

Back to the Basics: Guiding Principles for Effective Parenting

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In today's world, there is a wealth of information about how to raise a child in an effective manner. Numerous books & theories have been written on the subject. Some are complex & some are simple. As a parent, you may have become overwhelmed with the information & may be confused about the most effective ways to parent your child.

The fact remains that there are some general principles that could be considered the core of most of what has been written about parenting. These principles have been around for a long time, but it never hurts to remind ourselves of the basics that have been known to work throughout history.

Consistency, Predictability, & Follow-Through. Children function best when they know what to expect. Make it very clear exactly what you consider to be acceptable & unacceptable behaviors. Then, be predictable by being consistent in setting limits & following through with expectations. Consistency is both important between parents & from day-to-day for individual parents. That is, both parents should use the same consequences for misbehavior & be a team in backing one another up regarding discipline. Also, similar consequences should be used if the child repeats the behavior at another time. Consistency is also important for following through with promises, limit setting, or consequences. In other words, if you say something is going to happen, be sure you can make it happen, whether it is promising a reward for positive behavior or threatening a consequence for unacceptable behavior. Be sure to not use unrealistic threats (e.g. "If you slam that door, you'll never play with a

video game again!") Broken promises & false threats can compromise the parent/child relationship. Children have to believe that you mean what you say.

You are your child's role model. Children often learn how to act by observing their parents. In other words, if you talk the talk, you better walk the walk. For example, if parents handle frustrations well, their children will probably learn to handle frustrations well. If parents swear & become upset easily, they may find their children doing the same. Actions do speak louder than words.

Positive attention. Any attention is better than no attention, as far as children are concerned. You may have found that at a time when your life became very busy & you did not pay as much attention to your child, he/she acted up a bit more than usual. It helps to spend positive time every day with your child so that he/she knows that he/she is loved & important to you. Some parents have the misconception that quality time means spending an entire day together doing parent/child activities or going on elaborate family vacations. Quality time to a child is spending 10-15 minutes together daily in an enjoyed activity (e.g. playing a family game or reading together). Making time for positive interactions daily will decrease your child's negative attention seeking behaviors.

Catching your child being good. Similar to the above concept, children will seek their parent's attention. As parents, it is rare to ignore something a child does wrong; so, why do we ignore all the good a child does?

Put simply, it is up to you whether to put your energy into praising them for positive behavior or responding to negative behavior. Praise your child often. Catch him/her doing a good job of something & be specific as to the reason he/she is being praised. Don't wait for him/her to do something outstanding; praise them for simple things he or she does on a daily basis. (e.g. "You did a great job not interrupting me while I was on the phone.") "Thank you for being helpful to your brother by putting his dish away." "You did a good job sitting quietly at church." "Thank you for listening the first time I asked you to pick up your toys.") And, be sure to give your child the positive feedback immediately rather than waiting until later to praise your child. Immediate & sincere praise or physical affection (e.g. hugs, smiles, pats on the back, & high-fives) will positively reinforce your child. Positive reinforcement is known to increase behaviors. So, if you positively reinforce your child, you strengthen the likelihood of their positive behavior increasing.

Family meals. Historically, families regularly sat down to eat dinner together. Today, families often struggle to find the time to regularly share a family meal. Recently, researchers have linked a simple routine, eating dinner with parents, as being associated with a reduction in adjustment difficulties. In today's overscheduled world, it is important to remember that spending regular family time together with your children can facilitate positive adjustment.

Allowing your child to be helpful. Let your child help with as many daily tasks as possible. Most children enjoy spending time helping their parents, & it can also be a good learning experience. It may take a bit longer to accomplish something, but the long-term benefits will outweigh the time factor. Children will gain self-confidence in their abilities & feel as though they were an important part in the task. You will also have the opportunity to praise them for their helpfulness.

Giving directions. The way in which directions are given to your child can have an effect on how your child follows them. Parents should make eye contact with their children before giving a direction. Yelling or nagging about a request from another room rarely is effective. Directions should also be given in a very specific & concise manner. Avoid using vague directions such as "be good." Your idea of being good & your child's idea of being good may differ. Also, attempt to tell your child what to do instead of what not to do. Think of yourself, if someone tells you not to do something, what's the first thing you want to do? Rather than saying, "don't jump on the chair", say, "please sit quietly on the chair." Then, praise your child for following directions, but also be prepared to enforce the directions if the child does not follow them. If parents do not enforce directions, children learn that their parents don't mean what they say.

Strategies to avoid. Lecturing, nagging, yelling, & screaming to manage your child's behavior have simply not been found to be effective parenting strategies. In fact, they often make problems worse.

While you may have known some of these basic principles, they are worth drawing our attention to on a regular basis. After all, they are the foundation for any effective parenting approach you may consider.

Suggested Readings:

1. Parenting that Works: Building Skills that Last a Lifetime by Christophersen & Mortweek (2003).
2. Parenting with Love & Logic by Foster W. Cline & Jim Fay (2006).

Websites for further information:

www.kidshealth.org/parent
www.parenting.org
www.positiveparenting.com

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