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Why it's time for Mothers Who Think



I USED TO THINK THAT WHEN I HAD CHILDREN, THEY'D ALWAYS DO WHAT I SAY. NOW I'M GLAD THEY DON'T.

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BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI | **This** year we spent Thanksgiving at a friend's, and just before we all sat down to eat, she had us write down one thing we each felt thankful for. The results were wide ranging, from "I'm thankful the mashed potatoes turned out OK" to "I'm thankful it wasn't cancer." But what surprised me was that every mother at the gathering -- including myself -- had written the same thing: "I'm thankful for my children."

The thankfulness one feels for children isn't the easy, sentimental kind. It's laced with challenges and frustrations, paid for with nights of broken sleep and a house that looks like it's situated in a tornado corridor. Some of the funniest -- or most touching -- moments of motherhood can be appreciated only in retrospect, after one's blood pressure returns to normal. (Consider the time when Abhay, my 2-year-old, decided to fingerprint the furniture with ketchup on the night we'd invited my husband's boss over for dinner. Or when Anand, my 5-year-old, down with a fever of 103, said to me, "Mommy, you know why I like being sick? 'Cause whenever I open my eyes, there you are.")

What I'm especially thankful for are the lessons my children are constantly teaching me. Some of these I've learned just because of the nature of motherhood, the responsibilities it places upon you. Earlier I'd have done anything to avoid confrontation. Now I'm fiercely vocal about my children's rights -- and by

extension, at least some of the time, my own. Earlier I insisted that my life be meticulously planned, down to the minutest detail. Now I shrug and try to enjoy the next surprise that's lying in wait around the corner.

The best lessons, though, are the ones I'm learning from observing my children. *Relearning*, I should say, for once upon a time I knew them all. Until I became an adult. One is the enjoyment of simple things. Things that cost little, or maybe nothing at all, except attentiveness and an open mind. How bubbles have rainbows in them. How a snail pulls its horns in when you touch it with a leaf. How it feels to jump into a puddle with both feet. When you're cooking mashed potatoes and they're almost done, how hot air bubbles up and bursts through the surface with a big fwoop! The morning after Anand's birthday, the children summoned me to the family room with excited shrieks of "Mommy, come look, you won't believe this!" I wondered which toy, among Anand's many gifts, was lucky enough to merit so much attention. But it was merely a birthday balloon the children had positioned over the heat vent, where it hung suspended, fluttering in the updraft, as they watched wide-eyed with wonder.

Not all the traits my children possess are so easy to admire. A particularly difficult one, for me, has been their honesty. Children are totally, painfully, exhilaratingly and enthusiastically honest -- until we chastise it out of them. If Abhay doesn't like what I've cooked, out it comes from his mouth onto his plate. If Anand dislikes a visiting relative, he'll put his hands behind his back when asked to greet her with the traditional "namaste." I used to die a thousand embarrassing deaths each time such an incident occurred. Why me? I'd groan inwardly. Why did I have to be cursed with such rude children?

Last month, a bachelor friend of ours was about to spend a few days with us. The previous time he'd been here, he'd brought a number of expensive but age-inappropriate toys for our children. ("A teddy bear!" Anand had said on opening his box. "Yuck!") This year, anticipating the same problem, I cautioned Anand ahead of time. He was to be sure to tell Uncle Debu how much he liked his present.

"Even if it's not true?" asked Anand, his brow knitted in perplexity. His words were like a slap in the face. They made me see what I was teaching my children: Pleasing others is more important than maintaining your own integrity.

My mother had believed that. She'd seen to it that I did too. Did I want my children to grow up the same way?

"No," I said, to myself as much as to Anand. After much discussion, we reached a middle ground: Anand would tell Uncle Debu how much he appreciated his kindness in getting him a gift. And, when I got a chance, I'd let Debu know that Anand needed something a bit more challenging. Compromises

and creative solutions, the realization that behaviors might need to change in a changing world -- I hadn't known so much of child-rearing would depend on these things. "When I have kids," I used to say in those egoistic, pre-children days, as I watched my friends struggling with their offspring. "When I have kids, they'll do what I say. End of story." Even if that were possible, I wouldn't want it so anymore. I'm learning to enjoy the dialogue my children and I have as we grow together, as our stories unfold. I thank them, most of all, for that.

SALON | Dec. 11, 1997

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