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Mothering

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Parenting by Intention

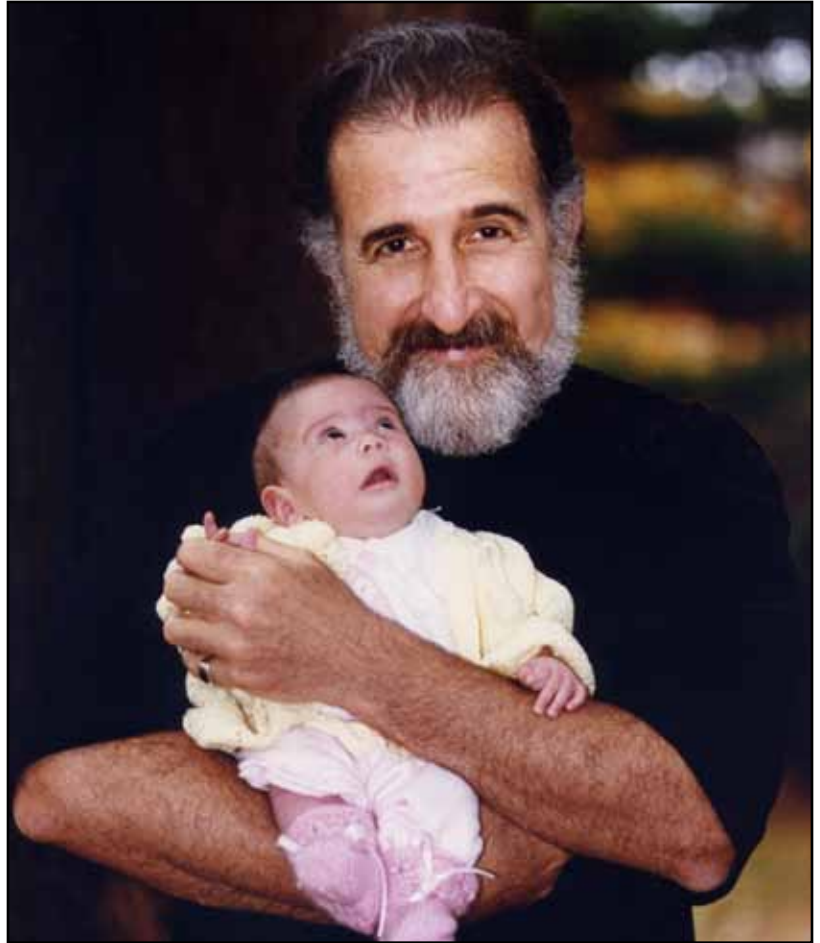
By Barry Neil Kaufman

I have six children, who ongoingly give me incredible challenges as new and different situations arise in their lives. When a toddler, my son was diagnosed as autistic and retarded, and pronounced by doctors as incurable. One of my three adopted children was seriously malnourished when he arrived from a South American orphanage. Another had been severely abused by his father at the age of two and a half, just months after the death of his biological mother. For the next three years he remained in an orphanage where doctors viewed him as justifiably traumatized. I have faced many challenges with these children; yet, at the same time, raising them has been among the easiest and most comfortable experiences of my life.

One of the most powerful journeys my wife Samahria and I faced took place twenty-one years ago when we designed a program based on a loving and nonjudgmental attitude which enabled our son to completely emerge from autism. After this, and the airing of the NBC television movie, "Son-Rise," based on our story, we were overwhelmed with requests for our assistance. In 1983 we founded The Option Institute to offer workshops to a wide range of people to help them make effective and positive changes in their lives. These programs have helped families and individuals from around the world find a more loving and empowering way of addressing life's challenges-including the challenges presented by parenting.

Although we raised only six children, I believe we could have nurtured 60 and found that just as easy. Why? First, we had developed principles of living that apply easily to parenting. Because of this, we felt at ease with our children as we tried to guide them through their teenage years, despite their sometimes confused attempts to experience their own power and individuality.

