. I'd like to mention a comment from an article written by Ann Stark in Cooperative Peace Strategies, where she discusses values involved in conflict resolution. She made, to me, a very interesting point, in that, if we have just the skills without the values, what we have is simply a technology of control, or a new way of manipulating people. It is the values which produce the more profound effect, and guide the

development

of the relationship. If we teach only skills, and the people who are learning the skills

don't internalise some of the values, we're teaching them to be more effective in some ways in what they're doing, but the relationship is circumscribed by the lack

of a better understanding. This may be true even though we don't consciously recognize or think about the values of our parents, or our own values as parents.

I was at a conference which Marjorie Tidman had organised on global education, a few years ago, and one of the exercises was to think who had been the most

effective teacher in motivating us. I thought back about my early teachers and then

suddenly I realised something that I hadn't realised before, and that was that when I

chose to do mathematics, it was really my father who had most influenced me.

Through his

love for mathematical games and mathematical exercises of all kinds, a constant interest

in puzzles, a real spirit of inquiry, (and a considerable disrespect for teachers), he

instilled into me a love of mathematics and problem solving. I realised that this was a

value which he had transmitted to his family more effectively than any formal education.

Perhaps this is typical of the transmission of many values.

Finally we come to skills, and skills are of critical importance,

because even if we have our values, if we don't have the skills, then we can't translate the values into practice. If programs are based on values or principles it is

essential to have a wide range of exercises which address the issue of translating the

principles into practice, particularly when the needs of the child must be understood and

responded to, or when there is a concern by the parent or some conflict which needs to be resolved.

The major issues addressed in A Bahá'í Parenting Programme are:

Attracting your child to spiritual ideals, which involves

attracting them to learn and recite short prayers or passages of the Sacred Writings,

training them in love and kindness, giving them confidence, and teaching them to respect

the Law of God and the rights of others;

Expressing love in tangible ways, which is based on stories and examples from the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá;

Communication and family relationships, which includes mutual respect between parents and children, courtesy, taking an interest in what children are doing, taking time to listen, and discussing Bahá'í teachings and values with them;

Family consultation, which includes the principles of consultation applied at a family level;

Discipline, which discusses encouraging what is good and guiding or correcting without using physical or verbal abuse;

Building a sense of Bahá'í identity in the home, which includes celebrating Feasts and Holy Days, hospitality, and inviting people who wish to learn of the Bahá'í teachings;

Protecting the light of the spirit, which covers the avoidance of talking about people behind their backs, avoiding nagging or harsh criticism, overcoming resentment and jealousy, helping children to fight their spiritual battles and teaching them to be truthful;

Prayer meditation and deepening in the home, which raises the question of how to prevent the spiritual aspects of life being submerged beneath the demands of everyday concerns;

Literature in the home, which looks at the importance of encouraging children to select and value literature;

Equality of the sexes, which looks at family roles, equal education, choice of occupations and participation in the world at large.

The program presents a variety of issues, values and principles which are important from a Bahá'í point of view in parenting and the education of children. You can see that it is not highly theoretical in the way it's constructed, but it focuses on what are perceived to be crucial needs in the area of parenting. It is a values-based program, based around values such as equality of the sexes, just to take one example, and its effectiveness depends on a willingness of parents to think about and systematically apply the values in the multifarious aspects of the life of an individual

family. The greatest risk in such a program is that it is used only for "consciousness raising" and does not, in a significant way, impact upon actual practice.

Other parenting programs such as PET (Parent Effectiveness Training) or STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) are based on somewhat different philosophies, and begin by identifying and systematically teaching a body of skills. This is the point at which I pass the baton to Christine to talk about her experiences as a parent and a Trainer in Parent Effectiveness Training...

