



17 PRIME THINGS I LEARNED ON THE WAY TO BECOMING A PARENT

By Susan Vogt

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Our oldest child just turned 21. Although we certainly aren't finished parenting yet, and I don't claim to have done everything right, at this stage in life I feel I have at least accumulated enough experiences that I would like to share my favorite pieces of parental learning with you. This also serves as a cathartic exercise since our children don't yet appreciate all these gems. Although much more could be said on each of the issues below, I share them in abbreviated form since I don't have the energy to write a book, and if you're in the active stage of parenting you probably don't have the time to read one. So here goes:

1. Stay-at-home vs. working-outside-the-home parents

The grass is always greener on the other side. The stay-at-home parent often suffers from lack of self-esteem due to personal and societal expectations. The work-outside-the-home parent is often plagued by guilt. Having done both, I found the stay-at-home role more demanding when the children were young.

2. Marriage

Marriage is not so much a matter of finding the right person as being the right person. It's hard enough to improve myself without embarking on a life-long mission of perfecting my spouse or children.

3. Spanking

It's a contradiction to tell a child not to solve problems by hitting or violence and then use hitting as a means to discipline.

4. TV, movies, video games

It's not only a matter of what activity such media promote (i.e. violence, sexual promiscuity, consumerism, etc.), but also what it keeps children from doing. There are fewer hours in the day for creative and interactive play when hours are spent in passive viewing.

5. Violence in the media

Any **one** violent or sexually explicit movie is not going to scar a child for life, but frequent exposure can raise one's shock threshold. We and our children, become less sensitive to the violence and more accepting of greater and greater levels of brutality. Control it.

6. Simple lifestyle

As the adage goes, "Live simply so that others may simply live." Cultivating a simple lifestyle, however, is not always simple and can take a lot of work. Although challenging and countercultural, the gospel calls us to this.

7. Sleep

If one spouse needs more sleep than the other, it is not a sign of laziness or moral inferiority.

8. Feeling overwhelmed with family needs or world problems?

I can't do everything, but I can do something. Just take a step. Do one thing. Make a contribution.

9. Consumerism

The more I make the more I "need". Our "needs" expand to meet a rising income. Sometimes the complaint that "you just can't raise a family on one income anymore" comes more from higher lifestyle expectations than from inflation. Our parents or grandparents didn't have air conditioned houses and cars, microwaves and entertainment systems. Many of them would have been poor by today's standards, but they had *time*.

10. The environment

Reduce, reuse, recycle. The hardest part of any recycling effort is setting up the containers and making it convenient.

11. Time

"Where you place your time, you place your life." (Clayton Barbeau) Although "quality time" is important, a skinned knee or watching that first step can't be scheduled. It takes a certain quantity of time to catch the quality times. "Presence" is more important than "presents".

12. Children

Children force us to develop virtues that we might not voluntarily cultivate. They can make us "holy" despite ourselves. A third child creates more change in parenting than you would expect.

13. Dual career parents

Keep your options open. Don't lock yourself into such high house payments or other debts that you close off the option of one parent quitting or reducing work hours if you change your mind and want to stay home with a preschooler.

14. Children's sports

Sports and school activities are good. Too many are not. Adults often organize their children's play too much. A certain amount of boredom and free time are a pre-requisite for creativity. Parents should support their children's teams but this needn't mean attendance at *all* games.

15. Chauffeuring

Generally kids get driven to too many things. Cultivate feet, bikes, and the bus as options. Chauffeuring, however, can provide valuable "talk time."

16. Rushing through childhood

Some things are worth waiting for — like Christmas, a driver's license, sex in marriage. To hurry it, spoils it.

17. The Great Escape Clause

As parents we are responsible for the process we use in rearing our children but cannot be held accountable for the outcome. In other words, I learned not to take credit unless I'm also willing to take the blame. Ultimately, it comes down to, "I did the best I could with what I knew at the time."