Second, we parent with strong intentions. When working with families at our learning center, I observe that those who enjoy their children live and parent with a set of principles or intentions in



Barry Neil Kaufman with his granddaughter, Jade

mind. Unfortunately, most parents have not consciously developed a frame of reference that helps them understand their daily interactions with their children.

When someone decides to become an architect, social worker, plumber, electrician, or taxi cab driver, society tells us that these endeavors are so important that we must educate ourselves in our chosen field and then actually be tested on what we've learned. Then we will be given a license to operate, whether it's to perform brain surgery or install a light switch in a wall. Interestingly, in two critically important areas, love relationships and parenting, we are given absolutely no education. Before we get a driver's license, we find out where the brakes and the accelerator are. However, when we have children, we have no understanding of how they operate.

We don't know where the child's accelerator is, we don't know where the switches are to help our youngster turn things on and off in themselves. Oftentimes we enter parenting with little forethought, ignorant of the dynamics of child-rearing and possessing little mastery over our own thoughts and feelings.

If I could do anything to teach people about parenting, the first thing that I would do is ask them some basic, extraordinarily fundamental questions, ones that often remain unasked. "Why do you want to be a parent?" "What do you hope to give and receive?" "What principles do you want to teach?" When I ask myself why I became a parent, the answer is very clear. I wanted to be a parent because I wanted to experience love, give love, and teach love. I felt that my relationships with my children would give me an incredible arena in which to make love tangible; this was a precious experience that I wanted deeply.

Indeed, I have wanted my children to be neat, responsive and respectful, to be good students and dear friends; yet all these aspirations have consistently taken a back seat to my primary objective as a parent, which has to do with teaching happiness and love. Mom and Dad are crucial role models in helping children open their hearts and making happiness, love, and respect for others a priority in their lives. To that end, we teach families easy principles based on our awareness of human interpersonal dynamics rather than externally derived "have-to's" "should's" or "supposed-to's." These principles may seem radical, outrageous, maybe even uncaring. However, my intention and delivery have always been to teach and foster love. I assure you, I love my children passionately and have found these guiding perspectives extraordinarily useful in teaching them how to choose love and happiness.

Principle Number One:

I never, ever try to save my children from their unhappiness.

That might seem like a strange position to take, lacking in compassion and sympathy. Actually it has nothing to do with lack of caring. Most parents spend massive amounts of time trying to rescue their children from their anger, distress and sadness. In doing so, they unwittingly teach and reinforce unhappiness. When children are unhappy about something, if I run around trying to rescue them, I'm making several implicit statements:

- 1) Unhappiness is out of their control (that's why I have to save them)
- 2) Unhappiness is powerful as a tool to motivate Mom, Dad and others (throw a tantrum at a crowded check-out line and

a preferred response in many situations. Inadvertently, we model and teach misery rather than inner ease and comfort. If a child at a family gathering is smiling, everybody walks by him/her unmoved. If, on the other hand, a child begins to yell and cry, the adults present, in an effort to save this youngster from their discomfort, will be drawn like ants to an ant hill. An observant child would rightly conclude that ranting and raving gets far more attention than playing happily. That child would gain significant insight into the ways of the world: if you want to move the universe, show distress.

I saw this demonstrated clearly one day when my family waited patiently at a supermarket check-out line during the rush of holiday shopping. Although many shoppers appeared blank faced, more than the usual number smiled at one another. A moderately festive mood prevailed until a two-year old girl, sitting in the seat of her mother's shopping cart, began screaming loudly.

People turned to see what problem had arisen. The child apparently wanted some potato ships that were inside the cart, but her mother had refused. In response, she protested with loud noises, tears, a flushed face and kicking. Her mother, somewhat embarrassed, maintained her position, trying to calm her daughter with quiet words. The child escalated her antics. By now, people in almost every

line watched.

Some grimaced, their disapproval obvious. Others gave the child sympathetic glances. One woman leaned over the shelves in her aisle and demanded the mother do something – anything – immediately.