I have been working for thirteen years with the program which is called PET, Parent Effectiveness Training, and in Europe "Gordon Training", after its founder and author Thomas Gordon, who is an American clinical psychologist. The program is skills based; the chief skills taught are listening skills, appropriate assertiveness, problem solving and conflict resolution. I think that these can only enhance family relationships. They fit in with all the aspirations of mankind today for peace. Without them I think that peace will be very difficult to achieve. A transcendent basis, a form of spiritual values, whatever one has, will give special life to the program. In family life, I think that the values communicated by the parents are the values which the children will take up, but they are much more easily taken up in a context of communication skills. PET is a program which enables people to learn and practise skills. It is a very practical program. Without it, in today's context, it is very hard to pass on values. We have looked at the kind of life we have today through the eyes of many of our speakers and in our workshops. We know that we are living in a society which as a whole does not value things of the spirit. It is a material society, and as parents we have to compete for example, with television, which has invaded our homes. Whether we like it or not, whether we turn it off or not, it is there, and very often its values are not our values. We have to compete with electronic games, we have to compete with the media. We need to be strongly based, and to have at our fingertips the best of communication skills.

Listening skills are disarming. If we can listen to our opponents, and show them we understand, we have taken a very large step towards negotiation and agreement. If we are sure of our values and can be assertive, without being aggressive, we have taken another large step. And then if we can step forward and negotiate, we are very much on the way to peace. Without those skills it is really difficult. In a parenting context, with PET we are using these skills with our own children. And the things that I have learnt, having painfully acquired the skills, have changed the way I think. I was a very traditional parent, raised in a family which was kindly and listening, but where traditional ways of parenting were the norm. With my first three children, I literally believed that I had to mould them and impose my values, because I saw that as my duty. I learned otherwise halfway through my family, so I have a control group of three. For the first three I didn't have PET, whereas I did for the second three, and it was much, much easier. Even allowing for my own growth and subsequent maturing, PET was a major help and I can recommend it.

More than that, among the things that I have learned is that enthusiasm for your values is more than persuasive. As John said he learnt a love of mathematics from his father, although it was never formally taught. I learned a love of books from my father, and I think I'm now addicted to books but I'm glad! Besides having enthusiasm, I think respect for the children is essential. When I grew up, not necessarily in my family, but in society as a whole, respect was one way: you respected people because of their position. You respected people above. People above didn't necessarily respect you. That was not the way it worked. What I have learned now is that mutual respect leads to mutual problem solving, and as the Bahá'í philosophy shows, so does, for example, respect between husbands and wives, between parents and children. Today's child does not respect unless respected, and that is a fact of life.

I think that, on another level, we could look at the child as we would

regard a beautiful rose plant needing the right environment. Everything is there within the child for its best development. We need to give the best conditions we can. Sometimes a little judicious pruning is a help, but always with respect for what the plant is. Always valuing. A child who grows up in a home knowing love and being loved, has been given what is really essential for best development. As a psychologist, (and I guess it is the same for many here who are psychologists or are counsellors), I have worked with a large number of people whose parents gave them many material advantages, gave them education, gave them the things they needed, but didn't appear to give them love. And there are people, in their fifties, their sixties, their seventies, still agonising over whether their parents really loved them. In those days a parent would have said "Why would I do all this If I didn't love you? But the difference in saying "I do love you" or "I love you" rather than expecting that this knowledge will be picked up on the way, is very great. It is really important in my view, to say "I love you", and I learnt that through my PET.

APPRECIATE! It is important, wherever possible, to show appreciation for what a child has done, rather than disapproval for what has not been done. It is really wilting for a child to grow up in an atmosphere of disapproval. Encouragement is a thousand times better than disapproval, yet in my experience, most parents find they usually work the other way around, as I used to do. But with PET, for example, I discovered, when my children were starting to wash up, it was much better to WAIT to be able to say "I was delighted this morning when I came into the kitchen and everything was so spic and span" rather than leap in at once with "My word, you've got a lot to learn about how to clear up and leave everything nice". With my first three (as I say I've a control group) I used to say aggressively "Clean up the bathroom when you've had your shower!" "Put your dirty clothes in the hamper!" "Put your towels out in the laundry!" and I had to say it every day, again and again. With PET I learnt to say "I was really pleased you left the bathroom so beautiful for the next person". Of course it had to be honest. I

had to explain and be patient. I had to wait till I could truthfully say it, and with some things I had to wait for a long time! But this is an interesting fact. I have five children away from home and sometimes the older ones come for a visit. Guess how they leave the bathroom! Towels on the floor! I'm sure they don't do it in their own houses. But the younger three whom I encouraged rather than blasted, leave it tidy. There's an experimental result for you!

