



Defining 'Successful Parenting'

by **Tim Sanford**

Many people believe every parent's job is to make sure his or her children turn out "right." Even though most of us don't quite know what that standard means, we feel obliged to meet it.

But if it were true, it would mean God messed up.

In Genesis we read about a place called the Garden of Eden. It was a perfect environment, a perfect "home."

In this perfect place there were two perfect people — God's children, Adam and Eve. Wouldn't that be nice to have perfect children?

And there was a perfect God — the perfect parent.

There was also a rule: "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17).

You've probably heard the rest of the story.

Adam and Eve chose foolishly, defying what God had told them. Our human decay and ultimate death are stark reminders of that wrong choice — made by perfect people in a perfect environment with a perfect parent.

So what did *God* do wrong? If He "trained them in the way they should go," why did Adam and Eve choose the other option? If Proverbs 22:6 is a *guarantee* of success for parents, why wasn't it a *guarantee* for the Author of the Book?

Enter free will.

I'm talking about a God-given freedom to choose — part of being created in His image. Adam and Eve exercised it, and your teenagers exercise it today.

"But I *want* them to turn out right," you say.

Yes. I agree with you. But that's not your job.

"But I want the best for them, for *their* sakes."

I won't argue with that. But it's still not your job to make sure they do.

If controlling your teenager isn't your job, what is?

This article series will help answer that question.

We need to figure out what your *real* calling is — to help you stop doing what *isn't* your assignment. A blurry job description makes it easy to wander into the overcontrolling side of the delicate balance between control and influence.

Your essential task depends on whether you're a mom or a dad. If that sounds like stereotyping, bear with me. I'm not talking about aprons and rolling pins and dragging cavewomen by the hair. I'm talking about doing what you tend to do best, and what your teen tends to need most from you.

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The Real Job of Dads

A dad's primary, underlying job isn't control.

by **Tim Sanford**

A dad's primary, underlying job isn't control. It's to **validate** every one of his children.

To validate means to let your child know over and over and over, through words and actions, that the following are true:

- "Hey, you exist and you matter to me."
- "You're good enough."
- "You're an okay kid."

Psychotherapists sometimes talk about the **looking-glass-self principle**. It's the idea that children get their earliest, most lasting impressions of who they are from what's reflected back to them by their parents. These impressions become those "records" in the jukebox of your child's brain.

Let's say four-year-old Johnny walks into the room where his dad is reading the newspaper, and Dad doesn't confirm Johnny's presence. Dad doesn't say, "Good to see you, son!" He doesn't even say, "Don't bother me. Can't you see I'm trying to read?" Johnny may begin to doubt his own existence.

It's like the old, philosophical question: If a tree falls in the forest and there's nobody around to hear it, did it make a noise?

In Johnny's case, the answer is no. His existence hasn't been validated by any response. He interprets that to mean, *I'm not an okay person*. This may be a totally wrong interpretation; his dad may not believe this for a second about his son, but this is how Johnny — and most children — will interpret this scenario. That's the way children's brains operate.

That's often why children do bad things, as in these cases:

- Sixteen-year-old Jenny barely saw her dad, thanks to his 12-hour days and golfing habit. He did give her a new computer, though, and thought that would be enough to show her he loved her. She used it to post suggestive photos of herself on MySpace. When her mom found out and tipped off Dad, he went ballistic and banned Jenny from using the computer for the rest of the year.
- Fifteen-year-old Ace saw his math grade going down the tubes, so he figured out a way to cheat on the final. He was desperate for a good grade because his dad only seemed proud of him when he did well in school. His cheating technique wasn't very practiced, though; he was caught and flunked the test and the course. As a result, Dad ruled that Ace would have to wait a whole year to take the driving lessons needed to get a license.
- Thirteen-year-old Bob remembered the fun he used to have playing chess with his dad. These days, though, Dad traveled all the time and buried himself in televised sports when he was home. Without asking, Bob borrowed his father's expensive chess set and took it to school for chess club. Somewhere along the way, he lost a few pieces. When he confessed, Dad yelled at him for being a "careless idiot." After that, Bob didn't think there was much chance the two would ever play chess again.

