

Giving the Gift of Safe and Loved
A Journey through Gentleness

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The social framework of our society to value, teach, and protect our children to achieve social standards continues to be re-developed with methods, theories to assess the child, parent, teachers, and other professionals in how we use our tools to enhance the child's quality of life¹. These methods and theories have been very influential in research on children's religious and faith development, yet the focus has been on cognitive abilities not on acceptance and relationship^{2, 3}. This awareness limits our understanding to accept this child for not what they know, but how one should receive faith and unconditional love of God through sacraments without a certain "cognitive" level⁴. Does this give us an excuse for our own behavior when our children struggle in our society to identify that certain competencies have not been achieved? Kohn⁵ has identified that most teaching methods have been summarized in six words, "we do this to get that". He goes on to state that through this framework it only creates the extrinsic valuing for the child. Missing the important foundation to nurture the intrinsic value. Greenspan^{6, 7}

¹ Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking. Cognitive development in social context*. New York: Oxford University Press.

² Basset, R. (1990). Picturing God: A nonverbal measure of God concept for conservative Protestants. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 9, 73-81.

³ Fowler, J. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and quest for meaning*. New York: Harper & Row.

⁴ Levine, S. (1999). Cognition as the foundation of spirituality. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 42(2), 121-140.

⁵ Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by rewards*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co.

⁶ Greenspan, S. (2001). Commentary: Distinguishing the capacity to engage from the capacity for exchanging affective signals. *The Journal of Developmental and Learning Disorders*, 4 (1), 123-128.

⁷ Greenspan, S. The affect diathesis hypothesis: the role of emotions in core deficit in autism and the development of intelligence and social skills (2002). *Journal of Developmental and Learning Disorders*, 5 (1).

continues to address the need for us to enhance the social emotional development of our children. We need to teach our children to engage in meaningful, purposeful relationships. Greenspan expands on this interaction that it is through our own awareness that we must engage with meaning to create teachable moments that enhances one's understanding of how we must treat others in our society. We cannot simply engage our self with the framework of physical discipline. Discipline means teaching and we must be willing to deepen our relationship with our children to give the blessing for our faith to make the foundation for peace and justice to create meaning for the most marginalized members in our society.

It is through our beliefs that our human family must be willing to work together not for the wealthy and powerful, but to build harmony into our human society to drive a positive outcome for social justice. A.H. Franke (1702/1885), an Eighteenth Century German Lutheran Priest, claimed that treating children with “gentleness and sweetness” instead of “strictness and harshness” is the best way “to present to them the love of God in Jesus Christ,” to awaken faith in them,” and “to bend their hearts toward the good”⁸.

We must realize that our own faith must be brought to the table to teach our children about moral and spiritual matters, to nurture this faith into our daily lives. We must become disciplined in our commitment to our children. Yet how, when in today's society we still need to learn to overcome the temptations that focus on extrinsic worth to serve our self? We must learn to give the daily blessing to nurture the child of God to live righteous lives and to care for the most marginalized in our society.

⁸ Bunge, M. (2004). Historical Perspectives on children in the church: Resources for spiritual formation and a theology of childhood today. In D. Ratcliff (Ed.), *Children's Spirituality* (p. 47). Eugene, OR, Cascade Books.

Over the past 10 years it has been our practice to focus on this most pure relationship, nurturing the child's faith, building a sense of companionship, and formulating community to teach social justice through the framework of *Gentle Teaching*^{9, 10, 11, 12, 13}. In order to do so, we have created meaning through our interactions to give blessings to children to nurture their garden of faith and unconditional love for God. Initially, it is essential that we understand the foundation of *our selves* through five themes:

First, our moment to touch the lives of the children we serve, second, to place meaning in the words, third, to give value to the relationship and ritual, fourth, to create new moral memories to create a vision for our future and finally, to put daily discipline in our commitment to teach one to be safe and loved.

