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Breaking Windows

by *Melissa Wilkins*

I am facing an aging crisis. And I'm not talking about the wiry white hairs I find myself plucking out of my twenty-something-year-old head—with three kids; I think that's to be expected. No, my dilemma is that my oldest child is about to be six. And though six seems like a kid, while zero to five seemed like extended baby- and toddlerhood, what really worries me is this: we're fast approaching the end of the Formative Years. If the nightmare-inducing parenting manuals are to be believed, important learning windows are rapidly slamming shut in my face right now. Some are already locked and weatherproofed with the shades drawn and have been for years. Oh, I know they say a scant few remain open a bit longer, but for the most part, it sounds like we're sealed in by five. She's formed.

I want to believe this is a ridiculous notion. All the hard work of parenting cannot be wrapped up in a few swiftly passing years. We have plenty of development yet to come, right? I don't expect to unleash on the world a young adult with all the rational and emotional maturity of a six-year old. So why do I keep hearing that every parenting battle we'll ever face is won or lost by the time they're five? Never mind that my husband and I try not to look at parenting as a war, full of us-versus-them battles; has our family really already established nonmalleable patterns of interaction that will last for the rest of our lives? Can that be right?

Sure, my daughter seems to be turning into a delightful, multidimensional person. She reads everything in sight, then asks if we can move into a chocolate factory or bemoans our family's lack of a covered wagon. She lobbies inventively for a pet pig: she points out how an influx of fresh manure would improve our vegetable garden, and when we ask her to scrape her dinner dish into the trash, she suggests that the leftover bits

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would make wonderful pig slop. She wants to cut her hair short because one can't gallivant across Narnia with ponytails, and one really never knows when one may stumble into a wardrobe and out of this world.

But there are moments. Moments of toy hoarding, of unkind voices, and rough words. There are times she responds with an eye roll and an "o-KAY" when gently corrected, and I still find myself reminding her to "use your words, not your body" to communicate with her siblings. She's unlikely to see, let alone put away, the Legos strewn across the floor, and heaven forbid she should notice where she places her hands after finger painting. Does all this mean we've somehow malformed her and we just don't realize it yet?

Perhaps. Perhaps we've been using faulty parenting methods all along. Perhaps in order to develop their full brainiac potential, kids do need Baby Einstein and "educational" toys. What will I say to her years from now?—"Sorry you didn't get the job at the UN, honey. I know everyone else applying spoke eighteen different languages, starting in infancy. But your father and I didn't believe the hype at the time. I guess we all know better now!" Perhaps we've made other mistakes that only she will be able to identify, and not until she's grown.

Truthfully, though, she hardly came to us as an unformed lump of clay. She had personality. Temperament. Opinions. And it isn't as though we've been doing all the shaping; she's done plenty of hard work herself, learning how she fits into a family created by her birth—and that work seems seriously unfinished. One of my girlfriends tells me that God will use those raw places where our kids are a little weird to grow them and teach them when they are adults. I hope she's right because there's still plenty of weird left to work out of me—passing some on seems inevitable.

Maybe the experts are right: my daughter's development is already set in stone. Or maybe their theories are flawed, born of a society that values intensive parenting in the early years and mass schooling thereafter. I'll probably never know for sure. But when I look around, it seems to me that if some critical parenting window closes after the first five years, no one on the ground knows it. I certainly know of parents of older kids who have developed a new parenting philosophy or tried out a new parenting method or learned new ways to interact with their kids, all with great success. I don't think I'll start ridiculing my friends any time soon for continuing to try to shape their older children. I won't laugh and point, or yell "Futile!" when I see a mom searching for new ways to communicate with her ten-year old, or a dad seeking to mold his twelve-year old's character, or friends trying to direct their teenager down a new path.



yellow lamp on blue book



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As for me, I think I'll just face the next day like I did the last one and leave the expert theories at the door. I'm not sure what other choice I have. Even if I could repeat the last six years, I wouldn't know what I ought to do differently; who she is and who she will become are still ambiguous to me. I will just choose to believe the best—we have shaped her acceptably well thus far, we'll continue to parent her to the best of our flawed abilities, and she'll grow to be an interesting adult in spite of our shortcomings—regardless of whether some elusive developmental windows are already sealed.

Melissa Wilkins lives and writes in southern California, where she also keeps busy with the care and feeding of three small children. More of Melissa's writing can be found at her personal blog makingthingsup.blogspot.com.

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