Democratic Parenting

By Marvin W Berkowitz, PhD

In D. Streight (Ed.), *Parenting for Character: Five Experts, Five Practices.* Portland: CSEE Publications, 2007

When we think about parenting, lots of ideas typically come to mind: love, protection, guidance, discipline, communication, etc. However, I want to make an argument that we should be considering the concept of democracy when we think of parenting and families. I hope both to offer some support for the power and relevance of democracy in families, and to suggest some ways we can be effective democratic parents.

When the founders of this great and daring experiment in self-governance that we call a democracy first crafted the blueprints of the United States, they understood that such self-governance depended on the character or virtues of its citizens. They also understood that families played a critical role in socializing each subsequent generation to be the kind of citizens necessary for collaborative self-governance. If we want the benefits that democracy can afford us —like liberty, human rights, and equality then we need citizens who have democratic and moral character. Families, and in particular parents, must play a central role in shaping such future citizens. As George Bernard Shaw once said, "Perhaps the greatest social service that can be rendered by anybody to the country and to mankind is to bring up a family." Those of us who study the development of morality in children understand how critical parenting is in shaping their character. As should be obvious, one does not foster democratic character in non-democratic families. In his history of childhood in Western society, deMause (1974) offered a developmental model of historical transitions in parenting which follows the path from more adult-focused, hierarchical, power-assertive, and dominant parenting to more child and rights-focused, egalitarian, and democratic styles. Despite our tendency to venerate and even worship the pilgrims who settled what eventually became the United States of America, what we know of their parenting is not for those with weak stomachs. According to deMause and others, we have come a long way. The final stage deMause describes is the "helping mode" which he claims began in the mid-20th century. According to deMause, this type of parenting is more of a servant-leadership orientation that focuses on the child's needs and partners with the child to meet them. In fact, the very concept of children's rights is only a recent historical discovery.

So, we can see that a modern enlightened view of parenting is one that recognizes both the moral claim of protecting children's rights and the socio-political claim that we need to raise children of character (both moral and democratic character) for our society to flourish and be the beacon of democracy that it was intended to be.

Democratic Parenting

But this book is about how to parent well and how to raise good children. So let us turn to what we know about one aspect of this parenting recipe…democratic parenting.

A decade ago, John Grych, a child psychologist, and I reviewed the research on parenting and what it revealed about parenting practices that result in moral, pro-social, character development of children (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998). In doing so, we identified what we later called the "fab five." These were five parenting practices that each had a major demonstrated impact on positive child development: nurturance; demandingness; modeling; democratic family process; induction. Those five parenting practices are well-represented in this volume and, we are told, our article was influential on this booklet's composition.

The full name for the democratic practice so influential on children's development of character was "democratic family decision-making and discussion." Research revealed that such democratic parents tended to have children who were higher than others in compliance with adults, development of conscience, altruism, self-esteem, and moral reasoning maturity. In fact, of the five parenting practices, only nurturance (see Diana Baumrind's chapter in this booklet) impacted positive development more broadly. Yet it is well accepted that parents should nurture (support, love) their children, but it is far more controversial to suggest that parents should be more democratic with their children.*

Describing Democratic Parenting

There are a few foundational elements to democratic parenting. In character education, we often talk about "head" (understanding, the cognitive component of character), "heart" (caring about, the affective component) and "hand" (acting upon, the behavioral component). We can identify a parallel "head, heart and hand" of educators: understanding what character is, caring about instilling character in students, and having the teaching skills to make it happen. Likewise, we can identify the "head, heart and hand" of parenting for character in general, and of democratic parenting in particular.

The parent's "head" of democratic parenting has to do with understanding (1) that children are autonomous human beings with their own rights, (2) that power can be distributed in different ways in a family, and (3) that democratic parenting is good for children and for society. The "heart" of democratic parenting is valuing democracy in general and the democratic process. It also has to do with caring about being the best parent one can and caring deeply about what is right and good for children, the willingness and commitment to being a shepherd, a guide for the lifelong path that their child's development will follow. Some people and some societies see children as a burden, others as a potential resource (e.g., workforce).