Perhaps I should explain just how I learnt to handle this sort of thing. First, I had to be clear about what I really wanted. It's a bit like a hierarchy of statements. "Will you please hang up your towels, and put the dirty clothes in the basket" is the beginning. "I would like you to put the dirty clothes in the basket" is next. Then we go to a Statement Without Blame - in PET it is called an "I-message", because it is framed in the first person by the speaker. Listen carefully, because it aims to get behaviour change without escalating into a conflict. Part 1 is a description of the behaviour without blame, "When you leave your clothes on the floor in the bathroom..." Part 2 is an honest description of the speaker's feelings "I feel really angry and frustrated..." and Part 3 is about the cost, in terms of time or money "because I have to pick them up and it makes me late for work!" The alternative is frequently a "You- message" - "You are completely selfish" "You make me so angry!" "You are the absolute end!" Sounds familiar? People in courses sometimes say "But I'd never be able to spend the time learning all that stuff, I like to get a quick result". It's not a quick result if you have to keep on and on saying it, and what is more, if you do keep on, you turn into a Nagger. "I-messages" are often surprisingly successful, but there is sometimes a snag, especially if you have become a nagger. "Aw, Mum, you're just so fussy!" Here is another trick. Change your tack for this one. Go straight back to listening skills. "You think I'm always on at you?" "You are!" Back to original statement "Well, I have to ask you because it makes me really late in the morning, picking up your stuff, and I feel really desperate sometimes". "Sorry, Mum, I didn't realise, I'll try and do it". "That's my girl!". You might have to persevere for a while, but many parents have told me in awestruck tones "It really works!" And they add that because it works, it is time well spent, and ABSOLUTELY NOTHING compared with the old-style never-ending fights. It should also be said that lots of

parents have pointed out that actually practising the skills as the course proceeds is the secret of success.

Another thing I would like to say is "Seize the moment!" when the child evinces enthusiasm. With my first two, for instance, when they asked if they could make pancakes with me, and I had them running around, and maybe I was expecting the third, I'd say "Not now, we'll have a session on Saturday", and they completely lost their enthusiasm until much later when they were at senior school and learned cookery. Whereas with my third child I'd say "OK" and I'd say to myself "Oh well, there'll be a mess but it won't matter" and we'd do it together. She's a chef now.

PET is skills based and grounded in the essential values of respect, empathy, genuineness and acceptance of the other. From PET I learnt that families matter, children matter and parents matter. PET is also a vehicle for the parents' personal values, and when they are working well with it, their own spiritual philosophy shines through. It is a truly effective way of communication. A family therapist well known in the United States has said that PET offers the means for "communication at its best". I think that has been proved true in my life, and I have had many letters and feedback forms from participants in the course who have said the same. Part of my work, both theoretical and practical, has been to evaluate PET, and I have plenty of concrete evidence of its worth.

In response to a question, I agree that it would be a major omission to leave out the effect of peer pressure on our young people. It is an outside influence and it has a vast effect. I remember how my eldest child at fourteen was adamant that she would not be seen dead wearing white socks. I thought it was quite ridiculous, and we had quite a few pairs of white socks. But it was more important to her at that time than almost anything else. If I had been skilled and really listened to her, I would have been able to say "You feel really upset having to wear white socks" instead of "Don't be so silly, they're only socks." I would have learned

to my utter astonishment that for her peer group white socks had a sexual connotation, and if I had been able to problem-solve she would have been equally surprised to find that I was open to solutions other than insisting she wear them. It would have been possible for both of us to be happy about the outcome if we had worked through the steps of no-lose conflict resolution.

We have also to remember that our children today have a lot more information and education in many areas than we could possibly have had. To be credible, we need to be able to appreciate their knowledge. That is also a good basis for our respect for them. As to passing on our values, we have been given as they have, the possibility to know and love God as our Creator. We need to foster our appreciation that they too have that possibility, and "seize the moment" to pass on our understanding with enthusiasm whenever it arises. Any means that we can take to help us arrive at our transcendent destiny will benefit us all and benefit the peace of the world.

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