

Principle 3 : Use appropriate “thinking” questions to transfer responsibilities and enhance communication in the family cont’d – parents’ adjustments

By now, we hope you get the idea that as our children mature, parenting goes from commanding to instructing, to listening and influencing; from being a dictator to a teacher, to a friend. This is actually a process of transferring responsibility. From being a helpless, dependent, self-centred child, we hope they will be transformed to a helpful, interdependent, other-centred and responsible adult. The work is on the parents, not the kids.

As grown adults, we parents sometimes expect our children to know things even before they are taught or do as we say and not as we do (we fail to attain our own standards sometimes)! Our impatience gets the better of us most of the time, resulting in raised voices and conflicts. As children grow, we have to make deliberate efforts to review our expectations of them; intentionally pause and enable more 2-way communication with questions though we are more tempted to tell and command. The idea behind this is hopefully with the questions, the thinking and responsibilities are slowly transferred to growing, thinking children. Perhaps let’s pause and divide the 21 growing years into 3 7-year phases to see the differences and the adjustments we parents have to make.

Obedient phase. For the first 7 years, we believe that it is a phase we should build obedience (absolute obedience is the ideal). It is a stage of “I say, you listen, obey and do!” When Samantha, Josiah and Elliot were growing up (till about upper primary), even opening the fridge they had to seek permission. That eventually developed into an attitude where they are more aware of other’s thoughts and feelings, and hopefully a more respectful attitude.

Instructional phase. From 8 to 14, perhaps it is where “thinking” questions begin and increase in depth and intensity. A stage of “I ask, you think and then answer.” “Do you have the freedom” mentioned in the first part of this principle is a good tool to practice.

Friendship phase. Come 15 and above, it is time to influence through listening. It is “You talk, I listen and maybe advice”. Note the general difference between boys and girls. There are exceptions but girls are usually more responsive and talkative. A simple “how was the day” may be enough to initiate a meaningful conversation with our daughter. With the majority of boys (ours included), however, the reply could only be “OK lor”. There are some topics, however, that boys will be a little more keen on carrying on the conversation but we need to spend some time to ‘discover’ this in our sons. Keep this in mind and don’t be alarmed if boys suddenly clamp up – they want to be ‘man’ and would like others to think that they ‘can handle it’. (Dad to the rescue - another topic!). Parents still retain the final decision on requests our children may have – so this friendship phase does not mean giving up authority!

(The ages above are not to be taken absolutely but serve as a guide.)

The first phase is observed to be fairly weak in Singapore, resulting in children having too many choices too early, becoming too vocal and disobedient. The background is probably because we wanted creativity. What we fail to realize is that creativity with loose or no boundaries result in chaos. When phase 1 is not done well, we believe many parents will face difficulties in phase 2 and will require more patience and humility to begin the questioning and 2-way communication process.

Not all parents are of equal ability to communicate well or be patient but we believe we are highly adaptable and if we are conscious, we can intentionally do something to adjust. The transition for us parents during these phases is not a natural one. We have to make a deliberate effort to hold back our thoughts and turn them into questions, rather than to tell.

Things are more caught than taught. In line with the fundamental principle on the husband and wife relationship, this listening and questioning approach should first be employed between daddy and mummy. Then our children will learn more from what they observe than what we tell them to be true.