

Nine Steps to More Effective Parenting **(www.kidshealth.org)**

Raising kids is one of the toughest and most fulfilling jobs in the world — and the one for which you might feel the least prepared.

Here are nine child-rearing tips that can help you feel more fulfilled as a parent — and enjoy your kids more, too.



Nurture Your Child's Self-Esteem

Kids start developing their sense of self as babies when they see themselves through their parents' eyes. Your tone of voice, your body language, and your every expression are absorbed by your kids. Your words and actions as a parent affect their developing self-esteem more than anything else.

Praising accomplishments, however small, will make them feel proud; letting kids do things independently will make them feel capable and strong. By contrast, belittling comments or comparing a child unfavorably with another will make kids feel worthless.

Avoid making loaded statements or using words as weapons. Comments like "What a stupid thing to do!" or "You act more like a baby than your little brother!" cause damage just as physical blows do.

Choose your words carefully and be compassionate. Let your kids know that everyone makes mistakes and that you still love them, even when you don't love their behavior.



Catch Kids Being Good

Have you ever stopped to think about how many times you react negatively to your kids in a given day? You may find yourself criticizing far more often than complimenting. How would you feel about a boss who treated you with that much negative guidance, even if it was well intentioned?

The more effective approach is to catch kids doing something right: "You made your bed without being asked — that's terrific!" or "I was watching you play with your sister and you were very patient." These statements will do more to encourage good behavior over the long run than repeated scoldings.

Make a point of finding something to praise every day. Be generous with rewards — your love, hugs, and compliments can work wonders and are often reward enough. Soon you will find you are "growing" more of the behavior you would like to see.



Set Limits and Be Consistent With Your Discipline

Discipline is necessary in every household. The goal of discipline is to help kids choose acceptable behaviors and learn self-control. They may test the limits you establish for them, but they need those limits to grow into responsible adults.

Establishing house rules helps kids understand your expectations and develop self-control. Some rules might include: no TV until homework is done, and no hitting, name-calling, or hurtful teasing allowed.

You might want to have a system in place: one warning, followed by consequences such as a "time out" or loss of privileges. A common mistake parents make is failure to follow through with the consequences. You can't discipline kids for talking back one day and ignore it the next. Being consistent teaches what you expect.



Make Time for Your Kids

It's often difficult for parents and kids to get together for a family meal, let alone spend quality time together. But there is probably nothing kids would like more. Get up 10 minutes earlier in the morning so you can eat breakfast with your child or leave the dishes in the sink and take a walk after dinner. Kids who aren't getting

the attention they want from their parents often act out or misbehave because they're sure to be noticed that way.

Many parents find it rewarding to schedule together time with their kids. Create a "special night" each week to be together and let your kids help decide how to spend the time. Look for other ways to connect — put a note or something special in your kid's lunchbox.

Adolescents seem to need less undivided attention from their parents than younger kids. Because there are fewer windows of opportunity for parents and teens to get together, parents should do their best to be available when their teen does express a desire to talk or participate in family activities. Attending concerts, games, and other events with your teen communicates caring and lets you get to know more about your child and his or her friends in important ways.

Don't feel guilty if you're a working parent. It is the many little things you do — making popcorn, playing cards, window shopping — that kids will remember.



Be a Good Role Model

Young kids learn a lot about how to act by watching their parents. The younger they are, the more cues they take from you. Before you lash out or blow your top in front of your child, think about this: is that how you want your child to behave when angry? Be aware that you're constantly being observed by your kids. Studies have shown that children who hit usually have a role model for aggression at home.

Model the traits you wish to cultivate in your kids: respect, friendliness, honesty, kindness, tolerance. Exhibit unselfish behavior. Do things for other people without expecting a reward. Express thanks and offer compliments. Above all, treat your kids the way you expect other people to treat you.



Make Communication a Priority

You can't expect kids to do everything simply because you, as a parent, "say so." They want and deserve explanations as much as adults do. If we don't take time to explain, kids will begin to wonder about our values and motives and whether they have any basis. Parents who reason with their kids allow them to understand and learn in a nonjudgmental way.

Make your expectations clear. If there is a problem, describe it, express your feelings, and invite your child to work on a solution with you. Be sure to include consequences. Make suggestions and offer choices. Be open to your child's suggestions as well. Negotiate. Kids who participate in decisions are more motivated to carry them out.



Be Flexible and Willing to Adjust Your Parenting Style

If you frequently feel "let down" by your child's behavior, perhaps you have unrealistic expectations. Parents who think in "shoulds" (for example, "My kid **should** be potty-trained by now") might find it helpful to read up on the matter or to talk to other parents or child development specialists.

Kids' environments have an impact on their behavior, so you may be able to modify that behavior by changing the environment. If you find yourself constantly saying "no" to your 2-year-old, look for ways to restructure your surroundings so that fewer things are off-limits. This will cause less frustration for both of you.

As your child changes, you'll gradually have to change your parenting style. Chances are, what works with your child now won't work as well in a year or two.

Teens tend to look less to their parents and more to their peers for role models. But continue to provide guidance, encouragement, and appropriate discipline while allowing your teen to earn more independence. And seize every available moment to make a connection!



Show That Your Love Is Unconditional

As a parent, you're responsible for correcting and guiding your kids. But how you express your corrective guidance makes all the difference in how a child receives it.

When you have to confront your child, avoid blaming, criticizing, or fault-finding, which undermine self-esteem and can lead to resentment. Instead, strive to nurture and encourage, even when disciplining your kids. Make sure they know that although you want and expect better next time, your love is there no matter what.



Know Your Own Needs and Limitations as a Parent

Face it — you are an imperfect parent. You have strengths and weaknesses as a family leader. Recognize your abilities — "I am loving and dedicated." Vow to work on your weaknesses — "I need to be more consistent with discipline." Try to have realistic expectations for yourself, your spouse, and your kids. You don't have to have all the answers — be forgiving of yourself.

And try to make parenting a manageable job. Focus on the areas that need the most attention rather than trying to address everything all at once. Admit it when you're burned out. Take time out from parenting to do things that will make you happy as a person (or as a couple).

Focusing on your needs does not make you selfish. It simply means you care about your own well-being, which is another important value to model for your children.

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