



by Karen Stephens

Parenting Lesson: Children Teach Us to Relish the Present

Michael, a charming four year old, attended our early childhood program. His mom was attending college to become a teacher.

While she was in class, Michael was learning, too. He was learning to get along with peers, to separate for short periods from his mom, and to participate in group activities. Michael was taking daily steps toward independence.

I'm lucky to have an office door that opens right into our 3-5 year olds' classroom. I leave it open as often as I can. As he scurried from one play activity to another, Michael would sometimes pop into my office, usually just to talk for a few minutes.

With a neighborly lilt he'd ask, "Watch doin'?" I'd respond with something like: "paying bills," "filing medicals," or "checking menus." His face registered bored.

Rather than hear more about my job description, Michael occasionally sat on my rug to play with my small collection of Native American dolls. Or he'd draw with markers that I kept "special" for kids who stop by to visit in my office.

On a couple of occasions I served as Michael's personal typist. Why does a four year old need a typist? Well, to write Mom a letter, of course!

When the pangs of separation got a bit too much, Michael would dictate the following message: "Mom, I miss you." Rarely did he "write" anything beyond that.

As I typed, he peered intently over my elbow. I guess he wanted to make sure I didn't misspell a word!

After "proofing" my work, Michael would sign and fold his letter. He'd put it in his cubby for Mom to find at day's end, then he'd scamper back to his busy schedule of being a typical preschooler.

Is that a smart way to cope with separation anxiety or what? No tears, no withdrawal into a corner, no refusal to continue playing/learning. Michael simply got those feelings out and went about his day.

Michael is now six and in first grade. And he's getting A's. He is still a charming boy; but he is no longer typical.

A little over a year ago, Michael started losing large muscle control. He became clumsy; his motor coordination regressed. He became weak and lethargic. And eventually, Michael became a patient of St. Jude's.

Young Michael and his parents had a new lesson to learn: How to fight cancer. Fighting for your life has to be the ultimate struggle for independence. But I'm glad to say Michael is doing a bang-up job of it!

“Relish

the

“now.””

Our child care staff recently received a holiday letter from Michael's family. The best part of the letter was news that Michael rebounded. His health status is remission. He's so full of energy he's able to attend school again.

Mom's message to us: "We are very glad to get to share another Christmas holiday with Michael." My response: Admiration. Awe. Gratitude. Watery eyes.

Mom ended her letter by saying: "Although our future is not certain, we are relishing the 'now' and hoping for the 'later!'"

I'm sure Mom's positive attitude helps Michael be a resilient child. Michael and his family are the epitome of rising to the occasion! And they are learning their lessons well. As Michael did when he was four, they are facing their feelings, putting them down on paper, and moving on with the business of daily life. What an inspiration!

Why do I share Michael's story? I want to express admiration for a family responding with dignity to one of life's worst challenges. I respect their realism. I marvel at their optimism and emotional strength. I admire their courage.

Mostly, I want to share the wisdom of Michael's mom: Relish your "now." Focus on what's going right, not on what's going wrong. Hope for a bright future, but be grateful for opportunities you have with family this hour, this minute, this second.

And so, let Michael's story be a wake up call. How would you spend today if you knew you might have only ten, five, or perhaps even one more left to share with your kids? Would you let violent anger flare in front of the children as you fight over credit card bills? Would you live in the past by nursing old family grudges when the in-laws come over? Would you watch football all day?

I think we can all pay Michael a lasting tribute. We can honor him, as a person *living* with cancer, by enjoying our own lives to their fullest. Michael and his family are grateful for every day of his life; the least we can do is rejoice in ours just as often.

Let Michael and his family teach us. Let them remind us that life is precious. That life can be fleeting. That life is now.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.