

Script – Print – Providing a light for our children

The chaotic world we live in can often have parents scratching their heads about the best way to raise their children. Now, more people are turning to a concept called lighthouse parenting.

According to experts, lighthouse parenting combines important traits such as nurturing, loving and protecting while giving their children space to grow and learn on their own.

"[It's like] a regular lighthouse that guides the ships from one place to another," says Victor Mendoza, a behavioral health provider for OSF HealthCare. "That's how it is with parenting. Just being there for your child and helping them get through difficult times. Sometimes [parents can] step in when they need to, and sometimes they let them try things out."

The lighthouse parenting concept has been talked about for nearly a decade. It was coined by pediatrician Kenneth Ginsburg, MD, who literally wrote the book on the topic. But it has come to the surface again recently as a concept Dr. Ginsburg has described in interviews as "a return to common sense and what we know works."

Mendoza says lighthouse parenting falls somewhere between two other styles — helicopter parenting and free-range parenting. A helicopter parent tends to hover, may be over-involved and is always evaluating risk that can prevent children from developing a certain skill. Free-range parents believe giving freedom promotes independence and self-confident children. For example, a helicopter parent might stand with their child on the tee-ball field, helping him or her get to the ball or run to the right base. A lighthouse parent might give their child some guidance before the game and watch the action from the sidelines.

"With lighthouse parenting, it allows your children a little bit of freedom," says Mendoza. "Obviously, you don't want to completely leave them in the dark and have them figure things out by themselves and not provide any sort of support. But just knowing when you have to step in and when you have to step back."

Mendoza says the biggest benefits of lighthouse parenting include encouraging healthy boundaries, building coping skills and creating a supportive relationship between parent and child.

And it's OK for your children to fall short of expectations from time to time.

"Letting them fail. Letting them learn from their mistakes. And allowing them to see if they can figure it out on their own," Mendoza says. "Having that dance with them in a way that we're going to move a little and we're going to step in a little bit. Sometimes we're going to move back a little bit. Just follow your gut."

Mendoza stresses that lighthouse parenting may not work for all parents and children. He says it's important to consider the child's age, needs, temperament and development. Lighthouse parenting is going to look different for younger children than school-aged kids or teens.

"Lighthouse parenting is not like this strict set of rules that you have to follow," Mendoza says. "It's like a guideline that you can incorporate into your parenting to help you be a more active parent or a more lighthouse parent and be there for your child."

Mendoza says the lighthouse parenting concept works in his practice. Some parents, he says, are willing to try a new style because of the way they grew up – in a home that lacked a good support system or parental involvement.

He adds children should understand that while they are loved, there are rules and boundaries for their behavior and actions.

Mendoza preaches patience when it comes to introducing a new parenting style. "It takes some time to practice and get used to it. So just be patient with yourself as a parent," he says. "Don't beat yourself up if you didn't get it right, or you felt like you didn't do a good job. That's what lighthouse parenting teaches you – learning from our mistakes and allowing yourself to engage in that lighthouse parenting and do it as best as you can."

For more information regarding behavioral or mental health support, visit the [OSF HealthCare](#) website.