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Parallels Between Parenting and Teaching

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Parallels Between Parenting and Teaching

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"On the evening of August 7, 2010, I was driving back from Pittsburgh on a warm summer day. My old car didn't have air conditioning, so I was dressed in workout clothes to try to sweat out a hot ride home. I had just been at the Mathematical Association of America's Mathfest, their annual summer meeting. I left somewhat early in the last day of the conference so that I would be home before 8:00pm, my daughter Aderyn's bedtime. I did indeed get home around 7:30. Aderyn went to bed, then I took a quick shower and went to bed myself. At 10:00, my wife, who was due to have our second child on August 15, started the beginnings of labor pains, which grew in strength. By 1:00am, there was no doubt that the baby was coming a week early. I got up and got dressed, Sara got in the shower (to ease the pain a bit), and we contacted the babysitter. I went to get the sitter at around 3:00am, and Sara and I went to the hospital. At 9:18am the next morning, August 8, our second daughter, Ivy Elaina Gantner, was born."



Ryan Gantner

Parallels Between Parenting and Teaching

On the evening of August 7, 2010, I was driving back from Pittsburgh on a warm summer day. My old car didn't have air conditioning, so I was dressed in workout clothes to try to sweat out a hot ride home. I had just been at the Mathematical Association of America's Mathfest, their annual summer meeting. I left somewhat early in the last day of the conference so that I would be home before 8:00pm, my daughter Aderyn's bedtime. I did indeed get home around 7:30. Aderyn went to bed, then I took a quick shower and went to bed myself. At 10:00, my wife, who was due to have our second child on August 15, started the beginnings of labor pains, which grew in strength. By 1:00am, there was no doubt that the baby was coming a week early. I got up and got dressed, Sara got in the shower (to ease the pain a bit), and we contacted the babysitter. I went to get the sitter at around 3:00am, and Sara and I went to the hospital. At 9:18am the next morning, August 8, our second daughter, Ivy Elaina Gantner, was born.

I was somewhat unprepared for what the next few weeks would bring. Yes, I understood that having a newborn baby was demanding, both physically and mentally – after all, I already had one daughter. What I was unprepared for was the amount of time I would spend with *Aderyn*, my almost-3-year-old, during the four weeks between when Ivy was born and when fall semester began. Since Ivy was breastfeeding at an unpredictable schedule, Sara had to remain with Ivy nearly all the time. Aderyn, who loves to play outside with the neighbor kids when the weather is nice, did not put up with remaining still with Ivy, trying to be quiet when she slept. Therefore, Aderyn and I spent nearly every waking minute of the day together. In fairness, I spent nearly every waking minute of the night with Ivy. With two young children, there are a lot of waking minutes.

Those four weeks I spent with Aderyn contain some of my best experiences with her. Since I knew that Ivy was throwing off everyone's schedule, I wasn't concerned with keeping a completely structured environment. I also didn't want Aderyn to resent the attention that Ivy would receive, so I made sure to make every effort to do things that Aderyn liked to do. That, as I have found, is one of the key elements to being happy and achieving success as a parent, and as a student. Let me explain.

My wife Sara is an engineering consultant. She works for herself, technically, but does most of her business with one company based in Minneapolis. For her job, prior to becoming pregnant with Ivy, she traveled periodically to Minneapolis or other places. When she was gone, I had the pleasure of having one on one experiences with Aderyn. I would do all sorts of things with Aderyn. I would take her to the store and spend hours just playing up and down the aisles. As long as I had absolutely no agenda of my own and was willing to let things go however they unfolded, both Aderyn and I were very happy. The minute I tried to steer her one way or another was when the stress of being a parent would set in. I quickly learned that in order to make the most of the time we had with each other, I would need to focus 100% on Aderyn and let her

guide the day (within reason, of course). The happiest experiences I have with her occur at the times when I am thinking least of myself.

The same can be said about being a college student. When I allow myself to focus on a single course, project, assignment, or research problem, that is when I learn the most, and get the most out of the experience. It is also when I am happiest as a student. As a graduate student, I would enjoy taking large parts of the day to seclude myself and work on my dissertation, or read relevant articles. As a faculty member, I often find that I have only several small, disjoint periods of time during which I need to accomplish my research. This is not satisfying or productive; I end up spending the majority of my time for research simply re-acquainting myself with where I am and what I need to do next. **Being a student, like being a parent, is most effective and enjoyable when one can focus entirely on the situation and dedicate 100% of available energy.**

Even after spending numerous days concentrating on dissertation material as a graduate student, I still had a difficult time preparing a thesis paper. I ran into some logistical red tap with the Graduate School office regarding scheduling of the thesis defense and other matters. I got so frustrated with the process that I was very unhappy to the point of losing my mind. My advisor continued to suggest that I be patient with the process. A friend suggested that this was simply something that I needed to go through, and that the end would justify the process. In the end, I did get my degree and wound up with a great job.

