

Parenting Skills

The most important job we will ever have – and no training? No manual? No mentoring? Here are a few ideas that might be of help.

1. Take care of yourself

Worn out, stressed or otherwise compromised parents are either too mean or too easy. Our kids need us to be “on our game”. Take time to recharge your batteries: get good sleep, get regular “quality time” with your spouse and friends, take a walk, take a bubble bath – whatever rejuvenates you and makes you feel whole and healthy, do it... if not for yourself, for your children.

2. Model the values and behaviors you want to see in your children

This is perhaps the hardest – and most important – parenting strategy. Sorry, but “Do what I say – not what I do” just doesn’t work. It won’t matter if we tell our kids to treat people with respect, for example, if they see us disrespecting others. Try this one: “I will talk to you when your voice is as calm as mine.”

3. Notice your children’s strengths

No one likes the nagging parent – least of all you or I! Make an effort to notice out loud when your child has done well. No need for over-exaggerated praise; just a simple, “I see you cleared the table” is enough to reinforce that behavior and boost

your relationship. Be careful not to say “good job!” too often, as that can lead kids to become overly-oriented towards pleasing others and will leave them vulnerable in life.

4. Provide a steady diet of choices

Everyone needs to feel some control, and if they don’t, they will (rightly) fight for it! Give your kids the experience of control within limits acceptable to you. In fact, you can smother them with control in the form of choices: from “Would you like to brush your teeth with your left or your right hand?” to “Would you like to go to the state university or get a job to help pay for that private college?” (Note: Points 4-9 come from the *Parenting with Love & Logic* program.)

5. Use empathy when your child is upset – even when upset with you!

Power struggles cannot escalate if we respond with empathy. Learn a few key phrases to use whenever your child is upset: “What a bummer.”, “How sad”, “I would hate that too.” And be sure to deliver them with sincerity; sarcasm only undermines what you are trying to do here. You will be surprised to find how this simple response can dissipate power struggles and deepen your relationship with your child.

6. If you don’t know what to do, give yourself time

There is no “super parent” who says the right thing every time. Cut yourself some



slack. We usually have more time than we think to consider our reaction. Try this: “You know what? I don’t know how to respond to that one. I’ll have to think on it. But don’t worry – I’ll be sure to come up with something fair.” While you think it over (you might also consult other adults for ideas), your child will be thinking it over too – which is exactly what we want them to do. When you return, your response will be more reasoned and your tone more calm (and effective).

7. When problems arise, ask yourself “Whose problem is this?”

Parenting is hard enough without taking on extra battles. If a child has a problem and the real world has a lesson for them, do not get involved – other than with empathy.

Ask the question, “If nothing is done, who will be directly impacted?” If your daughter walks out into the cold without a jacket, mother nature will take care of it. If your son forgets his lunch, hunger will teach him. Special cases arise, of course, when safety is involved.

8. When it is their problem: Let life do the teaching

We all learn best through direct experience. Has anyone ever learned about fire without touching it at least once? Skinned knees, poor grades, getting wet in the rain – these are parents’ allies. Let them do the teaching. Bight your tongue and keep your “I-told-you-so’s” to yourself -- they only distract your child from a life lesson and replace it with anger towards you. Instead, either butt out or use empathy and join with your child in his/her pain – and avoid becoming the source of their struggles.

9. When it is your problem: Say what you will do – not what your child must do

Controlling kids, if you haven’t noticed, is an uphill battle we can never win. But we can easily control *ourselves* and the things we can control. If your child has a habit of leaving her toys in the living room and won’t pick them up (our problem), try this: “No problem. Toys that are left here at bedtime will be going to Goodwill.” If your son won’t do a chore, do it for him (or hire the neighbor kid) and pay yourself out of his

allowance. If they won’t honor the rules about video games, don’t waste your breath, simply flip the circuit breaker, or remove the game (or at least the power cord) while they are at school. When they come home and throw a fit, use your empathy: “I am so sorry, you must be so upset. I know this is your game, but it’s my electricity, and I will be happy to let you use my electricity when I can trust that you will turn your game off at the times agreed upon.”

10. When you make a mistake, be kind to yourself

You will give in when you shouldn’t. You will yell and threaten to ground them “for life!” when you shouldn’t. If you are hurtful to your child, you can apologize for the hurtful part without giving in on whatever the issue was in the first place. Not only will you repair your relationship with your child, you will model for them how to own mistakes and take care of relationships.

11. Remember, some defiance is normal – and good!

A free democratic society requires citizens able to speak their minds and stand up for what they believe. And for children to withstand the influences of peer pressure, they have to know what they think and have the courage to act on it. Our challenge is to nurture that independence and strength, while also teaching responsibility and thoughtfulness ... while trying to run a household! (Where is that manual?)

Want to learn more?

We offer parenting skills training on a one to one basis or in group format. Talk to your therapist if you think that would be right for you or ask to be put on a list for the next group.

Love & Logic offers books and CDs which expand on these ideas (www.loveandlogic.com). The book *1-2-3 Magic* by Thomas Phelan is another good resource.

— Matt Case, LPC, Therapist