

Competence & Productivity:

I finished a rather fiendish suduko recently, after a long period of frustration, and noticed the simple pleasure I experienced out of just arranging numbers in a sequence. Why should that be? I thought? Why should a pointless activity evoke a pleasure sense of well-being? It got me thinking:

I realised that one of the most important experiences for any developing child or teenager is the experience of competence. The self-esteem of every child is enhanced by feeling competent and successful with some element of its life. These competencies need not be extravagant or noteworthy in and of themselves, but they must create a sense of mastery, worth, and uniqueness.

These successes may simply be no more than learning a musical instrument, playing football, reading books, excelling in a school subject or skill, understanding car mechanics, collecting things, making people laugh, being good with small children, looking good, writing, etc. etc. Whatever the small experience of competence is, it is vital for the growing confidence of the child and adolescent.

Look at any little two year old and marvel at the sheer uncomplicated pleasure they get out of simply doing some simple task successfully. It may be loading blocks into a box or fitting pieces of a simple jigsaw together. The child loves to feel successful and will, as every parent and grandparent knows, love to repeat it over and over again with the irresistible request "Do it again!" The truth is that we are all the same in some ways.

So if you are thinking about what to do for your children or how to be a good parent, think about his/her small areas of competence. *What does your child feel good at? What are his or her unique areas of competence?* If you can identify them then see how you can encourage them – even if you don't think are important. Maybe your teenager knows everything there is to know about the premiership or knows the lyrics of nearly every rock band there is. Though you might not value these things, in his own world this is how he feels good about himself.

But feeling competent and good-about-ourselves applies also to us as adults. Meaningful productivity in life is actually critical to one's sense of well-being and happiness. As we get older we can begin to lose that sense of simple joy in doing something well and of value. As we pass through middle-age we are prone to becoming tired and fatigued by the same old routines. The job no longer gives us that sense of purpose and accomplishment. The children are growing up and the simple delights or early parenting are replaced by a world-weariness.

It is so important then that we remember that at heart we are not unlike children. We too, in our 40's, 50's, and 60's, still need to feel we are still learning competencies. We therefore may need novelty, new challenges, and a sense of freedom in order to break free of our tired-old-ways.

This novelty, freedom, or challenge need not be something life-changing. It could be as simple as buying a new pair of boots, cleaning out a closet of old clothes, changing your car, repairing the old fence at the back, visiting an old friend, writing a letter to

someone, going back to church, changing your works schedule, letting go of some responsibilities, seeing a counsellor for a few sessions, changing your hair colour, removing an ugly shrub form the garden, hiring a skip and dumping out the attic, giving up TV for a week, etc. The important thing is to do any new thing *symbolically*. By that I mean, that you let it represent your freedom, your perseverance, your desire, or your not-going-to-put-up-with-it-anymore attitude.

Every little thing can have meaning if you live it fully. When you clean out the garden shed do it with conviction! No half-hearted efforts! In the smallest and most trivial of things one can find a universe of pleasure. Having painted the side of the house, you can look on like Michelangelo and celebrate for the evening!

The truth is that we can only live a small life. WE cannot travel the world and change the universe. We are, by nature, confined to our small patch. But we can care for that patch with all the artistry, creativity, and novelty we wish.

So if you are feeling a bit lost, or you feel your children are a bit lost, just think of small areas of competence that can be taken on and mastered. Get your teenager up out of bed to paint the garden shed. Get yourself up out of bed to get him to do it. Both of you will feel the better for it. Simple competencies over time become irrepressible.