

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Island Parenting: Grounded In Culture And Heritage - A Question Of Maximum Worldly Exposure

Opinion / **Published On June 30, 2016 11:55 AM /**

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A friend was informing me about the summer plans that she had orchestrated for her children, as she deemed it her duty as a parent to provide them with what she described as “maximum worldly exposure.”

“Every parent wants to provide his or her child with exposure!” she declared. I concurred but this set me thinking not only about worldly exposure but exposure within a child’s own community or country.

Isn’t it the parent’s responsibility to ensure that his or her child is learned on all things authentic, cultural, germane to his or her environ? Shouldn’t this take precedence over

the worldly exposure? These are just questions that I am asking, as I have worked with many children over the years who were versed in other cultures, had traveled extensively; however, they were ignorant about their culture and the communities in which they were raised.

Do not get me wrong, I am not saying that they were not taught the basics in school in their social studies class, or that they had not taken a field trip or two, but the extent to which they could describe the streets of New York, yet were struggling to relay a piece of their own history, I found quite disconcerting.

This isn't unique to children, as there are adults who cannot list all of the parishes in their island or even tell you what villages comes after which, yet like their children they could rattle off the streets of New York or even the 50 states in the United States of America.

As a native of St Kitts and Nevis, I can say that I have always been astonished when I hear people remark that they have been to New York or London but they have never been to Nevis, the sister island, which is only a stone's throw away. I am also quite surprised to discover that many have never vacationed in any of the neighboring islands or worse yet that they know so little about these islands. Their knowledge is often limited to biases or the negative stereotypes that are aligned with that particular culture or country.

All of this makes me question the significance of "maximum worldly exposure," that is, if you haven't mastered exposure within your community, island or country. Have you asked yourself, as a parent that is, about the message that you are sending to your child/children by providing him or her with "maximum worldly exposure" but yet no emphasis has been placed on his or her culture or the region in which he or she lives?

Be a tourist in your own country -- there is so much to discover!

I remember a conversation with a former boss who informed that he was looking forward to his vacation, when I asked about his plans, expecting the response to be that he was traveling to some far off exotic locale, he shocked me by saying that he was vacationing at home. My response was, "Well, what's so exciting about that, you are here all of the time aren't you?" His reply, "Well I will be taking in the sights like any tourist and enjoying the hospitality of my good people. I will go horse-back riding. I will do a safari tour and an island wide tour by taxi. Golfing is a must. I have always wanted to try scuba diving and snorkeling. These are just a few of things on my list."

There are many parents who want to provide their children with exposure and who may think that exposure has to be had by jetting off to some far off place. There are also many children who look forward to vacations so that they could travel overseas, and return to report the new adventures to their friends, however adventure, exposure and experiences could be had right at home.

Pick up a brochure or a tourist magazine in your country and call one of the agents at a safari or scenic tour; book a horse-back riding trip, schedule a scuba diving or snorkeling lesson for you and your child/children. Go and enjoy the experience! This is exposure.

Contact the historical or natural preservation society on your island and schedule a tour for you and your child/children. Many of these organizations offer hikes, educational tours

of ruins and historical sites. You and your child/children may even find that becoming a member could prove quite beneficial.

Travel around the island in a taxi. Take in the sights. Have the driver relay the history to you. You could use this time for bonding. Share your own childhood experiences with your child. There are parents who relocate to the city or another part of the country; if you fit the criteria; on this tour you could point out the school or church that you attended when you were a child.

A taxi tour is also ideal, as it is a more relaxed, and you won't have to focus on driving or be concerned that the passenger bus that you are traveling in is zooming by. Traveling by taxi can also be a way to brush up on your history, as taxi drivers are among the best historians your country has to offer.

Instead of saving up for that big trip an alternative could be making a list of restaurants in your country that you will like to dine at, and take your child/children for lunch on the weekend. Dining out isn't an activity that is reserved for dates or friends, nor is it an activity that is reserved for special occasions. Get that tourist magazine or brochure out and ask your child to join in the selection. Order something that you will not normally prepare at home, or you could just order dessert. It could be one item from the menu that is shared. Call ahead or request a menu so that you could budget for this occasion. This could be considered exposure.

Many hotels have local rates. Make a list of hotels that you would like to spend a night at; the goal may be one hotel per year or one hotel every two years, and save up for this. Take your children along. They will enjoy the experience. It will be a night of relaxation, and sometimes this is all a family needs to recharge or bond.

These are activities that could be spread across a year; be done for a birthday; to celebrate a special occasion such as a graduation; or just for family time. Your child/children will never forget the experiences, and best of all you will get to be a part of the experiences. Most importantly I think that these experiences will strengthen the parent/child bond and give a greater appreciation for culture, heritage and country and they won't break the bank.

Your country's most valued resource – the older generation

I read an article about the exposure that children needed in order to be smart. The list comprised: learning a second language, playing brain games such as chess, and music. One key thing that was absent however and this is the value to be had from the exposure to a grandparent or someone from the older generation who was versed in one's culture or history. As someone who grew up with a grandmother, I can assure you that the best way for a child to get any kind of valuable exposure, even worldly exposure is on the knees of a grandparent or on the steps of a trusted old neighbor. There is no better teacher of history or culture than those who have embraced it and lived it. Nothing beats this kind of exposure.

Reflection

A people without knowledge the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like trees without roots. Marcus Garvey

Change your opinions, keep to your principles; change your leaves, keep intact your roots. Victor Hugo

As parents we all want only the best for our children and at the top of the list, “maximum worldly exposure.” We want our children to experience the things that we have never experienced, travel to places that we have never traveled, and we feel that it is our duty to provide them with these things. Nothing is wrong with this. As I reflect, however I just want to say that we ought to ensure that our children are grounded in their own history, and surroundings. We ought to foster and cultivate an appreciation for their heritage, and that this is done before or as we set out to provide them with “maximum worldly exposure.”

Recommended Reading for Children

Clever Anansi and the Boastful Bullfrog – A Caribbean Tale by H. Patten and John Clementson

My Caribbean Grandma written by Sandra Campbell – Notice, Illustrations by Anura Srinath

Br'er Anancy and the Magic Pot written by V.S. Russell, Illustrations by Clovis Brown

Grandpa Sydney's Anancy Stories written by Geoffrey Philip

Cricket is My Game by Jason Cole

Tales from the Isles of Spice by Richardo Keens Douglas

Adventure at Brimstone Hill (Caribbean Adventure Series) written by Carol Ottley – Mitchell

Moko Jumbi Dreams written by Alsciss Lewis Brown