

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Navigating Island Parenting: The West Indian Parent's Attitude Towards Education

Opinion / **Published On April 20, 2016 12:22 PM /**

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Each morning we send our children off to school. Each morning we remind them of what is expected of them. Each morning we remind ourselves as parents to be forward thinking and not to repeat some of the 'mistakes' that our parents made with us. I am certain that there are many of us who still cringe from the, "Let me hear another complaint from the teacher and I will come up that school and straighten you out right in front the whole class."

I am certain that many of us got the, "What grade is that, a ninety-six, well where you lost the rest? Don't bring anything in front of me unless you get one hundred." I am certain that many of us were asked by our parents, "Was that your best? Don't you think that you

are capable of better? You know that there is still room for improvement? Yes, you got a ninety but have you evaluated where you fell short? Where did you lose the ten percent?" Trust me, I have been there and in those moments we thought our parents were being harsh, mean and impossible. We viewed the response in the negative and at times just wanted to know, "Why can't he or she say well done and I am proud." Then as the years pass and you are raising your own children you can't help but look back and do a couple of 'what ifs or where would I have ended if Ma didn't push me or if Ma didn't do such and such?'

I am certain that there are many of us who heard, "Why you come telling me you don't have any friends in school for, is that I send you school for, to go learn how to look friend? Friends going lead you astray! School is a serious business. It is not a social club. I am sending you to school to take in what the teacher have to 'pung' in your head. I am not wasting my money to send you there to look no friend. You will have more than enough time to look friend when you finish your education, so don't come back in front of me and tell me you don't have any friend in school."

Many of us thought that our parents were insensitive, mean, harsh, and in my case I can say down right militant when it came to school. The message was sent that school was no joke, that it was serious business. School was your vehicle to success. Education is key. It was instilled that you were not sent to school to 'skylark' or 'form the fool.' You were sent to school to learn.

Given our past experiences, many of us made the pledge that when we became parents we would be more understanding. We pledged to not resort to such harsh or caustic methods, the methods that many parents of yester year used. We made the pledge to not be as hard on our own children. I made that pledge. Many of my friends made that pledge. But you know what, as my sons are growing older, I did a total about turn. To my surprise, I find myself employing many of the methods that my own mother used, as I now have a great appreciation for all that she has done. My mother, a former educator fed us a hearty diet of books, active social debates and limited to no television. At that time I thought she was mean because I couldn't tell you anything about the characters on *Saved by the Bell* or *90210* which were popular among my peers however at a very young age I could start a diatribe on any social or political issue, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Dame Eugenia to name a few, thus my interest in social, international and political affairs.

My sons have heard, "You are not going school to look no friend." The modern day mother that I am, and given all of the parenting books and materials that I have read, the appropriate response for my sons' complaints about their friends not playing with them on a given day would be one of comfort and understanding, however the West Indian parent in me thought it pertinent to send the message as my own mother did, that school was not a 'social club' but rather an institution of learning and that was/is their purpose for being there. Don't get me wrong, I want them to build lasting friendships, I had friends, many who are still with me today, however my mother made it known that my purpose for being in school was to learn, full stop, period, and as she used to say, "Leg bend! Story end! You are not going there to socialize. School and your books are priority."

I can hear all of the proponents of socialization starting an uproar now, and let me clarify that socialization has its place in a child's development, however ask any West Indian

parent if their child's socialization in school, and let me reiterate in school, was their number one concern. The message, "You are sent to school to learn, not to win a popularity or congeniality contest, there is more than enough time for that when you were finished with your schooling." The message, "When you come home and you finish your homework, you can outside and socialize." The message, "You have brothers, sisters and plenty of cousins what you need more friends for." The message, "When you go to Scouts, play football or netball you can socialize. School is not the place for socialization."

I contend that there are many facets to West Indian parenting that can use a bit of sprucing up or improvement. The one area I can't say that I want to see a change is the West Indian parent's attitude to school or education. The one aspect of West Indian Parenting that I won't change in raising my sons is that school is important. They are being sent there to learn. School and one's education is nothing to play with, it was a serious, serious business, as one of my uncles like to say.

Respect for one's teachers, respect for those books which contained knowledge and respect for the institution of learning were surely no laughing matter. The West Indian parent saw it as his or her responsibility to feed and clothe his or her child, send him or her to school, to take in that knowledge and not to "skylark or form de fool." For the West Indian child the order of the day was church or religion and then it was school. School was important.

There are times I do wonder what the attitude of the West Indian parent is today, as it relates to school. What I can say however is that the old attitude to school, education and learning should not be thrown by the wayside. As a people we used to put value on education. We used to put value on learning. This should not change. We should not compromise on this. I will end by saying that the West Indian parent can soften his or her approach a bit, the going to school with the belt to the 'wash out' the child in front of the class, I am not so sure of, but instilling that attitude of respect for the institution, respect for teachers, respect for other children's education 'that is not going there to skylark, distract or disrupt the lesson,' respect for books, and respect for the right and opportunity to be educated should be instilled in each and every West Indian child.

Valuable Lessons Not Taught in School only by the West Indian Parent

"All skin teeth ain't laugh." "Remember common sense, mek before book sense." "No every old pan knock you must follow." "Hurry dog eat raw corn." "Don't cut your nose to spoil your face." "You ain't fall out no breadfruit tree." "Don't hang your hat where you hand can't reach." "See me and come live with me is two different things." "Who can't hear must feel." "One hand can't clap." "Remember, one, one full basket."

Quotes of Encouragement - Developing a Healthy Attitude towards School and Education

"The beautiful thing about learning is that no one can take it away from you." BB King

"What we learn becomes a part of who we are." Unknown

"Thirty years from now, it won't matter what shoes you wore, how your hair looked, or the jeans you bought. What will matter is what you learned and how you used it." Unknown

“It always seems impossible, until it is done.” Nelson Mandela

“Nothing is impossible. The word itself says, I’m possible.” Audrey Hepburn.

“It is hard to fail. But it is worse never to have tried to succeed.” Anonymous

“It doesn’t matter what everyone is doing. It matters what you are doing.” Anonymous

“Wrong is wrong, even if everyone is doing it. Right is right even if no one is doing it.”
Anonymous

Recommended Reading for Children – Caribbean Themed Books/West Indian Authors
Efa and the Mosquito by Alscess Lewis Brown, Illustrated by Cynthia Hatfield Caribbean
Animals by Dawne Allette, Illustrated by Alan Baker I am Dominica – Mwen Sen Donmnik
by Mara Etienne Manley Artwork by Aaron Hamilton Picture book- Ackee, Breadfruit,
Callaloo: An Edible Alphabet by Valerie Bloom, Illustrated by Kim Harley

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