

### **Book Review: The Secret of Parenting**

In my experience as a licensed clinical psychologist, today's parents seem to have difficulty determining what, if any, stance is best to assume with their children--especially during times of stress. Concerned about escalating matters and being manipulated, parents fail to appreciate the choices available to them. They find themselves caught off guard by ordinary parenting dilemmas, and through misinterpreting their children's need for empathy as functioning decline, quickly become insecure and overwhelmed. Uncertainty about parenting capacities and anxiety about childhood wellbeing can lead to hyper-vigilant and/or neglectful parenting ("something must be wrong" "I've put my time in now he/she has to grow up").

Anthony Wolf is a practicing clinical psychologist and author of several books, including, *The Secret of Parenting: How to Be in Charge of Today's Kids—from Toddlers to Preteens—Without Threats or Punishment*.<sup>1</sup> Wolf begins by noting a decline in parenting pleasure (pride/joy), which he links to a significant change in the parent/child power dynamic following the societal shift away from harsh punishment practices (which beget fear based compliance). According to Wolf, childhood tyranny is a necessary step in establishing healthy autonomous functioning, providing the appropriately engaged parental guidance is available.

Wolf offers insight into childhood conflicts about needing (and not needing) parental support citing specific developmental precursors. Parents are encouraged to thoughtfully respond in a consistent empathic manner, rather than a shortsighted mode borne of distress.

The author normalizes parenting struggles, replacing psychological speak with cartoon like categories of ego functioning. In place of ID and Ego are, respectively, the Baby-self and Real-self, introduced in vignettes about commonplace conflicts.

With respect to sibling conflicts, especially invaluable advice is given about letting children work things out, rather than hovering, or policing after the fact, both of which negatively impact interpersonal skills. Wolf's candid recommendation about managing bedtime separation problems (assuming a robot mommy posture after appropriately responding to pragmatic bedtime matters), is excellent. In my opinion, choreographed bedtime rituals assuage parental guilt, anger, worry and sadness often complicated by unacknowledged care giving fantasies.

In response to the parental tendency to impose readymade solutions to real and imagined problems (for both self serving and magnanimous purposes), Wolf provides useful phrases, in scripted dialogue fashion, including: "gosh that's a problem", "sounds like your mad", "gosh don't know what to say" and "good-bye". According to the author minimalistic parental commentary facilitates self-awareness and, in turn, good decision-making (supplants intrusive interpretation).

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf, Anthony E. (2000). *The Secret of Parenting: How to Be in Charge of Today's Kids—from Toddlers to Preteens—Without Threats or Punishment*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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Citing the work of psychotherapist Carl Rogers, Wolf points to the importance of good listening skills (meaning staying with what the child is saying, no more, no less). Listening can be very powerful, especially if it allows for the unfolding of individual perception of the dilemma without urgent interpretation or solution-saturated help. This empathic stance sends the message that the person matters, irrespective of their problem(s), and allows appropriate mirroring. Sadly, in today's fast paced society, where we are starved for time to just be, active listening is often experienced as a frivolous unproductive activity best left to the experts.