

learning for life



it's NOT fair!

by Robin Booth

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“Mom, how is it that you say I can't eat chocolate but you seem to eat as much as you like?” “And you don't HAVE to go to school. You get to laze around the whole day.” “And you tell me I have to go to bed at 8 o'clock but you stay up as late as you want?” “And why is it that you can smack me but I can't smack you back?” “This all seems so unfair!”

But this isn't really about paying tax. This is about being treated fairly, which is about being treated equally and with respect. Justice is what we wish for when we are treated unfairly and it is often fuelled by our anger which turns to thoughts of revenge (thoughts like ... "I hope you also get what is coming to you!")

I once had an idea about building a 'room' that would be furnished 'normally'

“ Suddenly the issues of ethics and morals are challenged. ”

These were some of the questions that a group of seven-year-olds came up with when we asked them what they thought was unfair about their parents' behaviour. In fact, I think some of these children went and asked their parents similar questions and I would love to have heard the parents' responses to these penetrating questions.

In all my experience of working with children and adults, there are two things which keep showing up as important elements to acknowledge and consider in living happy lives. Having the experience of being understood is one of them, and the other is *fairness*. I am going to define 'fairness' in this context as the quality of being treated equally. And even though this quality is also important to us as adults, it is most clearly observed in the actions and communications of children.

“But why must I do it? John doesn't have to do it. He went outside to play and he hasn't even finished.”

In many instances the arguments of the children are clearly thought out and have a point. Most likely they will also always be fair. Our children put us on the spot. They remember everything and keep reminding us when we step out of line.

“Why must I have breakfast before I go to school? You don't eat breakfast before you go to work so why do I have to?” We scramble to reply to these questions in such a way that attempts to justify the differences between the world of adults and world of children. In these arguments I think we fail. There is no justice here. And is there a way out?

As an adult I experience unfairness when I sit in bumper-to-bumper traffic with an empty bus lane next to me and a car drives along this bus lane and nips back into the traffic further up front. Or how about being a model tax-payer and then you find out about the people who seem to get away with some scam of not paying any tax? Suddenly the issues of ethics and morals are challenged. “Why must I pay income tax if many other people seem to get away with not paying any at all?”

but in proportions to my size as if I were a six-year-old child. In other words, the seats of the chairs would reach up to my waist and the table-top would be about eye-level. Even the drinking mugs would require two hands to lift and drink out of. There would be a pony-sized animal that would be running around the room, a kind of pet dog (this pony would come bounding over to me, tail wagging and if I had some food in my hand, she would promptly devour it, leaving my hand slimy!) Then I would sit on the chair with my legs barely touching the floor and I would pick up an oversized pencil that would be difficult to grasp. Then I would have a model of a person standing next to me who would be twice my size, with a finger outstretched pointing in my direction as if I had done something wrong.

This experience would hopefully give me a glimpse of a young child's perspective of the world. It would remind me how disempowered many young children may feel and would increase my levels of patience and compassion. It would be a reminder of how overbearing or disempowering it can be to have these 'big' people making rules which don't seem fair. It would remind me that if I also want to be treated fairly in life, I need to live those same values myself.

What would it really be like to experience the world from your child's perspective? Where do you think that they might experience the world as unfair? Where do you think you are being unfair to them?

So the next time your child says, “When we go to the video shop it's unfair that you say I can only get one DVD but you get two!” are you going to try and think up some clever comment that gets you off the hook so you can do what you want just because you say so, or can you use this as an opportunity to carefully look at the situation and bring your actions more in line with the core value of being treated fairly? And my wish is that this is also a penetrating question. ✨