**Parenting the parent**

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I have served the education sector of Pakistan for almost 22 years now. Today if someone were to suggest that the most challenging aspect of that journey would be to deal with the troubling demands of my students, or the difficult task of maintaining teacher quality/ turnover or perhaps the rigid, shortsighted or business-oriented nature of the school management, I would disagree and say none of the above. Instead, I call parenting the parent as the most tedious, time consuming and demanding challenge of them all.

Parents were the most unexpected focus of my job both as a teacher and then later as the head of a programme. While there were many success stories in dealing with them, there were quite a few failures in making them understand a particular point of view. Like students, there came a varied lot of parental mindsets as well and there were many disagreements too, but then there were many agreements littered along the way as well.

The harder issue was not about convincing them regarding an administrative or a management related problem. The real battle was to convince them about an academic issue or non-issues in some cases. Statements or comments like, “but many others do it too”, “somebody was saying”, “but we or my cousin/friend/ sibling’s child did it differently” or “I want to see more work in his/her copies” were the most common queries, discussions and deliberations. A few parents could not be convinced through any logic, fact, research or argument as they wanted to do what others did – and that too blindly and without any research. Some wanted me or my team to make all the decisions about their child as they couldn’t be bothered to do their own homework/ research.

Then there were the parents who along with this were also hell-bent on breathing down the necks of their children or wanted to micromanage them forever. These helicopter parents would just not see another perspective and would not move an inch. They refused to see how their children had different aptitudes, likes and dislikes than them or the kids they were constantly being compared to. These parents had to be told that their child’s potential or mindset was very different from what they wanted it to be and forcing them to do something was perhaps not a good idea.

These poor kids fulfilled the rituals of a busy daily schedule of sports, tuitions, reading, extra-curricular etc but the essence behind most of them was lost because of this imposition and there was zero learning happening. Many such children went through major mental health issues that surfaced years down the line if not back then. The parent was making the child become what they as kids could not become or achieve.

My toughest battles were with those parents whose children would grow up, but the parents refused to grow up alongside. No effort was made to allow the child to be independent, responsible or simply accountable for their actions. Such children remained within the umbrella and sadly never realised their true abilities or even aptitudes as they just followed what their parents asked them to do or become – no matter how miserable they felt about it or how demotivated they were as their own liking was for another subject, profession, method of thinking and even play.

But then there was a generation of parents who never raised their kids on their own and they were left at the whims of domestic help or others. These parents would rarely come to school or even know what their child did at school or, more dangerously, at home as well. This was a generation of young ones raised by their local or imported ‘ayas’. Such kids were not just dropped and picked from schools by domestic help only, they were also left to them for their food, games and in some cases even study requirements. Many mothers and fathers did not even know the everyday milestones and failures of their kids and they began to pick up the language, etiquettes and mindset of those that were not family but were there as supplement help to them.

Any effort to counsel the either too controlling or the too detached parents was a nightmare of sorts and took a good chunk of quality time from me as teacher and more as a head of school. My standard suggestion to all parents was to get to know their child, spend time with her/him, let the child evolve into his/her natural talents and always listen to what they have to say and not just talk to them. My plea was to please allow them the space to tell you anything and everything as no topic should be off the table.

I would beg them to let their young ones share their fears, their happiness, their inhibitions, their insecurities and their ideas with them. A parent’s love is and should be unconditional and a child should feel free to be her/ himself not just physically, but emotionally as well. All this requires time, effort and a thought process on the part of the parents – and more importantly this is in no way a ticket for parents to walk in, stay and control the lives or decisions of their children.

Children ought to be trained to be independent beings and thinkers. They need to be told that it's okay to go wrong or to make mistakes or make wrong decisions; they need that confidence from their parents first to be able to survive in this very demanding and cruel world. All of these basic ideas are strangely one of the biggest roadblocks in the minds of today’s parents and were a priority for me in my two decades of serving the education sector of Pakistan.

How will a child learn to bike unless they ride one, fall, make mistakes and then pick them up? How will a child learn to eat from a spoon or put food in his/her plate from the main dish unless they try, drop or mess up? How will a child learn not to own something that isn’t theirs when parents continue to do their schoolwork/ projects and ask them to lie and own it in public? Why will a child learn mindfulness when they see a distracted parent busy on their mobiles when they want the parent to focus on them and them alone? These are the questions that bother me to this day.

Towards the end of all arguments, I used to tell the parents to always remember that it is always about the child at the end of the day and everything else is and should be secondary. The child must always come first.

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