

8 Questions
Every Parent Should Ask



*Parenting in the Present With the
Future in Mind*

Dr. John C. Panepinto

8 Questions Every Parent Should Ask empowers parents to clarify their family vision and align with developmental principles. With answers you discover and meaningful to you, you can parent in the present with the future in mind.

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By Dr. John C. Panepinto

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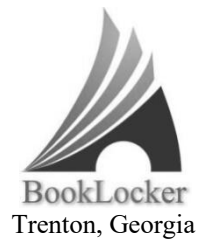
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Introduction

“Live the questions now”

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Children are unique. The path described by their nature, and their experience along the arc of being nurtured and challenged is a singular story unfolding. They change, go through developmental stages that are well described, and continue being who they are. Yet deep down no two lives are alike. And no two families are the same.

But lives and families do have similarities and maybe that’s where we can get stuck. We think if we follow certain steps and do them in the correct order, things will turn out as expected. “Happy” seems to be the word connected to this expectation. We default to “happy.” I will be happy, my kids will be happy, my family will be happy when...

...and as the story goes, live happily ever after.

Only if it were so simple.

But it’s not. The moment is complicated, and lives and families are complex beyond measure. Children are unique potential evolving in time. But children come to us *dependent*. They can’t make it on their own and have a long apprenticeship. To become independent and fulfill their unique potential, their seasons of dependence require an immeasurable amount of dedication, intention, and guidance within a loving relationship of challenge and support.

On the path to independence children require the time to mature, thrive, explore, and make deep connections. Each story is beautifully different. For parents, to be clear of *your* story is to be able to help the evolution of another’s. We get stuck here, too.

The way to clarity is not through generic statements. The way to understanding does not come from a manual describing a repeatable process. Children, lives, and families are not “how-to” projects. And the common use of “best practices” is misguided in the parenting realm. All we can do in any given moment is offer *meaningful communication* based on a deep understanding of what serves *this* child best in their development. We are always communicating. Best to be clear beforehand.

The way to clarity and understanding of what and who is becoming is not just through what was, or samples of what is, but through the imagination of what will be. Yes, these are based in principles—but clarity also is informed by creativity and intuition.

Potential can’t be measured—and this causes many problems and misalignment. But we can *imagine* the future, and these images connect to what matters most.

And we can start with some really good questions.

Finding clarity through questions may seem like a paradox, but only because in *not* knowing we often seek guidance in clear statements of “what to do.” This method works with machines and simple problems or situations. But not with children, relationships, families, and personal missions. Why? The truth is we don’t really know how it will turn out. We are open and dynamic beings in the flux of an open and dynamic system known as *life*.

Just consider where you were five years ago and project forward. Did you perfectly predict your present situation? Or who is in or out of your life, where you are, what you are doing? Your successes and mistakes? Tragedies and triumphs? You may have a good sense of the quality, but the specifics down to a checklist—not so much.

And that is fine. That is living. So here we go.

Principles

Very simply, every action in parenting is based on an inner philosophy on how a child should act and be. We have an inner sense of how development unfolds and who our children should become. All our choices and expectations flow from this basic doctrine, but unfortunately the beliefs often remain in unexamined form and are never brought out into the light for clarity... *Not questioned*. Many families go generation to generation without examining this philosophy yet live and parent directed by these beliefs each day, each moment.

Our most intimate experience of parenting came through our childhood way of knowing and, later, a still-developing adolescent mind. How we remember this time was influenced by who we were, how we made sense of experience, and what our needs were at that time. Most importantly, the greatest influence occurred in the first three years of our lives before we could make memories with words and stories.

Those first memories were stored in sensory, emotional, and intuitive forms, and became mental models and images of our sense of self, others, relationships, and how the world works. Further, we saw the world as a one-way street through adolescence as we were developmentally a work in progress towards true reciprocal and intimate relationships. And we were by NO means there yet.

We remember being parented as a *receiver*, not as a giver or caretaker. As mentioned, to be clear of one's story is to be able to help the evolution of another's. So, making sense of this past stage of life in the present as a parent or soon-to-be parent is an important task. It is a step towards clarity. And we get there with good questions.

If we ask these questions, then we are grounded in principles rather than the past or how we "think" we were raised. We don't mindlessly revert to common patterns or products such as, "Children are to be seen and not heard," or "Because I said so." We don't waffle between permissiveness and authoritarian modes. We don't react, we respond from an inner, well-thought-out core. When we are grounded in developmental principles that are embraced and lived consistently, they enliven the qualities we admire in ourselves, others, and our children.