It is through these five themes that the following patterns have been noted to give blessing to our children and to lay the foundation of social justice. We see our touch goes beyond our physical touch as we engage to teach one to feel safe and loved as we create a meaning of doing things together to give them a sense of protection as they are learning that it good to do things with us and for others. In our spoken message we see what we give goes beyond what we say, to the doing. It is not just what we do or what we say, but how much love we put in the doing. It's being aware to listen as we have dialogue with our children. That our language during this dialogue is not abstract, but concrete to give

⁹ Casey, K., McGee, J. J., Stark, J. A., & Menolascino, F. J. (1984). *A community based system for the mentally retarded: The ENCOR experience*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

¹⁰ McGee, J. J., Menolascino, F. J., Hobbs, D. C. & Menousek, P. (1987). *Gentle Teaching: A non-aversive approach to helping persons with mental retardation*. New York: Human Sciences Press.

¹¹ McGee, J. J. (1989). *Being together: Toward a psychology of human interdependence*. Omaha, Ne: Creighton University.

¹² McGee, J. J. (1998). *Mending broken hearts*. Abbotsford, BC: Homes Society.

¹³ McGee, J. J. & Menolascino, F. J. (1991). *Beyond gentle teaching: A Non-aversive Approach to Helping Those in Need*, New York: Plenum.

meaning. Giving value to the relationship instead of modifying one's behavior to perform the task. It is also in our interactions that we need to be warm instead of being cold. Creating new moral memories for their future that our role is one of a companion, but also as an authoritarian versus an authoritative. We see that our daily commitment focuses on unconditional love versus contingency on rewards or punishments. Through this blessing of unconditional love, one can unfold a journey of the blessing into nine destinations, which will enhance the blessing.

Initially, our role as teachers, caregivers, and parents is to facilitate meaningful activities that address the individual's quality of life. We create daily rituals with activities of value: knowing one's life plan helps to identify what we need to be doing with them, what we need to be teaching and how one needs a sense of protection to feel safe to express their feelings as they learn so that there is purpose. The purpose is to build relationships that have trust and respect, it is to realize we are here together learning and sharing, that our experiences don't have to be fun – for our time together becomes protection in knowing that we are here doing things together in the child's day. The caregiver's role is to be a gift-giver, bringing a commitment -- not just to do – but to inspire the child to want to do it – if we just say it is a waste of time or take a short cut it de-values not only the activity, but also us. It is important for each activity to convey to the child, “you are the blessing!” Creating a structure of daily rituals lays a foundation for who the person is allowing one to see the things that we do have purpose and value in their life, not just teaches them what we do, but gives them hope that all the things we do, fun and not so fun having equal merit in our daily responsibilities, When one places value with the things that are important in the child's life not only does it give the child

an opportunity for new moral memories, but allows the child to feel valued, safe and loved, it identifies purpose for being with others, and brings meaning to the time shared with others. This is the first step toward the caregiver becoming a companion who is walking side by side on the journey. For the child it is their presence that is needed, not their understanding or compliance. Our self-awareness of what is expected of the child is critical for this destination. We must not focus our time on grabbing one's attention or ensuring that one does the task right for this only creates contingencies to the relationship and the ritual. Yet these things, one's attention and being able to do the task, are important for the child to hear and to complete. However, we need to go deeper to create an intrinsic motivator for the child and this can only be done with the value of unconditional love for the child and being able to change who we are in this journey to build the relationship.

In the second destination, the caregiver continues to facilitate meaningful activities but now with the focus on recognizing and nurturing the child's sense of self. The child's self-worth emerges from repeated engagement in activities that have value. Engagement between the caregiver and child draws out the child's likes and dislikes and paints a picture of "who am I" for the child. It is important that the caregiver nurtures this awareness with the goal of building a sense of community together because disregard for the child's unique expression of participation prevents the child from recognizing his/her own worth. The child's growing recognition of his/her internal feelings lays a foundation for intrinsic motivation and is a step toward building a bridge with others. It is important as the caregiver that we create a foundation for the child to be excited about the choices one has to express one self, from the simple choice that seems limited such as, "John

needs to sit in this chair and this chair only as he learns,” devalues our ability to build and expand on this opportunity. Such statements as, “should we come from the right or left to sit, or should I pull the chair out with my left or right hand, or should I create a ritual of believing I’m going to space and need to sit in my astronaut seat and listen to my Star Commander? The opportunity to create meaning in one’s space is endless, and it is the key to this destination. Remembering one is becoming oneself and beauty is allowing one to seek out these choices, with collaboration and cooperation.