Barry Neil Kaufman and Samahria Lyte Kaufman and their six children.

- you get a candy bar to keep you quiet)
- 3) Unhappiness is a sign of caring (crying about your broken doll demonstrates how much you loved it.) In the end, our distress with our children's discomfort reinforces the belief that unhappiness is not only appropriate, but, perhaps, even

Suddenly the store's Santa Claus appeared. He searched through the crowds of people for the screaming child. Once he sighted her, he pushed through several lines, shouting "Ho! Ho! Ho!" as soon as he reached her, he put a candy cane into her hand. The little girl stopped screaming immediately and smiled broadly through her tears. As she opened the candy wrapper, surrounding adults watched approvingly. An older woman kept nodding her head saying, "Good." Some people applauded. One man proclaimed, "Santa saved the day."

My thirteen-year-old daughter watched the entire event with great fascination. She looked up at me and laughed. "Santa didn't save the day; he just taught that little girl that if you scream and cry, you get candy. Now, I'll bet when she goes to the next store, she'll do the same thing."

We attempt to save our children from their unhappiness as a way to love them, but in so doing we actually teach them to use discomfort as a manipulative tool. If we could be really comfortable when our child seems unhappy, then we might find they choose it less often. We could instead say to them lovingly and sincerely, "You can be sad



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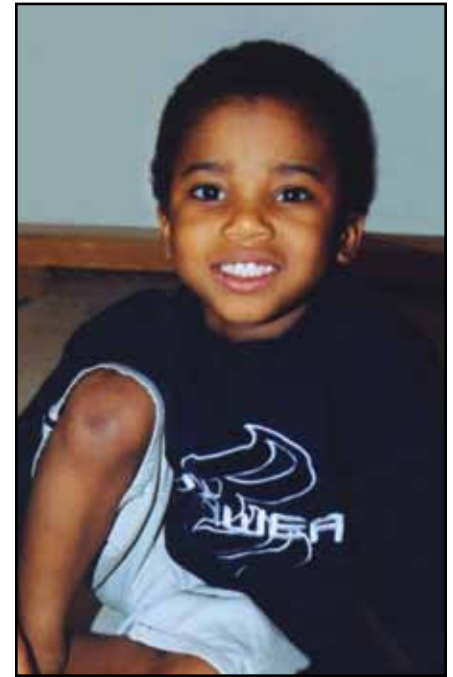
or angry about that if you want and I would love to talk with you about what you've experienced. But your screaming, whining and nagging is not going to motivate me in any way." In our home playing the nagging game does not get my children results or help them get their needs met. Thus, acting in that way makes little sense to them.

Contrastingly, when a child or adolescent experiences sadness, (for example, if a favorite doll is broken or when someone dies) being comfortable in the face of their feelings can be so useful. I have a greater capacity to be loving if I am happy and at ease, even when my children are sad. They are more apt to share their deepest feelings with me because they aren't afraid that they will cause me pain or discomfort.

Principle Number Two: *I don't owe my children anything.*

This second principle may sound as odd as the first; however, let me explain. Most parents feel a deep sense of obligation to their children. They not only believe that they should provide food, shelter, health and safety, but also that they should buy little red bicycles, space-age walkmans, trendy clothes and a college education. How wonderful if parents want to provide such objects and opportunities for their child! Certainly, I would encourage those who are excited to present a wealth of goodies to do so, not because they believe they're supposed to, but because they truly want to. If we only did what we wanted to do as parents, the nature of our parent-child relationship would be radically transformed; children are amazing students of the beliefs of our culture and those of their parents. They understand immediately when they're two, three, four and five years old that their parents are on the supply side of the relationship (the child asks for what they want, and the parent promptly delivers.) The message the child receives: Mom and Dad keep providing because that's their job. They owe me. By their actions, the parents unwittingly become co-creators of such a lopsided relationship.

