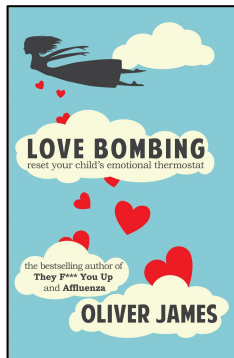


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The Day of Compassion

My plan for the Day of Compassion was to devote myself to my seven-year-old daughter for 24 hours. The idea was to spend the day doing what British psychotherapist and author Oliver James calls "love bombing," in which a parent:



"spends a period of time alone with a child, offering [the child a lot of love and control]. This is not the same thing as 'quality time,' where you just hang out with your child. When you Love Bomb, you create a special emotional zone that your child and you regard as wholly different from your normal life." (James, 2012, p. 4)

Although I regard myself as a caring, attentive, and responsible parent, I'm also aware that I often pay my daughter only superficial attention, distracted as I am by work, domestic life, my spouse, and (all too frequently) the smart phone. Since taking this Social Psychology course, I've also begun to suspect that the fundamental attribution error contaminates our relationship—that I overlook situational causes of my daughter's behavior and end up attributing her deeds only to dispositional causes. My hope was that by devoting 24 hours of committed, compassionate attention to my little one, I'd foster a deeper connection between the two of us, show her how much she means to me, and come to have a better understanding of how she views the world.

So, on Saturday, 16 August 2014, I powered down my mobile phone, turned off the computer, and let my daughter know that I was all hers for the whole day. She was the boss; her wish was my command. What followed was a challenging yet enriching day—one that exacted a toll but paid rich dividends by affording me greater insight into my daughter's world.

According to researchers Piercarlo Valdesolo and David DeSteno (2012, p. 262), compassion is "an emotion focused on concern for the wellbeing of another," but it comes with a price tag: "Aiding others is often costly both in terms of physical and psychological resources" (p. 263). These are findings to which I can attest.

At a merely practical level, I found committing myself to my daughter's desires tiring and at times frustrating; the wishes of a seven-year-old rarely align with general domestic demands. I was keenly aware that while we were building ice castles in the living room, splashing cake batter across the kitchen, and submarining in the bathtub, there was laundry piling up, dishes going unwashed, and grass growing higher. I had to work hard, ceaselessly monitoring myself to ensure that I was actively listening to her and fully committing myself to whatever activity we were pursuing, so that my attention remained focused on my daughter—not on my desire for domestic order.

On the other hand, there were many positives. Simply being with my daughter on her terms, without watching the clock or fussing over adult responsibilities, was a joyous experience, and I thoroughly enjoyed a number of the games we played. Who knew that making Magic Dragon Soup could be so much fun?



Thrilling, too, was her appreciation for "I'm the Boss Day." She mentioned several times how fun it was to make the rules and have Dadda "on tap," unconditionally available.

Paradoxically, the day's greatest reward also posed the greatest challenge. Late in the afternoon, as we enjoyed a backyard tea party with Teddy One and Teddy Two, my daughter opened up to me about some trouble she was having at school—trouble about which I had been completely ignorant. She confessed to having recently been the subject of classroom ostracism and bullying. This problem had been compounded by the departure of a dear friend from her class, leaving her feeling lonely and alienated.

These revelations—which I believe only surfaced as a consequence of the emotional connection established during the Day of Compassion—stirred up a maelstrom of feelings. I was dreadfully dismayed to learn of my daughter's loneliness, and I felt guilt for not having made myself available to her earlier. I also suffered cognitive dissonance when her disclosure exposed a gap between my conception of myself as an attentive parent, and the reality.

On the flip side, I was overjoyed that she privileged me with access into her inner world, and I felt relief that I had learned about her difficulties. Our conversation subsequently allowed us to implement some concrete measures to address her problems. We've started work on resilience techniques, and I met with her classroom teacher to develop a number of schoolyard strategies. These measures are already bearing fruit, and not just for my daughter—they've helped to align my parenting self-image with my parenting behaviours, and thus achieve cognitive consistency (Festinger, as cited in McLeod, 2008).

My daughter's candid admissions also confirmed my suspicion that the fundamental attribution error had been colouring my views of her behaviour. For example, she wasn't plodding through her homework because she was innately indolent, but because she was distracted by challenges at school. As a consequence of this insight, I'll endeavour to be more empathic in the future, and less hasty to scold her for perceived laziness.

In summary, my participation in the Day of Compassion yielded genuine benefits. To sustain the connection that my daughter and I established, I plan to hold regular 30-minute parcels of "I'm the Boss" time, with an occasional whole-day experience every few months. I hope that, as noted, I'll be less prone to attributional errors. And I'll obviously remain engaged with her progress at school, to ensure that our coping strategies are working effectively. Importantly, my experience taught me that sometimes, compassion—like charity—is best begun at home.



References

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