A simple way to consider these principles is to present the opposite forms. Consider all the attributes and qualities you DON'T want your children to become. If you make a list of these, typically you have experienced them in relationships, and it didn't feel good or turn out too well. Principles of character and competence underlie life-affirming qualities, and these negative qualities offer the opposite. Qualities such as dishonesty, unkindness, selfishness, apathy, and disrespect do not work too well in the scheme of life. The consequences arising from the actions and choices of these qualities don't align with well-being, healthy relationships, and meaningful pursuits. The world is not so forgiving of these qualities...

These principles and qualities will make sense as we go through these questions. They will resonate with you and, hopefully, inspire you. They will provide direction and a sense of purpose in your parenting. Being a mother, father, or caretaker is the most demanding role in life—and I suggest the most important. In a world of questionable leadership, parenting is the role of *primary* leadership. The role is lifelong and impactful generation to generation, and we are learning more each day about the importance of the quality of care and

relating. And once you are a mother or father, you will always be. Your histories are intertwined from the past and to the future through generations. Making sense and embracing this journey matters. It always has.

Getting Started

Purposefully, this is a short book. But the work it describes is long and the process requires repeatedly asking these questions and reflecting on them over time. Make the time by planning the time to be *in the process*. I've noticed time management systems and planners are often full of obligations, but short on what gives life meaning. Yes, jobs, meetings, and appointments are important, but nothing comes close to the time in your relationships. There is a saying that no one wishes, in their last days, that they had spent more time at the office. In the end, the most meaningful moments are the ones we've spent with others who give our lives meaning. Best to structure the time based on what gives time meaning and value.

Again, the work is hard. Life is difficult. Parenting involves sacrifice. But I prefer to consider this word, *sacrifice*, in a less common light. Over the years the meaning of sacrifice seems to have garnered a negative tone. Something given up or not experienced. Something not gained and regretted for something less than. But the origins of the word are in actions of "making sacred." What is more sacred than the responsibility of parenting? We are gifted a living being to hold through the lifespan, to provide the conditions required to survive, thrive, and feel alive. This is truly a sacred space.

Consider the commitment and take it a day at a time (and sometimes one moment at a time!). Start with the first of the *Eight Questions* and dive deep. Spend time with the process and know that first takes and impressions often skim the surface. At times, I will make note within each question regarding how other questions relate, for as a whole, the questions weave a meaningful fabric, interconnect, and resonate with each other. But take one at a time.

Go deeply into the meaning of the questions, beyond the logical and practical. Imagination and intuition may not be in this space straight away. Reflection, conversations, and inner dialogues take time and openness. But give this important work ample time and discuss your ideas with those involved in this process. Share perspectives for everyone's experience is different.

Stages

Parenting in the Present is a reference in the subtitle to being present as well as how parenting *differs* from previous generations. Both are challenges. With technological advances as well as less time spent in natural settings, it is hard to stay in the moment, to be completely present. And the world has changed significantly with many of the protective factors of the past no longer buffering the present. Parenting in the present requires more from us, to grow as individuals and align intentionally with significant others within our circle.

The alignment of paths is challenging. This is not about parts to whole or pieces of a puzzle, but just considering what makes up the whole needs to be kept in mind. A child goes through stages of development. We develop as individuals, as parents, in our relationships to significant others, and as a family. That requires quite a bit of work on alignment. And what works at one stage of parenthood or life typically won't work in the next in exact form and function. Things get much more complex. Understanding development is critical. Be a student of these paths.

For now, just know that life is continuity *and* change. And it looks different *and* the same in each stage. Children don't come with manuals, but they don't receive directions on how life works either. In these interconnections, we learn from each other. And there is always something to learn. If this made you take a deep breath, you are appreciating the task. And you are ready! Here are *Eight Questions* to consider in each stage of parenting.

About the Author

Dr. John C. Panepinto has worked in educational, clinical, and private settings for over twenty-five years (and counting). He worked as a counselor, consultant, and clinical supervisor in early intervention for two decades. Presently, he serves as Clinical Psychologist for Carolina Developmental Pediatrics, maintains a private practice, and serves as a clinical supervisor. With specialties in developmental psychology, attachment, and performance psychology, Dr. Panepinto has authored several books as well as articles for various resources including *The New England Psychologist*, *Psyche Central*, *Attitudemag.org*, and *Tennis Pro*. He writes and presents on parenting, development, emotional intelligence, resiliency, understanding the minds and hearts of boys, and performance psychology. He was the keynote speaker for the 2017 National Stay-At-Home Dad's convention, and blogs on his passions for fatherhood (*AFathersPath.net*) and performance psychology (*AbovetheFieldofPlay.com*).

Find more resources and information visit DrJohnPanepinto.com.

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