

Basics of Parenting

OVERVIEW

Parenting a child is one of the most rewarding tasks that life has to offer. It is also one of the most challenging.

As a parent or caregiver, you are your child's primary teacher, responsible for giving them the skills necessary to grow up and function successfully and independently some day.

Parenting is a full-time (24/7) job that we do not receive an instruction manual for. It requires an abundance of patience, effort and long hours.

The pay-off is in watching your child grow and develop into their own unique being: someone who is *respectful, responsible and enjoyable* to be around.

Responsibilities of Parenthood:

- nurturing, bonding, ensuring healthy physical development
- protecting your child from danger
- developing an effective "parenting style"
- encouraging healthy self-esteem and developing resilient coping skills
- managing your child's behavior

A child's physical development is of primary importance and the first years are critical in terms of proper nutrition and care.

Emotional development, social development and bonding with caregivers is also critical during the early years. Having a strong foundation will benefit your child through all stages of life.

Once children have surpassed infancy and are beginning to explore and manipulate their world, the more difficult aspect of managing their behavior begins. Often referred to as "the terrible two's", young children begin their journey into independence.

"Good parenting begins in your heart, and then continues on a moment-to-moment basis by engaging your children when feelings run high, when they are sad, angry, or scared. The heart of parenting is being there in a particular way when it really counts".

--John Gottman, PhD

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PARENTING STYLES

Knowing your parenting style is helpful in regard to understanding how you relate to your child and how you expect them to relate to you.

It also may be helpful to consider how you were parented as a child – many times we parent our children the same way our parents raised us. It is good to know we have choices as parents. If you are in a co-parenting relationship with another adult it is also helpful to talk about your parenting styles together and compromise/blend those styles as needed.

So what is your parenting style?

The four most common styles that researchers and child development specialists write about include: authoritarian, permissive/over-indulgent, assertive/mentoring, and uninvolved.

Authoritarian Parent:

- These parents tend to use external control to teach right from wrong. They are considered strict and are often quick to discipline, with little or no communication about the behavior.
- The authoritarian parent values teaching respect, obedience, and providing structure for their children. They generally do not allow their children to express disagreement about their decisions.
- They live by the motto, “do what I say”.

Permissive/Over-indulgent Parent:

- The permissive parent spends much time communicating with their child, often negotiating, explaining and reasoning.
- The goal is to stay emotionally close to their child through bonding, relating and communicating but they do not set high expectations or limits with the child.
- They are reluctant to cause or allow their child to feel unhappy or frustrated.
- These parents value “making their child feel special” and also want their child to like them (and become their friend).
- The permissive parent often “over indulges” their child. They may give them too much freedom too soon, or indulge them with excessive material goods.

Uninvolved Parent:

- This parent takes a hands off approach. They may be neglectful or avoidant in dealing with the children. In a two-parent family the uninvolved parent may let the other parent take full responsibility for raising the children.
- The uninvolved parent will often overlook opportunities to teach and communicate with their children.
- The children may feel like this parent hardly knows them.

Assertive/Mentoring Parent:

- The assertive/mentoring parent establishes clear guidelines and rules. The child knows exactly what to expect.
- This parent retains authority; they stay in control, and expect mature behavior from their children.
- The clear value in this parenting style is to teach responsibility and making good choices; this is frequently communicated and demonstrated.

- The assertive/mentoring parent is seen as pro-active and fully engaged in their child's development. They nurture and coach; and they also know when to back off and let the child experience natural consequences.
- They permit the child enough freedom of expression to allow positive growth and a sense of independence.
- This parent will use problem-solving, cooling off periods, and making amends as ways to handle misbehavior.

In considering your parenting style, keep in mind the following guidelines:

- It is ok to say no. Kids respect parents who set limits for them.
- Learning to handle your child's tantrums when they are young will pay off when they are older.
- It is normal to expect your child to test limits. When children know the limits they will feel safer and more secure. They will know and *trust* there is a parent in charge.

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TYPICAL REASONS FOR CHILD BEHAVIOR

There are four primary reasons that children behave in particular ways. It may not always be clear what that reason is, but in looking at behaviors over time you may see patterns emerge and the purpose for the behavior becomes clear.

Contact:

- All children have a need to belong. Making contact – both physical and emotional – with other human beings is a primary need. Self-esteem and courage come from the basic belonging and need to have contact with others.

Power:

- All children want to have some influence over their environment. They like things to go their way and want the power to make that happen. As parents, we should empower our children to make good choices and influence their environment in positive ways.

