

Seeing Your Child

By Barbara Whiteside, www.whitesideworkshops.com

December 15, 2008

Published in *The Enneagram Journal: A Publication of the International Enneagram Association*, July 2010, Volume 3, Issue 1.

“Love the child in front of you, not the one in your mind.”

I don't remember where or when I first saw this quote, but I have never forgotten it. Who among us, even as adults, doesn't want to be seen and loved as we are? The humanistic psychologists believed this to be the case, insisting that it is not possible for clients to move towards health until they feel acceptance, genuineness, and empathy from their therapist. Freud, too, said, “In the end, psychoanalysis is a cure of love.”

As adults, we often see the limitations of our preferred style and of the passion that motivates it. Some of us get very attached to our positive self-image, rather liking our Type. Others of us have an odious self-image, disliking our Type, but nonetheless being attached to it. Even as we seek to move from the constraints of our habitual way of being to what is best in us, our Type has a pervasive influence in how we see our world, including our children.

It can be confusing when we think of Enneagram Types in our children. We know our child's esteem is somewhat conditional on our ability to give them what Carl Roger's called “Unconditional Positive Regard.” Children actually need their egos strengthened. For example, our Three children need to hear the applause when they put on a skit for the neighborhood or write a good paper. Ones need to be encouraged as they try to get that horse drawn exactly like it is in the book, and listened to when others disappoint them. Fives need to feel their privacy needs being honored as they dig deeply into understanding all there is on the subject of dinosaurs. Sevens need us to laugh at their jokes and turn drudgery into fun. Twos need us to appreciate their help clearing the table or erasing the chalkboard. Yet, it can be a concern to us as parents to see our phobic Six child terrified of the first day of school, or our Four child creating drama in the family by acting out his feelings, or our Eight child coming at her sibling with a baseball bat, or our Five child disappearing into his room in the middle of a holiday gathering, or our Nine child going along with a peer group that is making poor choices.

I believe that the best way to work with parents is to first help them see themselves more clearly by understanding their Enneagram Type and how the lens of their Type influences the ways they see their kids. By the same token, it is important for parents to appreciate that some behaviors are more a reflection of age and stage of development than they are of their child's possible Enneagram type. For example, I have noticed that parents of three year olds often insist that their child is an Eight after learning the Enneagram, not because their child actually is an Eight (it is too young to tell in my opinion), but because a lot of three year olds act in Eight-like ways. Similarly, many parents will see their

teenagers as Fours because of the moodiness, intensity, occasional drama, and existential questioning that can so often be a part of adolescence, whether or not the teen actually is a Four. Developmental stages can mimic Type, and sometimes parents will confuse a stage that their child is in with Type.

Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principal" and the "Observer Effect" from quantum physics comes into play here as well. I understand his "Uncertainty Principal" as the idea that certain aspects of a particle or atom cannot be precisely known and therefore should be understood as probabilities, not absolutes. His "Observer Effect" is the idea that the very act of measuring an attribute (typing our children, in this case) has an impact on that attribute, and that the more accurate you try to make the measurement, the more impact.

What does all of this have to do with kids? It's difficult for us to see our own children accurately, because we are using the lens of our Type as the instrument to view our child. Many of us have had the experience of a neighbor, relative or teacher describing to us our very own child and it feels as if they are describing a stranger, certainly not our child. The more a parent can learn to observe herself and understand her own Type, the more likely a parent can see their child clearly. I know an Eight father who insists that his nine year old son is an Eight, and they contend with huge power struggles. The dad sees a world of weak and strong, and himself as a hammer in a world of nails; he sees his boy in that context. Perhaps with a better understanding of his own ego structure and the way that makes him see the world, he would be able to adjust his view and see and understand his son as he actually is. Both father and son would benefit.

Frequently we have our own point biases that color the way we see our kids. I know a Three mother who had a very easy time with her Seven daughter because they both had assertive energy and enjoyed lots of activity, albeit for different motivations. This same mother has struggled in understanding her Four daughter because she saw her as somehow deficient in ways that the other daughter was not. Who among us are free of bias? I have not yet met a parent who doesn't struggle over one child a bit more than another. We need to be conscious of our type preferences in ourselves and others, especially in our dealings with our children.

One of the ways I work with parents around this obstacle is to draw upon the Buddhist concept of "Right View". What is our intention in deciding our child is this or that type? Are we using that understanding to help guide us towards compassion, understanding, and acceptance or to support a bias we have? By and large, my experience is that most parents deeply love their children but often don't understand them. I ask parents to hold their opinions about their child lightly with openness to seeing their child as a dynamic developing personality rather than statically set in a concrete Enneagram type.

As adults, we know we have all the types within us, with perhaps more obvious connections to our wings, stress and security points. The same is true with our children. I ask parents to not be too certain, because certainty will lead them to collecting evidence to support their point of view and denying evidence to the contrary. The Enneagram is not supposed to be about absolutes. I might say to a parent, "I can see that your child is

showing some very Six-like characteristics. Let's try to understand this from what might be a Six perspective, and come up with some ideas on how to work with this situation."

What more can we do once we feel we are able to bring some clarity of vision to how we see our children? How do we work to strengthen their fragile and developing egos while keeping in mind that an ego gone awry could someday cause them great suffering?

We parents can do this by becoming the holders of paradox. We can see and love our self-forgetting Nine child while watching for movement into the higher essence qualities of Love, where the Nine child is no longer invisible to himself or others, weighs in and is included, and Right Action, when his energy gathers behind his conviction. We can give our Eight children clear boundaries, follow through, stand up to them and not be bullied, while holding in our consciousness their Innocence. We can listen to our Six child's fear of the dark or of our going away for the weekend, acknowledge their feelings, answer their questions, brainstorm together ways of easing their anxiety (a night light and the door open, calling every morning and night, etc.) while simultaneously knowing that the very thing they are searching for, they already have... Trust and Courage.

Most of all, we can listen. The theologian Paul Tillich says, "The first duty of love is to listen." There are plenty of accolades, kudos, and rewards given for our children's accomplishments, their doings. Most of us would say we want our children to know they are loved for who they are, not just what they do. My favorite definition of empathy is, "Giving a willing, spacious, open presence to another." Listening well to another is like a walk in nature. Something slows down inside and we begin to hear the quieter voice trying to get out, just like we hear the chirp of an unfamiliar bird. If we can learn to listen well to our children, we give airtime to all those uncomfortable feelings that are a part of Type. We begin to hear our One's annoyance (anger) at her friend or teacher, or our Four's sadness and envy over not getting the main part in the play, or our Six's doubt about asking the girl to the dance.

Through listening, our child becomes familiar with all the characteristics that define his or her Type. Little needs to be relegated to the basement of the unconscious because the child is feeling listened to and loved and accepted exactly as he is, with all the messiness and mix of feelings that make us human. In those moments when we no longer contract around the passions as they surface, something magical begins to open in all of us, children and parents alike. It is here, in this crucible of relationship, that we know love and all the essence characteristics that flow from that source.