As the child's self-awareness grows, he/she begins to recognize the caregiver as a companion in the journey toward building community. Out of habit or ease, the caregiver may be tempted to act as a *provider* and to do things *for* the child. However, the caregiver's role is to participate *with* the child and to be a *bridge-builder* to help the child feel connected to others. If we fail to nurture a sense of belonging for the child, the child experiences disconnectedness, which we may see through his/her behaviors and actions. While engaging with the child, the caregiver uses his/her tools (presence, eyes, words, and hands) to convey to the child that he/she is safe and loved.

A child may *be* safe and loved long before he/she *feels* safe and loved. While the absence of this feeling leads to a stronger sense of disconnect, we can instead nurture this feeling with warm interactions and participation in meaningful rituals. At this destination, the child recognizes that he/she is safe with the caregiver and unconditionally loved by the caregiver. From this recognition, the child feels a deeper sense of connectedness to the caregiver, and it is the caregiver’s role to be present and non-judgmental to allow the child to explore his/her feelings.

At this destination, what the child desires most is inner contentment. When coming

from a state of disconnect and frustration, the child seeks inner contentment as a resolution. When growing in one's feeling of being safe and loved, the child seeks inner contentment as the step of internalizing this feeling. Once the child recognizes that he/she is safe with the caregiver, he/she longs for inner harmony and freedom from traumatic stress.

This destination is the turning point toward peace and resolution. As the child seeks companionship, it is the caregiver's job to approach the child with open arms and to try to connect with the child. This moment of change is the beginning of a new moral memory filled with inner harmony and acceptance of each other.

The caregiver and child are now present together to build on the foundation of inner contentment and to create a true meaning of companionship. Companionship is an interdependent state, where both parties recognize that "I am because you exist." This reflection of oneself in the other forms a deeper understanding between the caregiver and the child. The caregiver's role is to be present with the child and to create teachable moments to support the child's growth and development, and this engagement lays the foundation for mutual valuing.

Mutual valuing is a state of respect, recognition that it is good to be together and to do things together, and there is unconditional acceptance between the caregiver and the child. As caregivers, we must assess how we are using our tools to convey valuing with warmth and flexibility. Valuing does not mean that we focus on changing the child's behavior, but rather on nurturing the relationship as a foundation for learning.

This final destination is the goal of our relationship, creating companionship through meaningful rituals. From the relationship that has been built, we can now expand

into new and different areas of doing things together. We draw others in to expand the child's community, we continue to nurture the child's possibilities and vulnerabilities as we work toward quality of life, and we continue on the journey toward unconditional love.

Conclusion

We are all created in God's image and we are all on individual spiritual journeys. The current models of spiritual development for an individual with an intellectual or developmental disability fails to account for the whole picture of the individual's quality of life. The framework of Gentle Teaching and, in particular, these nine destinations of spiritual development bring meaning to a child's spirituality through unconditional, meaning and relationship.

REACTION FROM GRADUATE STUDENT

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Written in stone at the Oracle of Delphi were the words “Know thyself” and this command is echoed in the *Gentle Teaching* framework. It stands to reason that those of us committed to living professional lives in the service of social justice, do well to reflect on the values, beliefs, and tenets of faith that so often drive our interactions with others, particularly those who are marginalized in our society. By training ourselves to maintain an inner gaze, we learn how to live with wise compassion for ourselves and those in our communities.

I have read that the Dalai Lama awakens each morning with a prayer of love, and a dedication of the day’s future activities to the benefit of all living things (Bennett-Goleman, 2001). *Gentle Teaching*, like the Buddhist observation of loving-kindness, is a discipline that takes sustained mindfulness and devotion. Like learning to play a musical instrument well, it requires vigilance, daily practice, and the concentrated effort of the body, mind, and soul. Employing *Gentle Teaching* methods increases our ability to balance self-awareness with behavior, and dedicated work in this area is paid with the development of harmonious interpersonal relationships with others.

The concept of *Gentle Teaching* has often been associated with the care and education of those living with disabilities as an alternative to aversive procedures used in behavioral therapy (Jones, 1994). However, the cultivation of reciprocal relationships through human valuing can be applied in a broader educational context. For example, an emphasis on relational learning seems to go hand in hand with principles of constructivist learning theory, which stresses a shared responsibility among students and teachers for making sense of knowledge and experience in a classroom setting (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

This notion is particularly salient for students who are steeped in a culture of escalating school violence (Schreiber Dill & Haberman, 1995). Whether it takes place in affluent, so-called “safe” communities, or in poverty-stricken neighborhoods where aggression, callousness, stress, high mobility, and homelessness are commonplace; we must ask the question: How can we promote social justice in classrooms by providing students with a gentler way to live and a better way to see and experience life?