In all these cases, a failure to do his job led a father to "clamp down" and substitute control for validation. That's a substitution that doesn't work.

Note, too, that by misbehaving these kids got **some** response — even if it was negative. By acting out, teenagers can affirm they exist and that their existence has impact on the world around them. Their lives have made "ripples in the water," so to speak. They get **something** from their parents, even if it's punishment.

To avoid that kind of acting out, remember: **A teenager needs as much of your time and attention as a toddler does.** In fact, a dad's validation is so critical to a child's emotional health that he or she will go to any length — and I do mean any — to get it, whether it's real or artificial.

What Validation Isn't

What do you think of the following example? Does it fall under the definition of validation or not?

Jason wanted to play basketball, but he was no star athlete. In fact, he never shot baskets at home and barely dragged himself to practice for the YMCA team, frequently skipping at the slightest excuse. At home he whined to his dad about how hard the coach made the players work, demanding extra running drills.

When games started and Jason spent most of his time on the bench, he got frustrated and decided to quit. His dad felt sorry for the boy and told him it was all right to drop off the team.

"Some people just don't recognize natural talent," Dad assured Jason.

Is that validation?

And the answer is . . . no.

Validation doesn't mean lying. It doesn't mean telling me, "Great game, son!" when I really played poorly.

Many parents have so bought into the self-esteem movement that no matter who wins or loses the baseball tournament, everybody deserves a trophy. In a feeble attempt to "validate" every player (and assuming the only way to do that is with a shiny cup), we end up extracting the genuine power and intention of true validation.

Just as validation has nothing to do with control, it has no relation to being a "softie" as a parent. You can be firm and strong and still validate your child. It means acknowledging your son or daughter, certifying his or her **existence**, affirming the person apart from the not-so-good performance.

Some fathers go to the opposite extreme, withholding validation when kids don't "measure up." Our culture is so conditional in its validation — affirming only those who've won fame or fortune, or been born (or surgically assisted) with "good" looks — that the same approach often creeps into our parenting. It's easy for a man to validate a good performance; it takes a lot more time and energy to see and value the human being in the absence of any performance and put it into words.

In a way, these forms of "invalid validation" are another attempt to control the way our kids turn out. We want them to grow up full of confidence, so we give even mediocre performances rave reviews. Or we want them to achieve, so we skip the praise so they'll try harder to earn it.

A dad's biggest job is to relinquish that kind of control and affirm that the existence of each of his children, with or without any great (or poor) performance, is acceptable. If you're a father, recognize that each of your children is worthy of being alive. **You** may know that, but each of your children needs to hear it from you.

Value that child as a person, even when disciplining an action or attitude. Make sure your child knows he or she is good enough for you.

Otherwise, when that tree falls in the forest, the silence will be deafening.

The best time to begin validating is the day you bring your baby home from the hospital. Parenting a teenager begins when he or she is born.

When he or she is **born**. Really.

But it's never too late to start. Do it often enough to cut a record in your teen's jukebox that says, "I'm okay. I'm good enough." If you can do that, trying to compensate with control won't be such a temptation.

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The Real Job of Moms

A mom's primary job isn't not cooking dinner, changing diapers or helping a preschooler glue colored macaroni on a coffee can as a Father's Day gift.

by Tim Sanford

What about a mom's primary job? It's not cooking dinner, changing diapers or helping a preschooler glue colored macaroni on a coffee can as a Father's Day gift.

The most important assignment a mom has is to **nurture** her children.

But what does that mean, exactly? Most of us have a vague notion about what being nurtured feels like, but here are a few specifics.

A nurturing mom goes beyond being the "maintenance person" in a child's life. She doesn't just keep a child clean, fed, warm, and dry. She also helps enable her children to develop fully by pouring life into them. She models joy and passion. Nurturing is filling your child up with aliveness.