Protection:

- Protecting a child is a primary responsibility of the parent/caretaker for the first years – as children grow they must learn to begin protecting themselves, both physically and emotionally.
- The goal is for children to not only survive, but thrive.
- Feeling safe can allow a child to be resilient and handle all kinds of situations.

Withdrawal:

- Just as a child seeks contact, at other times they need to withdraw, regroup and center. It is especially important to know when to withdraw from danger.

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Now that we know why children behave in particular ways, we will also look at the reasons why children *misbehave* at particular times.

Attention:

- The goal is to belong, to be noticed or to be served.
- This can come from either positive or negative attention. It is important to know what is reinforcing this kind of behavior in order to change it.
- Parents often feel annoyed with this type of behavior and may want to punish the child. This may actually be reinforcing the attention-seeking. Instead, try ignoring the behavior to extinguish it permanently.

Power:

- The goal is to be in control and to keep others from being in control.
- While parents may often feel angry and provoked by the power-seeking child, it is best to withdraw from the conflict. This does not mean to give in to the child's demands.
- Help the child to see how to use power constructively by teaching them to be cooperative. Encourage them to make good decisions. Let them experience both positive and negative outcomes.

Revenge:

- A child that has been hurt may choose to retaliate. It is important to not take it personally even if directed at you, the parent. Avoid using punishment and retaliation as this may make matters worse.
- It is important to try to understand and build a trusting relationship.

Inadequacy:

- The goal is to convince others not to expect anything from them and avoid taking responsibility.
- Often the parent may feel frustrated, helpless and inadequate as a parent.
- It is important to not give up or fall into the child's self-pity. Stop all criticism. Encourage any positive attempt the child makes, no matter how small.
- Acknowledge and identify your child's strengths and assets to refocus them toward a more positive self-image.

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WHY SHOULD WE USE DISCIPLINE?

It is normal to expect that your child will misbehave from time to time. It could be an isolated incident and never occur again, but if you notice patterns developing, it is wise to examine this more closely and decide on the best way to interrupt the behavior, change it into something more positive, or stop it altogether.

The primary reasons that parents discipline their children are:

- to maintain order and minimize chaos
- to teach right from wrong
- to teach appropriate boundaries
- to teach respect for self and others
- to develop self-discipline
- to strengthen the parent/child relationship
- to model good parenting so that our children will have a frame of reference to parent their own children some day

Effective discipline can come in different shapes and forms.

Different children will respond to various forms of discipline in different ways. In other words, not all children will respond to “proven methods” in the same way.

The main principles of making discipline effective include:

- the goal is to *teach*, not harm
- start by setting clear, specific expectations
- seek opportunities to teach and to encourage improvement
- look for “teachable moments”
- start with the least restrictive method
- use natural and logical consequences

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What are natural consequences?

Natural consequences are the results that naturally occur from a child’s behavior without the parent doing anything.

Sometimes it is best to allow children to learn from their mistakes. Avoid trying to rescue the child or to say, “I told you so”.

When NOT to use natural consequences:

- when the natural consequence could be catastrophic
- when the natural consequence is so far off into the future that the child is not concerned about the connection
- when the natural consequence of a child’s behavior affects *others* rather than the child

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What are logical consequences?

Logical consequences are those results a parent provides to teach children what logically follows when they violate rules or expectations.

To use logical consequences effectively:

- you may give the child a choice (either-or or when-then)
- make sure the consequence is logical and “fits the crime”
- give only choices you can enforce
- keep your tone firm and calm
- give the choice one time, then act (give the consequence)
- expect testing – it is part of the child’s learning process
- allow the child to try again later
- use “time-out” – this is one type of logical consequence

Effective Time-outs:

- A time-out is simply to remove the child from the situation, place, or activity to prevent them from getting any attention for his/her misbehavior.
- The purpose is to have a specific place and time to cool off and regain composure.
- Practice time-outs at a neutral time when the child is calm and able to understand what you expect of them.
- A general rule is 1 minute for each year of the child’s age. Any longer is usually not effective. The time-out should begin only when the child is quiet and calm.

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HELPFUL REMINDERS

Expect your child to test limits. Be sure you are consistent in how you respond to their testing.

The key to disciplining children effectively is having patience!

Always come from a *caring* attitude when you discipline. When we discipline out of anger or frustration, it is difficult for children to accept or learn the lesson we are trying to teach.

Walk away, use a self-calming strategy when needed.

Keep a good sense of humor.

Remember, the goal is always to *teach*, not harm.

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