Schools are in a unique position of introducing students to an alternative culture of non-violence through *Gentle Teaching* and moral vision. In turn, this provides them with opportunities for more constructive ways of relating and the ability to solve problems through empathic decision-making (Schreiber Dill & Haberman, 1995). Again, it must be noted that these benefits are contingent on teachers’ willingness to be self-reflective about their instructional methods and interpersonal relationships.

Thoughtless authoritarian responses to student aggression in the classroom do not relieve the fear, distrust, verbal threats, and physical pain that many students bring with them to school. These are relational patterns that hinder learning (Schreiber Dill & Haberman, 1995). Instead, teachers must model gentleness in reaction to violence. Students grasp the vision for a new way of behaving by seeing what teachers value; how

they develop gentle patterns of communication; and how they respond to threats, verbal abuse, or typical environmental violence (Schreiber Dill & Haberman, 1995).

Ultimately, *Gentle Teaching* reminds us to place emphasis on the relational nature of learning. By focusing on the maintenance of internal wellsprings of love, kindness, warmth, and compassion, we open a door that allows us greater understanding of ourselves and we also begin to create relationships that allow us deeper and more transformational connections to humanity.

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REACTION FROM GRADUATE STUDENT

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It is invaluable that such teaching of unconditional love and relationship before knowledge and understanding be present in this society driven by material possessions and dominance over others. By spending time with those who cannot function without the assistance of others is an opportunity for teaching not only for the child but also the care-giver.

Gentle Teaching is something that most people will not likely be able to live as fully as others. We must acknowledge this just as when people say: It takes a special person to be with or work with this population. Anthony McCrovitz (Tony) presents a philosophy that does not require everyone to work with the cognitively impaired. This can be for our own relationships just as well. Are we daring enough to think about and evaluate how well we love each other? Are we free to act in such a way that does not follow certain rituals and still be celebrated? Do we do this for those who are close to us?

The topic of isolation is important for any care giver to be aware and to stay within a healthy level. As a care giver myself, in a community for three years, isolation was something to be careful of because as the community grew in number, so did the distance. Agency is also something that can hamper and threaten community. People who are leaders of organizations can grow dangerously distant to the daily rhythm and relationship building that care givers and their special needs friends create in their home or place of work. These same leaders hold a lot of power over how and when standards are met and what is supported for the well being of care-givers. Policies and decisions pertaining to finance and how that affects the responsibilities of the care giver are a subject to seriously consider. Can a care giver give an unconditional love and healthy atmosphere to a special needs person, and maintain a sense of autonomy to uphold certain duties such as objective documentation for state and federal funding sources?

There are people who do not thrive with closeness the same way others do. Perhaps they were not given certain attention when they were developing. The wonderful thing about GT is that it is not the only answer for relationship development, it appears instead, to be a sign of humanity at its best, when it is vulnerable as well as dignified.

This is not a comfortable way to live and think and act toward life. It sounds wholesome and we should strive for it, but actually living it, really intent on unconditional love can be easily written off as superficial or impossible idealism. Unconditional love is not overly allowing. As we get to know each other, so we can show our approval and non approval as situations or interactions arise. It is not about control, which could be very challenging for many of us.

There can be a time when a child with impairments gets overwhelmed with situations that are not easy for him or her to stay calm and collected, so perhaps a behavior lashes out and it gets violent. Only care givers who really know this person can see them through and forgive them, love them and encourage them to continue developing that personality that is nurturing to self and others. Some care givers cannot do this. No matter how serious their intentions or time, it's a hard truth but people grow differently, and transitions are not as predictable as we would have.

The emphasis of meeting people where they are, instead of how we want them to be is something that doesn't always get associated with unconditional love. This teaching is more concrete in an important way. There is an everlasting need to teach persons in places of brokenness to know love. This sort of life calls upon the caregiver to change as well. The caregiver may even find that he/she in turn is broken as well. This Gentle Teaching in living practice is possibly a very intense experience of solidarity, to be broken and vulnerable together.