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Better Parenting Through Western Civ

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Better Parenting Through Western Civ

By David Head
UCF Forum columnist
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Knowing a little about Cleopatra can help anyone raise their children.



"Cleopatra Pleading with Caesar" by artist Felice Giani, courtesy of the Smithsonian Design Museum.

I enjoy teaching the history course Western Civilization because it has great tips for parenting. I have three children—ages 6, 4 and 21 months—and my wife and I face a problem common to the rulers of the ancient world's great empires: how to maintain order among an unruly population when you are outnumbered.

To govern the domain justly, with minimal tantrum/rebellions, we look to the wisdom of the ancients.

Ancient emperors liked to present themselves as gods to awe their subjects into compliance. Rulers also liked the attention; it flattered their vanity to be worshipped. One night, my mind flashed to this insight as a dinnertime squabble brewed between my two youngest.

My baby boy was ready to graduate to the highchair, which of course led his sisters to want to sit in it, too. Thankfully, the oldest was too big, but my second daughter was small enough to fit. Forget the booster seat, once a symbol of big girl status. She wanted the highchair.

Earlier in the day I'd lectured about Cleopatra, the first century BC Egyptian queen, and I had the answer. My daughter wanted to feel special — to bask in the attention of her siblings — and what better way than to be Cleopatra making a procession among her adoring subjects?"

So I called her booster seat the "Cleopatra chair," and buckled my little girl in. I made sure the seat was attached securely to its chair, and I picked up everything—daughter, booster seat, and chair—and paraded her around the kitchen like the queen of Egypt on her throne.

Thrilled, she ate happily and forgot about the highchair. We still call the booster seat the "Cleopatra chair."

The rulers of antiquity often faced a surveillance problem when trying to enforce their laws. Transportation was slow, communication was difficult, and the loyalty of underlings charged with carrying out an edict was always suspect.

My wife and I have faced a similar problem recently when the eye doctor recommended that my son wear an eye patch a couple hours a day to correct the treatable condition called lazy eye.

"My students laugh when I tell them Western Civ helps me be a better father. Ancient history is, for them, something so old it can't possibly be relevant to life today. But I've found the opposite is true."

My son naturally hates wearing his eye patch. He's a toddler, so there's no reasoning with him, no rewarding him, no bribing him. He doesn't even care about getting to look like a pirate. We put the eye patch on him, but as soon as we turn our backs, a tearing noise inevitably follows. There goes another patch.

The Roman dictator Sulla devised a clever—albeit violent—solution to his problem of enforcing his will when he couldn't be everywhere. He publicly branded his opponents

as enemies of the state who anyone could kill on sight. Whoever performed the assassination got to keep a portion of the dead man's property.

Now, Sulla's policy, called "proscription," sounds like a terrible model for parenting. However, I realized, if I stripped out the cruelty, I had a solution to my surveillance problem: expand the number of people invested in carrying out my wishes.

So I declared a "tickle proscription" on my son. Whenever anyone sees him touch his eye patch, they must tickle him into submission.

My daughters love it. They watch their brother like a hawk, keen to tickle him if his hands wander close to his face. My son enjoys it, too. Sometimes he touches his eye patch just looking to get tickled, which is fine as long as it stays on.

Thanks to a little Roman ingenuity, my wife and I don't have to watch every movement of our son's quick little hands for two hours every day to make sure his eye stays covered. We can get other things done.

My students laugh when I tell them Western Civ helps me be a better father. Ancient history is, for them, something so old it can't possibly be relevant to life today.

But I've found the opposite is true. The old Greeks and Romans have real insight into my 21st century problems.

And, yes, knowing a little about Cleopatra can help anyone raise their children.

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