Recognizing different personalities

I quit my full-time job to raise my first child. I read books and magazines on education, parenting, you name it. I made my own Montessori didactic materials, I produced hundreds of flash cards. In short, I was the typical helicopter new parent. In two years, I thought I knew everything about parenting. That’s when I had my second child. Wham! Back to Square One.

By now, I have raised seven children and taught hundreds more. I think maybe I can state with a little bit more confidence that every child is different.

Well, we all know that, but do we apply that fact in our daily parenting? Do teachers apply that fact in their daily classroom routines?

Let’s take one simple example. After moving to Phoenix, we promptly enrolled our children in the City of Phoenix Park and Recreation’s summer swimming programs. Level 1 is for beginner swimmers, generally, toddlers. My first daughter cried and screamed her heart out on the first day. I tried to sit as far away as possible, so as not to interfere with the coach’s work. I positioned myself across the pool on the opposite side, so I could see her. But then, she could see me too. She cried even harder, “Maaaa… maaa!!!” What an embarrassment. Everyone was bothered. Finally, I walked over to her, bent down and whispered in her ear, “Stop it, or I’ll put you in time out!” She stopped immediately.

Now, that worked only with her. Because she was obedient and hated being put in time out, the threat worked. But my next daughter was very different. She was a happy little thing, and almost never did naughty things. She never needed time out. Her first day in swimming, she also bawled and howled and embarrassed me in front of the entire pool of parents. I finally pulled out a can of Pepsi from my bag, shook it in front of my face, then put a finger on my lips: “shhhhh!” She stopped immediately. You see, she loved food! She loved pastries and candies, and absolutely adored sodas. I usually had to ration her sugar intake. So promising a whole can of cold Pepsi did the trick. For the sake of her soda fix, she would overcome her fear.

Third daughter was a totally different matter. She had quite a personality of her own. If she put her mind to something and decided to do it, no punishment would stop her from doing so. But she had a heart of gold and was a Drama Queen: often crying buckets and sobbing while watching TV. When her turn came and she was put in the water for her first swimming lesson, oh my goodness. She kicked and hollered, pushing the coach away. What a disgrace! So I walked over, took her out of the water and whispered in her ear, “Baby, look here. The coach is very angry because you kicked him. He is staring at me now because he thinks I’m a bad mother. The rule is that if the mothers are bad, they are going to call the police and take the mother to jail. If you want me to go to jail, just keep screaming and crying and kicking. That’s OK. I’ll understand.” Then I put her back into the water. The poor girl bit her lip and stifled her sobs, and kept looking at me now and then, to make sure I was still there. But she was quiet and cooperative. Fear of water and an unknown group of people was nothing compared to Mom being taken away by the police.

OK. There is something to be said about not lying to children. But after all, in this country, the police do take away bad mothers, right? So this was not really a lie.

All children are good children. You just have to get to know them, their loves and their fears. Then, and only then, you can start teaching them effectively.