

PARENTS FORUM

Where The Heart Listens

Second Edition

A handbook for parents and their allies
in a global society

by Eve Sullivan

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Disclaimer

PARENTS FORUM is not a substitute for medical, psychiatric or psychological advice, for professional parenting education or for other counseling.

Readers are urged to consult their health care advisors or other appropriate professionals about specific concerns or problems.

Dedication

To parents around the world and all those who care for children and support parents.

Heart of the Matter

Chapter One

This book aspires to change the way you feel about parenting, the way you think about it and the way you go about it. At the same time, it aspires to transform the ways we support each other as parents and the ways other individuals, agencies and businesses in our communities support us. Each task taken by itself is challenging, but there is powerful synergy among them and I am convinced that they can more easily be accomplished if we work on them at the same time.

Parenting is the oddest business: part service, as we nurture and guide our young people into adulthood, and part production, as we try to meet society's demands that our children become healthy, honest and caring, hard-working, fun-loving and service-minded young adults. Unfortunately, most of us are pushed -- and we push ourselves -- to meet these demands with ever-shrinking resources of time or money, or both.

In a sense, our children are our clients, consumers of our parenting services. Everybody else, that is, society at large, is a client, too, expecting us to provide a satisfactory product from our home industry. But where are the parenting schools? Who provides the on-the-job training? While these analogies hardly capture the many dimensions of parenting, raising children is still a job. We need to get down to business, starting with a careful consideration of the skills we need for the job.

This book is not fundamentally about raising children, but about raising parents. We need to become the best parents we can be, and this process requires that we reach inside ourselves and that we reach out to each other. Reaching inside ourselves involves thoughtfully examining both the parenting

we received and the parenting we are doing. Reaching out to each other involves talking with other parents about our successes and struggles, and theirs. These two efforts, one inward and one outward, help us to develop skills to achieve our "personal best" as parents.

We must also continue (or begin!) to advocate for the time and support we need to succeed at this most challenging and critical job. Sometimes advocacy within the family is all that's needed -- help with homemaking from one's mate or children -- but we also need to advocate outside the family. Parents' voices need to be heard and parents' needs considered in schools, at the workplace and in government policy debate. The resources section gives you some pointers for finding information online about the many organizations engaged in supporting parents and in bringing family issues into public debate.

In developing new skills, will we become perfect parents? Of course not. On a good day, yes, certainly we will be good parents, maybe great ones!

On a not-so-good day or a truly terrible day, we can share our frustration, anger, sadness or fear with another adult rather than take those powerful feelings out on our children. We need to reach out to other parents when we are caught in our own emotional storms and when our children's storms threaten to pull us in. In doing so, we can keep the best moments we have with our



kids clearly in mind and heart. These best moments come when we are emotionally present in our own lives and emotionally available to our children. We need to remember how much we love our kids, how much our kids love us and how much they need us, even when -- or especially when -- an "emotional tornado" threatens. Other parents can help us do just that.

There are many books on baby care, child development, and children's learning, and countless volumes on the shelves by professionals and parents-who've-been-there about what can and does go wrong with kids and families. Still too scarce on the parenting book rack, though, is guidance for parents on specific techniques and strategies for dealing with the feelings and conflicts provoked by our own ordinary day-to-day experiences with our children. Most of us start on a positive path, with a lot of love and joy, and we want to stay on that path. But how?

A young woman who looks to me both as a friend and as "another mother" in her life (I am twenty-some years older) called me not too long ago to tell me that, after a year or more of effort, she had finally gotten a new job. She thanked me for encouraging her in the low moments. While her delight was obvious, she was emotionally "stuck" on one thing. Over and over, like a broken record she said, "I can't believe my boss (of the job she was leaving) didn't thank me." I listened, encouraged and then listened some more. My friend finally realized that it was better for her (never mind what her former boss thought) if she focused on the good wishes that other co-workers had expressed at her leaving and her own sense of

You won't find a set of rules in this book, no recommended bedtimes for a certain age child, methods for getting children to clean their rooms, or strategies to get teenagers to call you and tell you where they are. What you will find are suggestions for new ways to talk with your children and to talk with other parents about your own experiences. The suggestions will guide you in identifying your feelings and thoughts and in seeing how each affects the other and how both affect your behaviors. Often the feeling, thinking and action parts of our experiences get confused. The PARENTS FORUM approach helps you examine your feelings and thoughts before choosing what to do or say. You will find particular emphasis on the practice of more attentive listening and less judgmental response.

I hope this handbook will help you develop greater appreciation for what is working well in your own family. Focus on the positive aspects of family life

accomplishment. Certainly it is important and freeing to pay attention to the positive elements in our relationships and our lives. Sometimes, though, telling a friend or a parent, a sibling or spouse, over and over again how sad or angry we feel, is essential to getting to a positive place.

That conversation with my young friend reminded me that we never outgrow our need for a sympathetic ear and that if parenting is about any one thing it is about fostering our children's emotional development as they grow and adapt to changing circumstances.



Heart of the Matter

will give you courage and energy to consider honestly the problems you face. The discussions and exercises described in later chapters will help you develop new perspectives on what may not be working so well. The handbook also suggests sorts of activities to look for -- and to organize -- in your community where you can meet others who share your concern for healthy family life.

But parents are busy people and you may already have enough commitments! Whether you use the PARENTS FORUM approach informally, as a reference, or formally, through participation in events, I hope it will be helpful to you.

Most of us know instinctively what researchers tell us: that human beings, as social animals, need each other in at least two different ways: We need both the intimacy that comes from close relationships and the affiliation that comes from belonging to a group. Without these connections, we feel lonely and isolated. Participating in PARENTS FORUM gives people a chance to make new friends and practice communications skills that can help us strengthen our relationships with family members. At the same time, PARENTS FORUM activities connect participants to their communities, fulfilling the need for group affiliation.

You may have picked up this book because you are concerned about stress or unhappiness you have noticed in yourself or a friend or family member. Maybe someone gave you this book because he or she is concerned about you or your children. Perhaps you have young children -- or no children yet -- and you want to look down the road ahead to see what sharp turns and scenic overlooks await

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you on the parenting journey. However this book got to you, I am glad you have it in hand.

Perhaps you could say PARENTS FORUM is a program of "smart love," in that we seek to create a better balance between discipline and affection in our family lives. In sharing our stories -- describing the events of our lives, our reactions and those of people around us, and the eventual outcomes -- we raise our social and emotional intelligence. We become more effective and more loving parents as, using the skills we acquire in PARENTS FORUM, we learn to listen with our hearts.