As a result, children may fail to learn about gratitude. They may fail to



develop a deep sense of appreciation for all that's provided for them, even if it's minimal, through the efforts and energy of well-intended parents. In some way, we cheat our children from perceiving as gifts what the universe gives them, what their culture gives them, what their community gives them and what we personally give them. We often base our parenting on obligation rather than on choosing to deliver only what we truly want.

I'd like to illustrate the foregoing with an example from my own parenting. I had always tried to teach my children that education was an honor to be earned, not the birthright of all, even those with little interest in learning. Both of my older daughters were graduating from high school intending to continue their education at college. One daughter had applied herself diligently to her studies and earned excellent grades. In addition she had dedicated herself to dance and wished to enter a choreographic arts program. Could we help her financially to achieve her goal? After much discussion, my wife and I expressed with enthusiasm our wish to fully support our daughter's demonstrated commitment to learning. In contrast, my other daughter had moved through her high school years without putting out much energy or effort, applying herself

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minimally in order to complete her course work. Since many of her friends were continuing their education, she too planned to attend college. When she asked for our financial support, we decided that her lackadaisical attitude and performance in high school warranted serious review. Our conclusion: we would pay for a part of her tuition but requested that she earn a substantial portion for herself as a way to demonstrate that she truly wanted to learn. At first, my daughter became angry in the face of our position. We pointed out that her focus on what we wouldn't provide undermined her appreciation for the part we were willing to offer. I remember that night very clearly. After we had explained our intentions, she looked at us astounded and then quietly left the room. Five years later she shared with me how that event had had a profound impact on her life. For the first time, she had to take significant responsibility for what she wanted. As a result of paying for part of her education, she became a far more motivated and successful student. We gave only what we wanted to give and trusted that our children would grow from that.

My own father was aghast at the apparent inequity of our decision. He believed we "owed" our children a

college education. Obviously, we did not concur. He continued to protest, "How could you treat one child differently from the other?" He noted, with pride, that every time he had purchased a gift for one of his three children he had always purchased an identical or similar item for the others. I call this "abstract parenting." In effect, if one of us had consistently lent others a helping hand, while the second sibling had been a thief and the third an arsonist, we would still all have received the same provisions, no matter what we had done. It occurred to me, as I explained our decision to my dad, that I didn't see the world in terms of an abstract equity that obligated me to provide for each of my children in the exact same way. I made a moment-to-moment decision to do what I reasoned would be responsive to each of my children as separate and individual. Where is it written that everyone gets the same, regardless of their choices and actions? I wanted to support love, caring, respect and hard work. By giving thoughtfully and consciously, I may be more likely to increase those desirable results in the universe.

Though I strongly affirm that "I don't owe my children anything." I do not mean that parents shouldn't provide and share their bounty with their children. I suggest,

however, that we see our provisions as gifts, amazing gifts, provided in a give-and-take relationship of love. No "should's" here. As gift givers, we would probably feel far more excited to supply whatever we choose to supply, while our children, as receivers, would have a completely different experience of the exchange, one far more respectful, honoring, and appreciative. You win. The child wins. The relationship grows deeper and more loving.

Principle Number Three: *I don't spend any more time with my children than I want to.*

Caring parenting, loving, powerful and effective parenting has nothing to do with time. Many parents have deeply held beliefs that when their children are infants, toddlers, adolescents, teenagers, they are supposed to spend a certain number of hours per day or per week with them. They believe that "time" spent directly with children will naturally have a favorable impact on their development.

Unfortunately, it doesn't always work that way. In parenting programs, I often hear moms, especially, feeling trapped as the major caretaker of the family. Although they love and cherish their children, they often experience a sense of boredom and frustration in their parent/child interactions. As a result, the message they give their children is not the one they would hope to give. The time spent is infused with irritation, discomfort and impatience. The child, instead of feeling a sense of communion, love and interactive ease, ultimately experiences resentment from their parents.

I believe in parenting by wanting: do what you want to do and don't do what you don't want to do. Instead of stuffing any feelings of boredom or frustration, we can examine why we are feeling that way toward our children. In moments like this you will not be very useful to your children anyway. Use the time you would have begrudgingly spent with your children to help yourself become truly present and loving. Then go and be with your kids.