It's not a joyless, self-sacrificing caricature of Betty Crocker. A nurturing mom takes time to play, read, and take pictures when the toddler's spaghetti ends up on the head instead of in the mouth. She enters the child's world to see things from his or her perspective, even if it means the carpets don't get vacuumed for a while. She provides empathetic understanding from a position of strength and support. That's true whether she's dealing with a toddler or a teen — except for the part about spaghetti on the head.

Like dads, though, moms have a natural urge to protect their children. That can lead them to cross the line between nurturing and futile attempts at control. One mother of twins describes her ongoing battle with this issue:

I remember when my boys were babies. I took them out for their first ride in the double stroller. Along the way, I saw a mean-looking dog running loose ahead of us. Instantly I made plans to save the lives of my children by throwing myself over their little bodies, suffering whatever injuries the dog's sharp teeth might inflict. When the harmless dog trotted away without any attempt to attack us, I laughed at how readily my "mommy radar" had me prepared to die for my kids, without thinking twice.

Two years later, I struggled because it wasn't so easy to keep my little ones safe. As fast-moving toddlers, they were always three steps ahead of me at the lakeside park we visited often. Either I was chasing one down to keep him from following the geese into the lake, or I was wrestling my way up the jungle gym to spot my would-be mountain climber. But I didn't want to refuse my boys the pleasures of the playground and their freedom to explore. How often I wished to put each boy on a 200-foot leash so each could be free — within limits.

Many years later, this struggle continues. I want my 16-year-olds to drive so they can enjoy the normal freedoms and growth of other teenagers. Yet I do what I can to instill the fear of death in them to keep them

on a "leash" of careful driving habits and away from daredevil maneuvers behind the wheel. Finding balance means continually going back and forth between the healthy desire to give my kids freedom and my God-given urge to keep them safe.

You can't control the results, but you can stir in the right ingredients. You can seek to know your children as individuals, different as they might be, and bring out the best in each. You can demonstrate by example how to explore life with zest and express the unique gifts God provides each of us. Your nurturing can blossom in emotional and spiritual growth.

Before you feel burdened with a mile-long list you can never follow through on, let me be quick to say that nurturing is not about "doing it all" or doing it perfectly. It's about doing the best you can — without losing yourself or driving yourself crazy because your own needs aren't taken care of. You won't be able to nurture your children if you're exhausted from burning the candle at both ends.

So please take care of yourself, too. **You** need aliveness in order to pass it on to your teenagers.

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How Much Validation and Nurturing?

Every person needs both validation and nurture to fully develop into a healthy adult.

by Tim Sanford

Validation from Dad, plus nurturing from Mom, equals "mission accomplished" as parents. You'll notice that the word **control** doesn't appear anywhere in that equation.

But speaking of equations, how much validation and nurture does your teenager need?

I've known teens praised for their accomplishments, but hardly ever validated for just existing.

I've known teens kept neat and clean and "mothered," but neglected and lacking those qualities needed to become fully alive as human beings.

Every person needs both validation and nurture to fully develop into a healthy adult. That's why God's ideal plan includes every child being raised by a mom and a dad. It doesn't always happen that way, of course, and I'll say more about that later in this article series.

What happens when a child is raised in a home marked by too little validation or nurture or both? In my 20 years as a professional therapist, I've seen as many people in my office — if not more — who lacked these ingredients as I've seen who were abused by a parent. Don't get me wrong; abuse and neglect are very destructive. But the damage can be just as severe for those who didn't get enough validation from their dads or nurture from their moms.

I remember the story of a missionary kid in Ecuador. Though I've long forgotten the details, one statement from this boy — close to my age at the time — still rings in my ears. He said, "My dad will spend three hours talking to a drunk on a street curb, but he won't spend three minutes talking to me."

