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Focus on changing attitudes not just behaviors

A common mistake we make when it comes to environmental issues, and most other issues for that matter, is that we tend to focus all our efforts on shaping behaviors rather than attitudes. Change an attitude, and the behavior will follow.

There is nothing wrong, of course in getting our children to “do things” to save the planet, like recycle, or avoid plastics, or to save electricity etc, but the question is “do they UNDERSTAND WHY they are doing this?”

Behavior without understanding is short term. It’s basically compliance without any appreciation of the significance or the importance of the act. Behaviors will fade just as quickly as they have begun when they are not rooted in understanding.

You can force your kids to recycle or to save electricity now and they will comply because they want to obey you, but over time, these habits fade.

So the first step is getting our children to understand the issue.

Helping them understand the issue

I think even we, as adults, need to remind ourselves once in a while. Sometimes we get so caught up in the “green, save the planet fads” that we forget what on earth all of this is for.

Ask the average adult or child, why saving electricity helps save the environment and less than 20% will be able to give you a coherent answer. Ask the same question about why we recycle, why we should protect our forests, why we should plant more trees in our neighborhoods and you will get the same superficial answers.

If we want our children to truly grow up to be environmentally conscious, then we need to encourage a deeper understanding.

Sometimes we underestimate our children’s ability to understand things.

I was listening in to a teacher who was explaining environmental issues to his class of 7 year-olds and I would like to paraphrase his words because I think he did a great job in explaining the issue in a way that was simple yet respectful to the children’s intellect.

“We have been blessed with a beautiful and remarkable planet as a home, and this earth is not just a home for us humans, but is also home to millions of animal and plant species. However, the way we live has an effect on our earth and if we are not careful we will destroy all that is beautiful about it. Worse still, when nature is disturbed it affects the environment in a way that affects us. We must not think that all we see today will last forever. The forests, mountains, oceans, animals, plants, even the air we breathe; if we are not careful we can lose these things forever. What we do can make a difference to the earth we live in.”

Embedded in this teachers class were some of the key issues.

1. Firstly, the beauty of the earth and all its resources is something we should celebrate and treasure.
2. Secondly, we must admit that as human beings we have made mistakes in the past when it comes to protecting and taking care of our earth. We have started to destroy a lot of what was beautiful about nature. We do have an impact on our environment.
3. Thirdly, if we do not change how we live now, the world will be destroyed and all the things we take for granted will be lost.
4. Lastly, when the earth dies, so do we. Many people still see environmental issues as saving some rare bird somewhere in some jungle that no one cares about. Very few realize that it affects our own survival.

Make it real with some local examples

Sometimes environmental issues seem very distant, very hypothetical and subjective to children (and to adults). That’s why so few people really care enough to do something about it.

To help our children connect environmental issues with their own lives we can then give our children numerous examples of how environmental changes affect our local community in Malaysia.

Start with examples they can relate to. For example the haze situation in Malaysia which is caused when plantations are burned, or flooding becoming more severe when there is deforestation, or more people getting respiratory illnesses because there is so much pollution in big cities, or the fact that its hard to find

a river near the Klang Valley that is clean enough to swim in because we seem to have dirtied so many of them.

The point we try to make through these examples is that our actions as human beings have consequences. When we are cruel to nature, we are the ones who suffer.

Giving them practical options to act

Now this is the stage where we start talking to our kids about what we can do to change things. It's important that we don't leave them with a sense of helplessness. They need to believe that they can do something significant, that they can make a difference.

There no shortage of small, practical, sustainable activities children can do; from helping the family sort out stuff to recycle, to being more careful in the way they use water and electricity, to planting trees around the house etc etc.

Older children may get to a stage when they start to question how small action can change anything. They look around and see so much apathy and they ask how can I possibly make a difference to such a large scale problem. This is when you can cite examples of communities around the world, where because it has become a social norm over time, in other words it has become part of their cultural practice to be environmentally friendly, they have made a difference together. It's the power of numbers. When one person plants a tree it is only a small beginning. But when that person inspires 1 million people to each plant a tree it creates a new forest.

We start small. We set an example for our neighbors, friends, classmates and community. At the start it may feel like a lonely task, but over time when more and more people join us, we become like a mighty river, a force of nature for nature.

Enjoy nature

You protect the things you love. When we get our children to love and enjoy the beauty of nature; the trees, the rivers, lakes, the mountains, the sea, animals and all other living things, they will feel more protective of nature.

So as parents we need to expose our children to the beauty of nature. When was the last time we took them to a river, a waterfall, or the seaside? Have they ever seen insects and animals in their natural environment as opposed to just in the zoo? Have they watched some of these amazing documentaries about nature?

Teach them to appreciate the beauty and wonder of the earth, and they will protect it.

This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010