The Art of Rapport
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PARENTING

The Art of Rapport

Good feelings create the basis for talking

Talking to and guiding children is one of the beauties and responsibilities of parenting. It's also the most challenging, if not terrifying, area of parenting--a monster-in-the-closet for moms and dads. What do you say when little 4-year-old Raksha decides she wants to keep a pet hamster in her bed, next to the teddy bear? Or how do you explain to 8-year-old Makunda that grandmother has just died--what is death, where did she go after death, what is reincarnation? These situations and questions demand good skills (and knowledge) in talking with your children. Therefore, in Hinduism parents are understood as the child's first guru: an awesome responsibility. How do you do handle it?

Two months ago Hinduism Today reviewed a book by parenting expert Dr. Fitzhugh Dodson called How to Discipline with Love. He makes the crucial point that discipline is really teaching. To make discipline an opportunity for teaching takes real communication skills--not beyond any parent's ability, but you have to understand the process, and then take the time to use it.

Several of Dodson's methods focus on talking with children. The first is called rapport: cultivating an emotional connection which demonstrates that you, on a feeling level, want to understand your child. It is a "mutual liking and respect," as Dodson puts it. It means you want to share in your child's world through talking and expressing positive emotion. Rapport is not a corrective measure, but a bridge of interest and friendship that makes the road to guidance and correction smoother. Dodson calls this an "emotional foundation."

We cannot teach through positive discipline without establishing rapport. Rapport may seem obvious, even built into the parent's inborn love for their children. It's not. You have to work at creating rapport. Most parents, according to Dodson's thousands of case experiences, do not establish rapport with their children or they ignore the need for it. Dodson says: "Parents believe their children should obey requests and commands simply because children should obey parents. This is like a teacher assuming the class will want to work on a history lesson simply because the teacher tells them to. Not so. The child has to feel good about the teacher in order to fulfill the teacher's wish. It is the same whether we are talking about a school teacher or a parent-teacher."

Developing rapport means spending time doing things together and simply talking with your children at their level, or what they want to talk about. Often it's just being together silently, simply feeling the good bonding of parent and child while enjoying an activity. Rapport is always a good feeling. It can easily be broken. Speaking sharply can break it. Then it needs to be repaired. With rapport maintained, the next step of talking with your children--called feedback--can be learned

and used. We will discuss feedback in next month's parenting column.

TO ORDER HOW TO DISCIPLINE WITH LOVE, WRITE TO: PENGUIN BOOKS 375 HUDSON STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK. 10014 USA