

LETTING GO

BY CHIP DELORENZO, M.ED

If you're anything like me, you have some plans for your children, whether they are conscious or unconscious. Most parents do. Those plans might be very general and admirable: going to college, getting married, having children, maintaining the values of your family, and owning a home. They might also be more specific, and more about you: attending a specific college, playing a specific sport, entering a predetermined profession, or achieving goals that you either achieved or didn't achieve yourself.

I have four children, and my oldest is now 12. In the last 12 years, my own agenda for my children is continually being revealed to me. Despite being an educator in a philosophy of education that espouses independence, individuality and allowing children to become who they are vs. who adults want them to be, I still find that I have conscious and unconscious agendas that affect my interactions with my children. And of course, the problem with this is that when I am seeking to achieve my goals for my children I miss what they already bring to the table; their natural talents, gifts and interests.

I use the local barber to get haircuts for myself and my three sons. Bruce charges \$7.00 for an adult haircut and \$6.00 for a child's haircut. Not only do I love his prices, but also the selection of magazines, old-school hair tonics, and the light banter that flows between Bruce and Mike (Bruce's nephew, who also works in the shop) and the waiting customers. As a boy, I loved going to the barber shop. I can still smell the Clubman hair tonic, talcum powder, and hot shaving cream they used on the back of my neck. I always assumed that if I had boys that they would be "real men" and get their hair cut short, and in a barber shop just like the one that I got my hair cut in as a child. I don't think I thought much about this agenda, as it was just a natural outgrowth of my own fond memories. It was just an innocent assumption, based on my own experiences. However, as my boys have gotten older, they have had some different ideas.

Two years ago, my oldest son decided that he wanted to let his hair grow out, and get it styled in the beauty shop where his mother went. He wouldn't admit it (and still won't), but he wanted a Justin Beiber haircut. He said it was similar, but different than Justin's. It was a Justin Beiber haircut. Can you see where this is going? It worked out about like you imagined. A power struggle, followed by my wife's betrayal of me through a visit to the beauty shop for a Justin Beiber haircut. My dreams of sitting in the barber shop with my son, exchanging witty banter with Bruce, and watching him get the back of his neck shaved with hot shaving cream and an straight razor were crushed. In the future I would be sitting in the barber shop alone while my wife waited for him in the beauty parlor for a \$25 trim and a handful of mousse.

This is an amusing story now, but at the time it was an awakening to a powerful lesson. Something as innocuous as fond memory of getting my haircut turned into a power struggle with my son as I sought to fulfill an unconscious agenda. Without realizing it, at the time, I had projected my agenda for reliving my fond memories onto my son, and then insisted that he enjoy the same thing that I did. Instead of seeing him as his own person, separate from me, I saw him as an extension of me, and couldn't understand why on earth he would want something different. The problem with this kind of thinking, is that if I act upon it, I actually create distance between my children and me, when all along I simply want to make a connection with them. They will likely either become rebellious or passively complicit with my agenda. Neither of those two options are things that I want for my children.

Now, what is also important to explore is the difference between allowing children to explore their individuality, and helping them develop the values that we feel are important. Let's discuss that simply by using the real life example of my son and his Justin Beiber haircut. On the practical end of things, after I was able to abandon my barber shop dream, my wife and I decided that, with four children, allowing everyone to get a \$25 haircut every other month was more than my wife and I were willing to spend. The trip to the beauty salon was a nice treat (and, ironically, a nice bonding time for my wife and son), but not something that we wanted to sustain long-term. We sat down with my son, prior to his next haircut, and talked with him about the price difference between the barber shop and the beauty salon. We explained to him, that he could wear his hair the way he liked, within reason, and that we would be willing to pay for Bruce to cut it. If he chose to go to the beauty salon, then he could find a place that will cut his hair less expensively, and/or do some work around the house to pay for the difference. In this way, I was able to follow his lead, and get to know him a little better, but still maintain healthy limits for our family, and hopefully teach him a life lesson around money.

As I learn to identify my agendas and plans for my children, and learn to let go, not only do I get to know my each of them better, but the connection between us grows. I have been absolutely astounded by how different each one of them are from my wife and I and from each other. Each of them has different talents, learns differently, has different tastes, and responds to circumstances differently. They are uniquely brilliant, creative and hungry to be known for who they are; and, conversely, have little interest in who I want them to be. As it should be.

Learning to let go:

1. Understanding that our children do not share the same priorities that we do, and that's OK. As an adult I am focused on getting things done, and where I'm going next (the future). Children live in the now. They are less interested in getting things done, than in learning how to do things and finding out what they enjoy.
2. The importance of taking time to find out what they are interested in, even if it's quite different than what we parents are interested in. However, this is how we continue to find out about who our children are, and also learn new and interesting things!
3. Allowing for choice, within limits. Wherever possible, especially through family meetings, we try to include our children in decision making. There are always constraints and limits, it's as important that children understand this and learn to work within limits as it is to work to go beyond limits. Learning to make healthy choices is dependent upon being allowed to make the choices in the first place, and also being allowed to make mistakes. Sometimes we learn what we like and what our talents are by trying things that we don't like and finding activities that we're not talented in.
4. Less talking, more asking. One of the most difficult efforts as a parent has been to learn to ask good questions and listen without judgement. Good old fashioned Socratic questioning is a powerful way to listen and explore without judgement: What happened? What caused that to happen? How do you feel about it? What do you think? How do you see that situation? What do you think you would have done differently? What do you think you learned from this experience? When children know that we are seeking to understand vs. to be understood, it is amazing how much they open up.
5. Celebrate their uniqueness and differences. "Wow, I could have never done that. You really have

a talent for _____."