You might notice that the principles I've suggested differ from accepted cultural norms in a profound and dramatic way. Nevertheless, it's been my experience that parenting from these perspectives ultimately results in our children's learning of love, self-reliance and gratitude. Although in our culture our sons and daughters commonly learn to strive for such accomplishments as good grades, they often fail to give much attention to deeply opening their hearts and minds to themselves and others. When I was a child, my well-intended father, doing the best he could, used to discipline me harshly with the end of a strap. Each time he hit me, he would explain he was doing it because he loved me. I remember thinking back then that when I grew up, I might not want to love anyone else, since love seemed to beget painful interactions. Unfortunately, in our work with families, we find that those old methods of child rearing still persist. Perhaps the only change in approach (to one seen as more politically correct) has been that the sharp edge of the strap has been replaced by the sharp edge of the tongue.

Therefore, I encourage parents to create some primary principles for themselves and to establish clear intentions. There is something wondrous about parenting this way. Most of us don't do it because we believe that if we have preset intentions, spontaneity and serendipitous behavior will be diminished. However, I haven't found that to be the case. Parenting by intention puts

us on a firm footing with our children as we view and respond to them, allowing us a wider panorama of possibilities by freeing us from distracting discomfort and indecision.

Most of us design our relationships haphazardly. They reflect what occurs on a daily basis – not what we would have intended had we given the matter forethought. When, instead, we take charge of becoming the grand architects of our parent/child relationships, we can make up intentions that we believe would serve us most in these very special relationships. Each of us should create our own list. However, wishing to offer you inspiration and guidance, I will present intentions that have been espoused by families with whom we have worked at The Option Institute.

Intention Number One: *Make love the number one priority in all our parent/child relationships.*

That means, for instance, valuing feelings and expressions of love above grades, neat bedrooms and an appropriate appearance. The mother of two teenagers who attended a program here at The Option Institute found herself preoccupied with her concern that the mess in her teenager's bedrooms would

spread to the rest of the house. Although she learned in the workshop that happiness is a choice, she feared abandoning her new knowledge once she got home. I posed the following questions: "Suppose you went home and found the house in utter disarray. Would that be difficult or stressful for you?" She replied that it would be a sign that her children did not respect her and perhaps did not really love her. I then asked, "Why do you believe if your children were sloppy, that would mean they didn't love or respect you?" As she explored further, she decided such an assumption no longer made any sense to her, although she remembered her own mother accusing her of disrespect when she herself, as a teenager, hadn't obeyed the house rules. The message we send our children: If you don't do as your parents say, then you're disrespectful; if you aren't who your parents want you to be, then you're not honoring them.

As she reviewed those assumptions, she laughed and said, "No, they don't make sense. Why would I ignore all the various ways they do love and respect me just because at times they don't put their clothes away?"

After completing the program, she later shared a wonderful experience with me. She explained that when she returned home her house looked like an unkempt college dorm, with dirty dishes, plates of uneaten food and soiled laundry everywhere. At first she felt the



muscles in the back of her neck tighten; her mind became cluttered with judgments and irritation. Then she reminded herself that in the workshop she had decided to make love the number one priority with her children. As she approached their bedrooms, she committed herself to feeling and acting out her new intentions. She could feel her body relax as she encountered her daughter and said, "Hi honey! It's so good to see you." In spite of the situation, she opened her arms and gave her teenager a hug. She reported the wonder of the internal experience she had given herself, never once focusing on the state of affairs in the bedroom. When her son entered the room, she turned and greeted him, too, with an affectionate embrace. Her son smiled and said, "Wow, it sure looks like that program was good for you!" She smiled, "Yes, I had a wonderful time." As she walked out of the room, she stopped, looked around, and said, "Look, I'm wondering if you could do me a favor. I would really appreciate it if you could spend the next hour or two cleaning up the house." Her son, whom she had described previously as resistant and a bit foul-mouthed, looked at her casually, smiled, and said "sure, Mom" Then he proceeded to pick up a shirt lying on the floor, folded it carefully and started a neat pile of clothing. Mom was flabbergasted. Usually her children resisted her. However, she noted when she made love the number one priority, not only did she have a completely different experience with her children, but she inspired a different response from them.

