

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Photos an Aid to Self-Awareness

ONCE, GETTING YOUR PICTURE TAKEN was a special look-your-best occasion with solemn facial expressions. Now stiff portraiture is reserved for heads of state, and technology allows for voluminous photos reflecting countless moods and activities. When I was growing up, photos were taken at standard times—the first day of school, blowing out candles at a birthday party, graduating from elementary school. Technology allows us to take pictures and get instant results, reflecting the whole flow of life. However, the ease of acquiring digital images (I have hundreds in my computer) can distract us from the tradition of looking at photos as a family and reminiscing about their meaning.

Discussing photos is a great way to develop common memories and help a child in the process of developing identity. Scientists now know that the brain doesn't record our history in a running video of what actually happened. Our memories are based on subjective images, leaving out what qualities others saw in us or successes that didn't register in our consciousness.

Looking at photos with a child can be a wonderful opportunity for tuning their awareness to their own growth and development and the wonderful traits they displayed at an early age.

Here are some ideas for promoting self-awareness through photos:

Talk about developmental stages. Parents have often told me that a child was independent “from the day he was born.” However, the stage of acquiring autonomy actually begins when a child is around two, signaled by saying “No.” Looking at a photo, you can point out, “That’s when you first decided what foods you liked and those you didn’t want.” Helping a child think about the fact that her life has included many stages of development helps her to see that she is still in the process of changing and creating a whole identity. In the Waldorf tradition, birthdays sometimes include posting pictures of a child in many successive stages.

Note evidence of resilience. Parents, grandparents, and teachers are all figures who help a child remember how successfully he handled life’s hurdles in the past. Parents might look at a picture and note, “Remember when you first started school, you had a hard time saying good-bye, and now look how strong you are about going in to your class.”

Point out the traits you want to nurture. Haim Ginott, the famous child psychologist and author, was one of the first experts to point the importance of catching the child demonstrating the qualities we want him to develop. Looking at picture provides the perfect opportunity for offering positive feedback about a child’s essential nature. We might focus on a photo and comment on a child’s sensitivity to others, his generous nature, his honesty, humor, or curiosity.

A picture is worth a thousand words because we can use it to bolster children’s good feelings about themselves and an awareness of what others see in them.

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