This boy was part of a missionary family, doing God's work in a foreign country. There was no abuse here — just lots and lots of "not enough." The damage was just as deep as if it had been caused by active abuse.

The pain, woundedness, and emptiness in case after case like this may be covered with a practiced smile or an impeccable résumé. But they're still there.

So how much is "enough"?

Do you have to be a perfect parent?

No, and no again!

Dad, your validation doesn't have to be flawless. It just needs to be **enough** for that individual child.

Mom, your nurturing doesn't have to be world-class, either. It needs to be **enough** for that particular child.

But how do you know what's "enough"?

"Some" is not the same as "enough"

Consider another word picture. Let's say you need 50 "units" of oxygen to stay alive. If you have 52, you have enough to live on — maybe not enough to run a marathon, but enough to survive.

If you have 96 units, you have enough — and some left over to climb Pikes Peak.

But if you only have 9 units, you don't have enough. You will die.

So if you have 49 units, do you have "enough"?

No.

"What are you bellyaching about?" someone might say. "You have a whole lot more than the person who only got 9!"

Some adults might say, "I know my parents loved me, and they gave me what little they could in the way of validation and nurture. I got more than a lot of other people did growing up."

But was it **enough**?

Some is not equal to **enough**.

"Enough" varies from child to child, personality to personality. What's enough for one child may not be for the next. If a child doesn't get enough validation and nurture, he or she may not physically die — but will be emotionally damaged and maybe even emotionally cease to exist.

What happens when your child doesn't get enough

That was the case with Angie. Sixteen years old, she was brought into my office because she was angry, hurting herself, and depressed.

She came from an upper-middle-class "Christian family," to use her parents' words.

As I got to know Angie, she told me of the daily routine in her home. Dad was always busy with work, even when he was in the house, and rarely spoke a word to any family members. Mom was clinically depressed — nonfunctional in private, but upbeat and social when in the public eye.

There were no harsh words, no abuse, no molestation. Angie was just left to fend for herself — not because her chores were assigned, but because they wouldn't get done otherwise. She did her own laundry, made her own meals, checked her own homework, paid for her own things, and answered her own questions about life.

Yes, she was angry; she was all alone. There was no validation, no nurturing — no "fussing." Yes, she was harming herself; she was taking her anger out on the person she thought was at fault. She told me it was her fault for being born — a tragic jukebox record she'd been playing for years. And yes, she was depressed; you'd be depressed, too, if that were your life.

It was all because she hadn't gotten, and wasn't getting, enough validation and nurture — at least for her.

This story breaks my heart as I recount it. Angie chose illicit drugs rather than therapy to deal with her situation, and I never heard from her again.

Her story isn't unique, either.

This is not a call to "blame the parents for all the teenager's problems."

It's a statement of reality and truth.

That's the vital nature of validation and nurture. Unfortunately, the necessity of both may be forgotten until after a child has been raised — often by moms and dads who spent their parenting years searching in vain for control.

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What Makes It Hard to Do Your Job

Here are some factors that can make it tough to validate, nurture and keep your fingers off the "control" button.

by Tim Sanford

Your job description **is** doable.

You **can** validate and you **can** nurture.

That's not to say, of course, that people and events won't conspire to make your job harder. Here are some factors that can make it tough to validate, nurture and keep your fingers off the "control" button.

1. The judgment of other parents. It's easy to talk about other parents, evaluating their parenting based on how their teenagers are choosing and behaving. Since moms are often more closely tied to raising children than dads are, they're especially susceptible to this kind of talking, comparing, and evaluating.

Some parents even do this comparing in the "fellowship" halls of their own churches. Is that fellowship? Is it encouraging and uplifting?

I don't think so.

The sad news is that it's so common. Have you been on the receiving end? Did you respond by trying harder to control your teen's behavior in order to silence the critics?

One lesson I've learned as a parent is to guard my mouth and not talk in an "evaluating" manner about another mom or dad. I've also learned to guard my heart when I hear others talking about me in that way.

