

SOME PRACTICAL WAYS TO BE A MORE EFFECTIVE AND RESPECTFUL PARENT

Parenting your children can be one of the hardest tasks you take on over the course of your lifetime. Unfortunately, it is all too easy simply to fall back on and use what your own parents did with you, even if what they did was shaming, hurtful, disrespectful, and destructive. Sadly, that may be all you know. The goal in effective parenting is to expand your repertoire of behaviors to teach your children how to become cooperative, productive, and healthy adults. Keep in mind that you model for your children what anger is and how to handle it (i.e. you as a parent are your children's "emotional tutor"). Below are some ideas about respectful and non-abusive parenting, which can help your children become healthy and productive adults. Think about and begin to use some of these positive and growth-producing ideas to help your children grow up with different attitudes and behaviors from the ones you may have had to struggle with.

Become aware of children's normal and natural development and understand what to expect from your children during these periods of time. Children go through different stages to become competent and capable adults. You as their parents are very important in helping them reach that final goal. Some of these stages can be very frustrating and irritating.

- The "terrible two's"
- Adolescence

Convey an attitude of love and respect, even, and especially, when children are being disrespectful themselves (i.e. don't "sink" to their level). Remember that you are the parent (and the adult), not their peer and that you are modeling for them the way to handle anger, conflict, and disagreement. You need to learn to detach in a healthy way from the intense emotional reactions that you may experience as a parent (your intense reactions are normal; disrespectful, explosive, and shaming behaviors are never helpful or constructive). Children are masters at engaging in power struggles with their parents. You need to be the one to disengage from the power struggles (keep in mind that you won't be able to win them anyway.) Also seek to use your reactions to give you some information about the **GOALS** of your child's misbehavior (from *Children: The Challenge* by Rudolf Dreikurs and Vicki Soltz, 1964).

- The child seeking **ATTENTION** will trigger feelings of irritation and annoyance and a desire in you to remind and "nag"
- The child seeking **POWER** will trigger feelings of anger and "being provoked" and a desire in you to "fight" (e.g. to become aggressive and get into a power struggle) or to "give in" (e.g. to become passive and avoid or withdraw from the issue)
- The child seeking **REVENGE** will trigger intense feelings of hurt and disappointment in you and a desire to "get even" or retaliate
- The child seeking to **SHOW INADEQUACY** will trigger feelings of despair, hopelessness, and powerlessness in you and a desire to agree with the child that "nothing can be done"

Be aware of asking "Why did you..." to your child when he or she has misbehaved or done something you didn't like. Often, this is simply an invitation to your child to engage in a power struggle with you because they will respond with "I don't know" or they will offer an answer that is not the answer you

wanted and expected to hear from them. Rather than asking “**Why**,” let them know, in an assertive and respectful way, how you feel about what they were doing and give them a consequence, if appropriate.

Negative attention, from a child’s perspective, is **ALWAYS** better than no attention at all. Be creative in looking for positive ways to interact with and attend to your children.

Take time to connect, have fun, and be with your child in their activities, in your activities, and in family activities (and, whenever possible, spend some individual time with each child you have to work to develop a “personal” relationship with them).

Look for small ways to encourage and give your child credit for who they are and what they do (e.g. “*I really liked the way you played with your sister before dinner*”). There are, in fact, lots of opportunities to do this over the course of the day. Minimize the importance of their mistakes and look for remedies and resolution when they do occur rather than becoming shaming and blaming with them (e.g. saying things like “*Oh oh, the milk spilled. Let’s get down and clean it up*” rather than “*What the hell is the matter with you, you little brat? Can’t you ever do anything right?*”). Learn to understand the difference between praise and encouragement as they are outlined below (from **STEP: The Parent’s Handbook** by Don Dinkmeyer & Gary D. McKay).

- **PRAISE** focuses on external circumstances, and “rewards” are offered only for meeting certain standards
...e.g. “*That’s great that you’re the captain of the soccer team*”
- **ENCOURAGEMENT** focuses on your child’s ability to handle life effectively and recognizes effort, improvement, intrinsic worth, and what your child contributes
...e.g. “*You must have worked really hard to become captain of the team. It seems like you feel pretty good about getting yourself there.*”

Clearly communicate your love and affection for your child, both:

- **verbally** (e.g. “*I love you, sweetie*”) and
- **non-verbally** (e.g. hugs, pats on the head, and other affectionate touching)

Listen to and attempt to get at (in a non-threatening way) and understand your child’s feelings and perspective. Teach them how to communicate with you and others through your interest in them and your open-ended questions for them about what they are feeling and experiencing in their lives. Be sure to physically get down on their level (i.e. sit or kneel) when you are talking about something important with them; avoid the temptation to “tower over them” and use your size to try to intimidate them into “behaving properly.” Use issues and situations that arise in their lives and in your relationship with them as “teaching moments” to help them better understand themselves, other people, and the world around them.

