

Advice to Parents From Parents

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From SAAS Watch

The other day I was commiserating with a parent whose son had done one of those things that evoked in both the parent and in me a “How could you ever do something almost as stupid as some of the stupid things I used to do” response.

As the conversation developed, the parent said, “I have two children; in your job you’re responsible for hundreds and you’ve had experience with thousands. Are there any suggestions that you could pass on to us parents that might help us do our jobs better?”

The First and Most Important Bit of Advice I occasionally share with parents came from a mother in New York. Addressing a group of freshmen parents and reflecting upon the experiences of her eldest son, who had graduated with honors the previous June after a rocky freshman year, she said, “If you had the perfect kid from the perfect family in the perfect school with the perfect teachers, you’d still have problems, because growing up just ain’t easy. So don’t beat yourself up over every mistake your kid makes. Just relax, follow your gut, and do your best.”

Correctly, or incorrectly, some parents are not all that confident in their guts. A solution is to have in place a plan or a process to support the intuitive awareness that all of us have to a greater or lesser degree. Here’s an excellent suggestion from a SAAS dad about how to have a better gut, especially about the important issue of whether the parent should get involved in his kid’s school life as the student’s advocate or let the student handle a problem on his or her own. “When my son entered high school I told him that I would always take seriously his serious concerns and that he needed to be able to help me to distinguish between those times when he is just kvetching about something or someone and that time when he has a significant concern that is beyond his ability to deal with.”

In my experience, parents who hit over .300 in the National League of Parenting are

those who can distinguish between the venting of that normal frustration which requires only a semi-attentive ear (“Nobody likes Joe: he’s even mean to cute little kitties.”) and a call for help which requires intervention, when a student is in over his or her head. The best thing to do with the former scenario is to listen politely and do nothing, whereas the latter condition should be addressed immediately, as it almost always involves a life situation which the young person just does not have the experience to negotiate properly (For example, how to avoid being pushed into Things I Don’t What to Do by social and/or peer pressure).

Some parents will read the preceding paragraph and say, “I can’t get my kid to talk about anything, and you want me to talk to her about her real problems?” The key to getting kids to talk about important things is to insure that they feel they can talk to you, and be heard, without getting hit in the face by a Knee-Jerk Reaction (Supply your own example of a KJR from your experience as a child or as a parent.).

As someone who in his younger days was to KJR’s what Edgar Martinez is to base hits, I can attest to the virtue and the value of wisdom which I stole from a parent whose business was teaching communication techniques. His advice: At important times, when you think that your hot buttons might get pushed, train yourself to listen more than to talk, to use descriptive language (“I now understand what you did. I’m less clear about why you did it. Could you explain to me why you made the choice you did?”) rather than judgmental language (“You cheated on the exam. You’ve ruined your life, embarrassed our entire family, and threatened the Existence of Western Civilization. How could you?”), and to ask a ton of questions.

The mistake that many people make is to react too emotionally and too quickly to information that is unpleasant or, as is often the case, incomplete. In most situations there’s no



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rush to have a reaction. Go slowly and don't create a bigger problem than the one you're trying to solve. Before you act, make sure you understand the issue on the table, which often requires understanding the issue behind the issue. If a young person, or an older person, knows that you don't overreact, you stand a much greater chance of hearing the truth.

The last bit of advice comes from another SAAS parent: "Don't, don't, don't, and I

repeat DO NOT listen to rumors or contribute to the rumor mill. If you have a problem with someone at school, or if your child brings a problem to you, go talk directly to the person at school who is supposedly aware of the problem or is the cause of the problem."

Amen.

