

When parents talk to me about their children it often seems as if it would be helpful if they could look in the mirror (at themselves) rather than across the room (at their child). Parenting is, after all a relationship between two people, complicated by all of the parent's psychological characteristics as well as by whatever challenge the child is presenting. This might be easiest to explain by way of examples:

1. My child gets incredibly anxious before tests.
2. He's so worried about where he'll get accepted to college.
3. She has a good day if things go well with her friends and a bad day if they don't.
4. If he isn't satisfied with his performance (piano, basketball, etc.) there's no living with him.
5. She gets herself into a crummy mood and then takes it out on me.

In each case parent are observing something that concerns them about their child. We know we would do absolutely anything to help them feel better but our efforts to help them might be limited if we only look at what they're doing and how they're handling themselves. Chances are the situation they are in has been influenced somewhat by our parenting and by what we have taught them with our model when we have had to deal with something similar.

1. Do we get anxious before important events in our lives? Are we frantic before the holidays because we want everything to be "just right"? If we are facing a deadline at work, or planning a speech, do we demonstrate with our behavior that life is filled with important events in which our worth is going to be evaluated by others?
2. What messages have we been sending about college and the importance of being accepted into one of the "good" ones? Is it possible that we have created this level and intensity of worry in our children by our own preoccupation with this issue?
3. How are we when we have a conflict with a colleague at work or tension with a friend, relative or neighbor? Do we model that it is difficult for us to feel content when others are annoyed with us, misunderstanding us or talking behind our backs?

4. Is there a chance that they perceive us as critical and judgmental? What do we say when they don't seem to be performing as well as we think they could be? Do we look disappointed when they get less than perfect grades or when they don't practice their piano (dance, basketball, etc.) as much as we think they should?
5. What are we like when we're moody? Do we blame others for "how they make us feel"? Is there a chance that we have inadvertently taught our children that the only times to feel good is when everything is going exactly the way we want it to go?

By looking in the mirror (instead of across the room) we might discover ways that we have been contributing to our children's problems. In addition, we might realize that we can help them change and grow by adjusting some of the messages we may have been sending and modeling new behaviors.