Democratic Parenting

We are arguing for a commitment to children as a moral responsibility for their welfare and development, much as deMause did in identifying the helping mode of parenting. My colleague Bill Puka once posited the notion of "developmental love." By this he meant that one way to show love for a child is to dedicate oneself to his or her healthiest development. The "heart" also entails faith; that is, a belief that the long-term commitment to democratic parenting will indeed lead to the kind of child development that one intends to produce. The "hand" of democratic parenting is the set of parenting skills necessary to be democratic in one's daily parenting behaviors. These include certain communication skills, the ability to make children feel safe and supported especially during disagreements, etc. I will turn to these in more detail in a moment. First, however, let us take a closer look at what democratic parenting really looks like.

The core of democratic parenting is an orientation toward certain forms of communication, especially in problem-solving and decision-making situations. Democratic parents both (1) value their children's autonomy and respect their rights and perspectives and (2) understand that in doing so they are optimally fostering their children's moral and civic development. Therefore they "respect children's voices as meaningful contributions to family discussions, decisions, and conflict resolution processes" (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998, p. 385-6). They also understand that in doing so they are fostering the development of those character traits listed above as outcomes of democratic parenting (e.g., altruism, conscience, and moral reasoning maturity). In other words, they realize that democratic parenting is not only just, but it is also developmentally effective. Because they realize this, democratic parents "let children know that their voices are valued and provide affective support for their participation in family discussions" (ibid, p. 386).

That latter point about affective support is worth belaboring. My earliest research was on the promotion of moral reasoning maturity through peer discussions. The most developmentally productive discussions were often quite contentious with children and adolescents cognitively grappling and attempting to "win" the "debate." This seemed to really stretch children's thinking about right and wrong and produced significant development.

However, when we tried to apply this model to parent-child moral discussions the picture changed a bit. The key difference was that children did not develop when their moral discussions with parents were contentious. Rather they needed to be couched in a context of feeling emotionally supported by their parent(s). The discourse looked different, more like respectful disagreement in which both parties knew there was no risk to the relationship. This seems critical to how democratic families disagree, especially about potentially emotionally charged issues. Larry Nucci has much to contribute to this issue in his chapter in this booklet.

Democratic Parenting

Another of this booklet's authors, Diana Baumrind, shed some important light on this many years ago when she identified a form of democratic parenting. Because of space limitations, Professor Baumrind does not address democratic parenting in her chapter here, but it is a variation of authoritative parenting, the parenting style that most effectively leads to the development of character in children.

Baumrind (1991) has spent decades studying the dimensions and effects of different styles of parenting. One style she identified was labeled "democratic." She defined this as being high on Supportive Control ("considerateness, responsive discipline, principled use of rational explanations to influence adolescent, intellectual stimulation, and encouragement of individuation" p. 751), with a moderate use of more assertive control but low on more directive/conventional control strategies. As Baumrind describes such parents, they are "more responsive than demanding, are agentic but not officious, and set limits when necessary, although their preference is to be lenient" (p. 752). Others who have studied such parents have found them to be warm and supportive, low in anxiety, and low in power assertion, with rules being created jointly by parents and children. In other words, democratic parents love their children, feel comfortable with them and in their roles as parents, and do not seem to need to exert their authority in a hierarchical manner. Such parents tend to have very healthy children, although in adolescence they may experiment more with drugs.

Democratic parenting is thus justified in three ways: as a form of just respect for children; as a means of socializing responsible democratic citizens; as an effective way to educate moral children. We have also established that democratic parents need to understand democracy and democratic parenting and its justifications, and they need to deeply care about children and democratic society. It is now time to look more closely at the "hand" or skills of democratic parenting. What can and should you do as a democratic parent?

What You Can Do

Respect and Love Children

As we have established, democracy in general and democratic parenting both depend upon respect for others, in this case respect for children. When we think of respect, we often think of the Golden Rule. In their book on Emotionally Intelligent Parenting, Maurice Elias and his colleagues (1999) transform the Golden Rule into the 24-Karat Golden Rule; that is "Do unto your children as you would have other people do unto your children" (p. 1). As they point out, we often allow ourselves to a lower standard toward our children than we do others (neighbors, teachers, etc.). So one good way to test your level of respect for your children is to ask yourself how you would feel and react if someone else was behaving toward your child the way you are.