Intention Number Two: *Be really present with our children.*

Many parents half-listen when their children speak. That doesn't reflect a lack of caring. Most of us half-listen to our partners, our co-workers, and our lovers as well. As a result, we miss the subtle nuances and cues expressed by our sons and daughters. And we don't give them a chance to fully know and understand us.

All discomfort and distress is the result of a regret about the past or a worry about the future. Most of us have

never been educated to attend to the present moment. In interacting with our children, my wife and I focus on being present. We do it in a way that is quite exciting. I believe that God lives in details. That means to me that when we are truly present, we can see God in our children.

What would happen if we recalled that experience we gave ourselves when we first held our infant sons and daughters, who might now be 10, 14 or 18? Perhaps they want to borrow our car, shave their head, pierce a ring through their nostril or cut holes in their jeans. Do we look at these teenagers and think, "Wow, this is God, this is the blessing of the universe!" Or are we more likely to exclaim, "My God, don't pierce your nose! Please, could you put another pair of pants on? And why do you want that ridiculous hair-do?" We have so many expectations and agendas for our children! They cloud our ability to see and appreciate their uniqueness and originality. Being present is the key to truly enjoying the moment to moment events of parenting.

Intention Number Three: *Express and teach gratitude.*

The power of appreciation comes through actions. Feeling gratitude creates a wonderful internal experience; expressing it allows us to feel the full bloom of appreciation. Most significant would be our willingness, on a moment-to-moment basis, to find some aspect of every person and event to appreciate and then find a tangible way to express our gratitude. Again, what we do is what we teach.

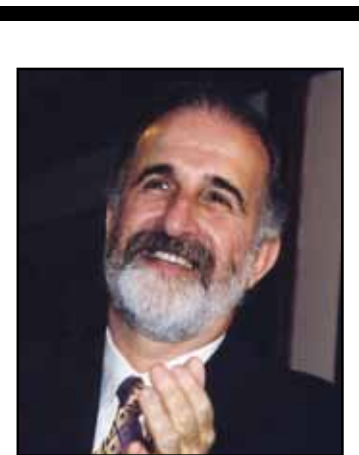
Several times a year, our family participates in what we call an informal gratitude exchange. Each of us takes the time to consider what we most appreciate in the other member of our clan. One by one we express our appreciation using specific examples. Often, we anchor these expressions with a smile, a hug or sometimes even a tear.

We have another tradition in our family. Before leaving for a trip to give a lecture or workshop in another city, state or country, I check in with each of my children. I update my love and appreciation for them in words and gestures. In

this way, if by chance those moments turned out to be my last with them, I would feel a sense of completion.

Parenting is a creative and evolving process, so the principles and intentions we create today might give way to new and innovative perspectives tomorrow. As we create a platform on which to stand, we don't have to make it rigid or inflexible. Love has many modes, and infinite pathways through which it can be expressed.

Oftentimes, we have the internal awareness of loving our children, but our words and actions do not display that love. In fact, our expressions of display and discomfort teach our children about our values and concerns. When we express anger, we teach anger. We can never be diminished by loving our children, even when they might not be expressing love to us.



Barry Neil Kaufman is the bestselling author of 12 books, including *Happiness Is A Choice* and *Son-Rise: The Miracle Continues*. He and Samahria Lyte Kaufman are the Co-Founders and Co-Directors of The Option Institute and Fellowship, a world-renowned learning center in Sheffield, Massachusetts. **The Option Institute** offers week-long workshops for individuals, couples, families and groups. Six Institute programs focus specifically on raising children and teaching parents how to use the innovative ideas presented in this article. For more information contact:

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