Offer **CHOICES** and **ALTERNATIVES** regarding behavior that you wish to have your children develop in order to help them to take on a sense of personal responsibility and ownership for their behavior and to teach them how this ability can affect their life in positive ways.

- e.g. “*Do you want to pick up your toys now or after dinner just before you watch TV?*”

Express your anger, disappointment, hurt, and other similar feelings in a direct and respectful manner (e.g. using “I” statements, taking responsibility for your feelings, and moderating the intensity of the emotional response). Your child will feel shame and guilt even if you are respectful in doing this. Then be sure to re-connect with your child (you have the responsibility to re-build the “interpersonal bridge” between you and them) at a later time and be very clear with them that you still love them despite your distress with their behavior at that particular moment. Don’t punish your children by ignoring, sulking, or refusing to talk with them for extended periods of time. This only teaches them that important relationships are fragile and can be easily ruptured and potentially completely lost.

Explosive and abusive anger (expressed directly toward the child or simply around the child) is always a frightening, intimidating, and humiliating experience for children, no matter how they seem to react (e.g. even if they are acting in an oppositional or defiant way in response to your volatility and disrespect). Use respectful time-outs (for yourself and your children) whenever necessary. This is a concrete way to teach your child about the need for them to be respectful when expressing their anger. When you do “blow it” with your child and become disrespectful, explosive, or intimidating (as may happen at times), go back to the child, admit your mistake, and apologize for what you regret saying or doing (then work hard to change that kind of behavior with them in the future).

Avoid using physical force to punish and discipline (e.g. spanking, pinching, cuffing on the back of the head, pulling at a child’s ear or hair). This type of punishment only teaches short-term compliance and fear. It also creates resentment and the belief that it is alright, when the child becomes bigger and stronger, to punish and control others through their own use of physical force. Physical restraint is necessary and okay at times as long as the intention is not to intimidate or hurt the child and the child is young. Avoid the temptation to squeeze hard enough to inflict physical pain to “get your point across” or “get the child’s attention.” Be aware of and careful about trying to intervene physically with an older child; this potentially invites a physical altercation between you and your child.

- An example of reasonable restraint would be physically stopping a small child from playing with an electrical outlet and physically moving them to another place as a way of distracting them.

Use logical and natural consequences to address a child’s misbehavior. These are **consequences** that follow directly from a child’s misbehavior and have more potential to “make sense” to the child. They also allow for the child’s individual choices. **Punishment**, on the other hand, is “discipline” based on threats and intimidation, moral judgments, and “demands” of obedience and compliance. Some examples of natural consequences are below.

- **THE ISSUE:** a child not wanting to eat what is served for the family meal
THE NATURAL CONSEQUENCE: not permitting snacks between that meal and the next (the child’s hunger then becomes a natural consequence) **VS. PUNISHMENT** which would be attempting to force them to “eat everything on their plate” and making them sit there until they do it (i.e. the “clean plate club” syndrome).
- **THE ISSUE:** children leaving their clothes, toys, and shoes all over the communal areas of your house
THE NATURAL CONSEQUENCE: creating (and talking calmly with the kids about) a “family box” that is placed in the garage or the basement where, at the end of the day, you put everything that is not where it should be (the child’s frustration about not being able to

find a favorite toy or pair of shoes the next day becomes a natural consequence) **VS. PUNISHMENT** which might be yelling and screaming at the kids about what “little slobs” they are.

Use a “matter-of-fact” tone whenever possible to communicate consequences (to avoid instigating or being pulled into a power struggle with your child). Don’t expect “a good attitude” from your children when you are giving them consequences or asking them to do something for you. If your child does what you want, even with the whining and complaining, they are doing what they need to do to cooperate with your wishes and you are accomplishing what you need to accomplish as a responsible parent in the situation. It helps to learn to ignore as much “bad attitude” by your children as you can.

Talk openly with your partner about your parenting styles and decisions and work together as a “team” in your child’s best interests (even if you are separated or divorced). Don’t “bad-mouth” the other parent or put your child “in the middle” when there are problems or issues that arise between you and your partner especially if you are (or have been) involved in a contentious divorce proceeding. If an argument or conflict between you and your partner has the potential to become explosive, volatile, or disrespectful, go to another part of house away from your children (and, hopefully, find some constructive ways to de-escalate the conflict so your children don’t hear explosive or abusive interactions between the two of you even if you have removed yourself from their immediate vicinity). For children, even hearing these kinds of interactions between you and your partner can dramatically affect them emotionally (e.g. contributing to significant anxiety for them).

Take a parenting class or attend *Early Childhood and Family Education (ECFE)* alone or with your partner to learn more about being an effective parent and to get emotional support, suggestions, and ideas from other parents. Be open to other strategies, tools, and resources (e.g. books, magazine articles, friends who are also parents) that can help you be the best parent you can be. There are also some helpful parenting books in the *Books List* under the *Anger Resources* section on this website.