Democratic Parenting

We have also seen from the research that respect is not enough. Children need to be and feel loved and supported, in addition to being respected. As parents we need to create a constant substrate of affection, not make it contingent upon their specific behaviors and misbehaviors and be sure we communicate our affection clearly to our children. We can't forget to clearly express our love to them.

Welcome and Solicit Their Voices

There is an old saying that we have all heard: Children should be seen and not heard. That may be the exact opposite of democratic parenting, at least on the "heard" part. For a family to be democratic, two fundamental and related things need to happen. First, children need to believe that their voices are valued and welcomed; that their parents want to know what they think and will seriously consider their input. Oftentimes, however, as much as we may genuinely want to include children in family decisions, discussions, and problem-solving, we may forget to ask them or may be too hurried or stressed to be willing to expend the time it takes to have such conversations. So, the second fundamental is that parents need to actively invite children's input; they need to ask children to speak up and be heard. Of course, as in any social group, this openness to input must be authentic. Children will quickly figure out if you are just humoring them or paying lip service to valuing their voices. We will introduce some structured ways of inviting children's voices in a moment.

Be Developmentally Appropriate

Children at different developmental levels require different degrees of structure in invitations to chime in. Furthermore, what may be appropriate for an adolescent to discuss may not be appropriate for a younger child, or it may not be appropriate for any child. It may be appropriate to ask a child what the family should have for dinner, but not whether they should itemize their tax returns or take out a second mortgage. And giving a young child an open-ended option ("what do you want for dinner?") may not be prudent. Rather limit the options to make it easier for them to decide ("do you want hamburgers or spaghetti for dinner?"). Walking into Baskin-Robbins and asking a preschooler what flavor they want could lead to hours of vacillation. A better strategy would be to ask them which of two or three flavors they want, knowing which two or three flavors they like most. As they get older, the choices we give them can be more complex and open-ended.

Be Socrates

We are not advocating that children get veto power, nor that you should only have one child so the children can never be in the majority in the family democracy. We are not advocating installing a democratic government in your household. Rather we are advocating adopting some principles of democracy in your parenting.

Democratic Parenting

So we want to suggest that you be Socratic as well. As Bill Puka suggests with his notion of developmental love, we need to be guides and gurus for our children's development. We can do that within democratic structures by being Socratic; that is by using discussion to get them to consider concepts and facts that are both critical and might otherwise be missed.

There are a variety of strands in psychology that emphasize the power of reflecting on reasons for choices and decisions.   Children need to learn what a justification is, what counts as a good reason, and to use reasoning to justify their demands, claims, and assertions. Parents need to ask children "why" they think it is a good idea to open presents on Christmas eve rather than Christmas day, to get a pet dog, or to be the one to get the last extra piece of pizza. Then discuss the reasons and see if you can come to agreement on the soundness and validity of their justifications.

The parenting practice of induction (one of the Fab Five mentioned earlier), is also relevant here. Induction means that, when parents are either praising or reprimanding their children , they focus on giving a reason for their praise or displeasure by highlighting the consequences of the child's actions for another's emotions (e.g., "I am so proud of you because you told Aunt Martha that you liked the birthday present and that really made her happy" or "I am so angry with you because you hit Linda and now she is sad and crying"). In other words, in family discussions and negotiations, be sure to direct children's attention toward reasons for behaviors, the consequences of actions (especially their own actions), and other people's feelings.

Don't Be Napoleon

Democratic character comes not from learning about democracy as much as it does from experiencing democracy; that is, from experiencing the power of your voice in collaborative decision-making. Families tend to be (often for good reason) hierarchical. Parents wield power and children are subject to it. This is not a good source of the formation of future democratic citizens. Just as in schools, adults in families tend to make all the decisions and solve all the problems themselves. We waste so many opportunities to enlist our children in these decisions and deliberations. Parents need to look for opportunities to welcome children into family discussions and deliberations. Just as parents find opportunities to name objects ("see the doggie") and colors ("that ball is red") to help children develop language, they need to find opportunities to invite children to contribute to decisions ("which sweater do you think Grandpa would like best?) and solutions ("what do you think would be a good way to make Alex feel better?"), rather than just doing it oneself. Each time we act unilaterally we steal a developmental opportunity from the child. Of course, all this has to be within reason, or life will grind to a halt as we negotiate every choice and solution. Pick your spots!

