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**May 5, 2010 – Parenting: Improve your skills with self awareness and empathy.**

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There are many principles for improving parenting skills which have empirical support to help parents with the exceptional task of raising children. Some examples include giving praise and positive attention, being firm and supportive, implementing consistent consequences, and spending quality time together. One topic that does not often receive attention is the notion that parents can improve their parenting skills by developing self awareness and practicing empathy. Simply put, self awareness refers to our ability to know ourselves and our own needs, while empathy refers to our ability to know the perspective of others.

As parents, we have to take care of ourselves first if we are to effectively respond to our children's needs. More fully appreciating our children's "perspective;" their thoughts and feelings within a developmental framework (i.e., typical behavior given a particular age) can greatly affect parenting skills. Enhancing our understanding of a child's capabilities at various ages and stages (e.g., problem solving, moral development, etc.), can dramatically and positively impact our expectations of them, thereby enhancing the empathy with which we approach them.

Developing self awareness can facilitate our personal understanding of how we navigate personal relationships; get our needs met (or not), and how we interpersonally impact others (i.e. how other's perceive us). Furthermore, if we are in a committed relationship, we have to pay careful attention to the impact of this relationship on our children, requiring us to spend the necessary time nurturing these committed relationships thereby modeling effective communication and problem solving for our children. Whether we know it or not, our children watch us closely, observing how we interact with the world. Modeling effective ways of communicating, dealing with conflict, and expressing love can enhance our parenting effectiveness.

To increase empathic understanding, we must fully engage ourselves in the perspective of others to understand how they may be feeling. When we apply these concepts to our parenting skill repertoire, we can more fully understand how our children affect us, and how we may be impacting them. While this may sound like psychological jargon, it can have profound effects when applied to our parenting experiences. How often have we seen our parenting skills go "out the window" when we experience stress, have a bad day, or are fighting with our spouse? Developing self awareness and spending time on ourselves can mitigate the impact of these normative life events on parenting. With respect to empathy, how often do we take the time to think about the feelings of our children? It's easy to forget what it was like as a child, and forgetting can increase our chances of taking *very* personally the behaviors of our children. This is hard stuff, right? So, do we work hard to empathize with their perspective when they are not listening, or not responding to our requests? Of course we

don't all the time. But if we just think about how they may be feeling, we develop the ability to "take perspective" and re-engage with a renewed sense of understanding.

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