Patience is necessary. This is more obvious with parenting than with being a student. Aderyn loves to stall. “One more story before bed, daddy.” “Can I have a snack before we go upstairs?” “Stay with me two more minutes, please.” There isn’t much she won’t try in order to delay bedtime a few minutes. If I blow up and demand that she go to bed now, she’ll break down in tears and won’t get to sleep anytime soon. However, if the situation is met with patience, she’ll go to sleep before too long.

As a teacher, patience is essential. I don’t think many people will disagree with that. They say that when a teacher asks a question of a class, the teacher should wait an uncomfortably long amount of time for a response for the class (20 seconds, 10 seconds; the advice varies). The idea is that the silence will get a shy student to respond to a question, since the discomfort of the silence eclipses the discomfort of giving a response.

What is less obvious is that being patient is also necessary as a student. I have calculus students who take their homework questions to the Math Center for assistance. First, they get frustrated when the tutors take a few minutes to wrap their minds around a volume of revolution problem. Then, even when the tutors figure out the approach, the students get frustrated when the tutors won’t tell them the answer! Patience with the problem is key. One thing that sets good students apart from average students is the amount of time they are willing to spend getting incorrect answers.

Some not-so-good students, however, also spend a lot of time generating incorrect answers. However, since they don’t vary their approach, there is little chance they will get it correct eventually. In Calculus II, there are several techniques of integration which are covered. The below average students see an integral and think, “I bet integration by parts will work, I’ll try that.” When it does not work the first time, they try integration by parts again, and again, and again, without ever stopping to think that perhaps using a trig identity or partial fraction decomposition might be the better approach. **Being flexible enables a student, and a parent, to achieve things that are not otherwise possible.**

As a parent, getting Aderyn to eat is a challenge. One day, we can give her a reward if she eats all of her vegetables. The next day, that approach doesn't seem to work. In order to achieve the goal (getting her to eat healthy food), my wife and I have had to be very flexible and creative. "If you take a big bite of beans, I'll wink at you." (Yes, that actually worked – once.) "Let's both take a bite at the same time." "Your peas really want to be eaten, or they will be very sad."

When I tell someone that I have children, often their first response is to ask about how I am sleeping. **With children come some sleepless nights**, which will surprise nobody. However, **the same is true of a good student**. As an undergraduate, I remember routinely being in the computer lab until 2:00am writing JAVA code that just wouldn't compile, or sitting in my bedroom trying to figure out why the terms in the Taylor series expansion wouldn't cancel out to give me 3rd order convergence in my numerical scheme. In order to focus 100% on a subject, there will be some sleepless nights. In the end, we all learn more from those nights than we would have by sleeping.

That is not to say that we can stay awake all the time. Sometimes, things just break down. **Every once in a while, a break is needed**. As a parent, finding a babysitter for a date with my wife is occasionally necessary. Not only does it give me a break from children, I can feel how much more energy I have for the kids when I do return to them. The same is true for being a student. The best students find ways to unwind.

Let me reiterate the bold statements, as they pertain to parenting and being a successful student. Being a student, like being a parent, is most effective and enjoyable when one can focus entirely on the situation and dedicate 100% of available energy. In both situations, patience is necessary. Being flexible enables a student, and a parent, to achieve things that are not otherwise possible. There will be some sleepless nights, and every once in a while, a break is needed.

I have applied these bits of advice to parenting and being a student. But, these apply to many more situations. Hobbies. Faith. Career. Relationships. Ask yourself the following questions. Are you allowing yourself to focus 100% on your relationships (some of the time)? Do you have patience in your job? Are you flexible with your spare time? Does your faith ever cause sleepless nights? If not, what does that say about your approach to life?

By following this advice, I also find that I cut out a lot of "lost" time. I almost never watch television, for instance. The time spent watching TV I can never get back; I'd rather dedicate that to my kids. The time spent making my lawn look perfect I can never get back; I'd rather learn something new. The time spent playing video games I can never get back; I'd rather talk with my wife. Because some of my happiest times with Aderyn come when I give myself to her, I have learned a lot about life. I am happy. And I look forward to many more adventures as Aderyn and her little sister, Ivy, grow up.



Dr. Gantner, wife Sara, Aderyn, and Ivy