Democratic Parenting

Create or Adopt a Family Problem-Solving Method

Having a clear method for decision-making and/or problem-solving can be very helpful. In his book Raising Good Children, Thomas Lickona recommends what he calls a "fairness approach." There are ten steps to this method for, first achieving mutual understanding of the nature of and perspectives on the problem, then solving the problem, and finally following through to monitor the success and implementation of the solution. In all steps, parents and children are equally involved in collaboratively moving through the process. Some parents like to write and sign a contract or agreement that describes the result of the problem-solving process, and it often ends up on the refrigerator door as a reminder and resource.

Be Values Driven

While democracy is an excellent social system, it is not flawless. As Winston Churchill once opined, democracy is the worst form of government humans have ever created…except for all the others. Democracy does allow for injustices to be done and justified by the majority to the minority. So it is important to have a values base for your family in general and for your democratic processes in particular. Many years ago, I had the privilege of working on Lawrence Kohlberg's Just Community Schools project. This project was an experiment in high school democracy. We created small alternative schools within larger high schools and endowed them with the freedom of self-governance. One person, one vote; teacher, student, administrator. But these mini-democracies had two guiding values: justice and community. All community decisions were supposed to try to maximize justice and to build a sense of community.

It is important in your family to know what you hold most dear. It is important to know what your most central moral values are. They may be derived directly from your faith tradition or may be adopted or adapted from a variety of sources.   Wherever they originate, they should be invoked as the litmus test for your important family decisions. As parents you should raise them and ask questions such as "is that fair to everyone?", "does that show respect for our neighbors?", or "how is that a loving thing to do to her?"

Check-In

Do not assume success. It is a good idea to check in periodically both on the success of prior decisions and solutions and on the degree to which children and parents feel in general that the family is operating fairly. But be forewarned that the very notion of fairness (justice) is a developmental concept. What is fair to a preschooler (idiosyncratic and/or selfish) is not fair to an elementary school child (stubborn radical equality) and is different from what is fair to an adolescent (balancing of legitimate claims and perspectives).

Democratic Parenting

Even if you are on different wavelengths, and even if you can't come to an agreement, you are still engaging in open, respectful, and egalitarian discourse.

Conclusion

Democratic parenting is justified for three main reasons: (1) because is just and respectful of children; (2) because it is a context for the development of civic character and future responsible democratic citizens; (3) because research has shown that it produces a wide range of desirable moral and social characteristics in children. Such parenting requires an understanding of democracy, children's rights, and democratic parenting strategies, an authentic concern for children's development and fairness, and a command of the parenting skills necessary to be an effective democratic parent. Those skills include induction, collaborative decision-making, and the ability to adapt to the development level of the child.

NOTE

* Interestingly, John Grych and I later wrote a parallel paper for teachers, when Tom Lickona (see his chapter in this volume) suggested that the Fab Five parenting behaviors applied equally well to teachers. Teachers can also do all of the same behaviors and evidence is beginning to show that it works in schools as well as in families. Although there is no research on this yet, it is likely that when both families and schools engage in parallel and research-supported practices of raising and teaching children we are more likely to successfully raise the next generation of responsible democratic citizens and adults. But this chapter is not about schools and teachers, so let's turn our attention back to parenting.

References

- Baumrind, D. (1991). Parenting styles and adolescent development. In R.M. Lerner, A.C. Petersen, & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), Encyclopedia of adolescence: Volume 2 (pp. 746-758). New York: Garland.

- Berkowitz, M.W. & Grych, J.H. (1998). Fostering goodness: teaching parents to facilitate children's moral development. Journal of Moral Education, 27, 371-391.

- DeMause, L. (1974). The evolution of childhood. In L. deMause (Ed.), *The history of childhood* (pp. 1-74). New York: Harper and Row.

- Elias, M.J., Tobias, S.E., & Friedlander, B.S. (1999). Emotionally intelligent parenting: How to raise a self-disciplined, responsible, socially skilled child. NY: Three Rivers Press.

- Lickona, T. (1983). Raising good children. NY: Bantam Books.