Sure, it's easier said than done. But nobody said parenting was easy — just doable.

2. Catching up. When a child hasn't been sufficiently validated or nurtured, he or she can be thrown into an unconscious emotional "survival mode."

This can put a record like the following on his or her mental turntable: "The only person in this whole world I can trust to look out for me is me. So I will do whatever I think I have to do to get my needs met."

If you think I'm talking only about a child adopted from an orphanage overseas, think again. Not getting enough validation or nurture can and does happen in our society, even among upper-middle-class, churchgoing, intact families.

These kids can be found on a continuum ranging from mild to extreme. Those on the mild end of the scale are often underdiagnosed and labeled as strong-willed, having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, perfectionistic, "control freaks," lazy, underachievers, or just plain selfish.

While these may be partly accurate assessments, they don't tell the whole story. Attempts to help the teen "get his act together" will be met with limited success, because only surface issues are being addressed and not the underlying attachment and bonding problems.

Young people on the extreme end of this scale get noticed more quickly. Their negative behaviors usually are diagnosed as — among other things — oppositional defiant disorder, rebellion, antisocial behavior, or conduct disorder. Even if these diagnoses are correct, they still don't address the deeper issue of what's needed when validation or nurture is lacking.

Whether symptoms are mild or wild, the damage can be deep and severe. Professional therapy with a counselor familiar with bonding and attachment issues is in order.

3. Single parenthood. If you're a single parent, you may be facing a real battle.

Is that an understatement, or what?

I've said that dads are supposed to validate and moms are to nurture. Where does that leave you?

Mentors and other healthy role models can be very helpful, though most single parents I talk with say it's not easy to find such people for their teenagers. And finding them may not be enough. You and your teen may need to wear a path to a counselor's office — being sure to find a professional who has a working understanding of bonding and attachment issues with teenagers.

Melinda had been a single parent to her son for more than nine years when I met the two of them. Andy was now 13. During our first session I asked why they were talking to a therapist like me, since there seemed to be no real issues at hand.

Melinda explained that she just wanted a "checkup" for Andy and herself, to make sure they were both ready for the changes the teenage years would bring.

As the sessions progressed, it became apparent to me that this single mom had gotten it right. Yes, Andy was an "easy child" as far as personality goes. But Melinda had been purposeful in her parenting, and had kept Andy around spiritually solid men in the church through various activities. She'd given Andy enough nurturing and had done her best to see that he'd gotten as much validation as possible. The situation wasn't perfect, but for Andy it was **enough**.

There are many stories like Angie's — and many like Andy's, too.

If you're a single mom, you can nurture **and** validate your teen. If you're a single dad, you can nurture as well as validate.

Defining Success as a Parent

Get into the mind-set that everything you do as a parent ultimately is part of validating or nurturing your children.

by Tim Sanford

Regardless of your parenting situation, you can erase "control" from your job description and add "validate and nurture." While you're at it, don't forget all that fine print about paying for things, coaching your daughter's soccer team, correcting your son's awful table manners, sitting through countless piano recitals, teaching spiritual values and how to balance a checkbook, driving all over town, disciplining, encouraging, saying no at times and yes at others, setting boundaries and repeating all this as needed.

In doing this year after year, you greatly increase the opportunity for your teenager to choose what's wise and right. Even though you can't control the final outcome, you've stacked the deck in your child's favor. **That's** what your job as a parent is.

Get into the mind-set that everything you do as a parent ultimately is part of validating or nurturing your children, especially during their teen years — preferably in ways they don't consider offensive or embarrassing.

And don't forget that it's not about being perfect or exactly "right."

It's about "enough."

Relax. You can do these things. And while there may be hard times, you can do them **successfully**, even if your teenager doesn't turn out "right" — now or later.

Remember, the results aren't in your hands.

The clearer you are about this job description, the more able you'll be to maintain a balanced approach to this thing called control.

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Additional information to help you succeed as a parent

Tim Sanford

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