

# Parenting With Confidence

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Imagine a job description for today's generation of parents. What attributes promise success? Some would say that parenting requires wisdom, humor, patience and organization skills, for starters. It also requires good management skills, a sense of moderation, flexibility, intuition, empathy and persistence. As metropolitan parents, we need time to chauffeur our kids to soccer and "quality" time to engage our children without e-mails or answering machines.

How can any one person qualify? And, in order to parent with confidence, where is the job training in the face of such varied and ever-changing demands?

To add to our angst, we parents have only limited influence, within a relatively short period of time, to learn new skills, practice and determine what is effective for our particular child.

Our influence as primary caretakers is greatest during the early years, when children are most dependent. Predictable rules set the foundation for trust and security. As children mature, they attain greater ability to cope and adapt and are better able to handle autonomy. The mature teenager has enough common sense to finally practice independence.

Most of us test weak authority figures by being noncompliant. Insecure authority is demonstrated not only by parents who cannot set appropriate limits but also by agitated parents who use emotional threats or physical force.

Without appropriate limits and consistency, children can become anxious and reactive. They frequently misbehave when demands are confusing. Angry feelings and opposition are natural reactions to inconsistency.

When we parents cannot maintain our authority due to stress or insecurity, we jeopardize our ability to manage our children effectively. At such times, children not only act out, but may develop social-emotional immaturity as well. Alternatively, a temperamentally difficult child may challenge parents to the point of exhaustion, diminishing their confidence. In either case, the family system is less harmonious and less productive. Trust and respect may be further undermined as parents react to misbehavior with harsh threats or bribes to regain control.

How do we raise our children with greater confidence and less exhaustion? And, how do we maintain calm benevolent authority as we set the necessary boundaries that promote security and growth?

## ★ Know your limits

Know thyself and know thy child so you can better respond to your needs and hers. Know how to refuel and rejuvenate yourself. If parenting with confidence requires creativity, problem-solving and frustration tolerance, it makes enormous sense that we must take care of ourselves in order to manage our children effectively. We simply parent at our worst and our children behave at their worst when we are not mindful and present.

## ★ The goal of parenting is not always about "happy"

We all want happy friendly children, but fostering short-term gratification to achieve "happy" children may result in long-term relationship problems. We parent to help our children get along in the world, which means that they are going to be frustrated and will not always want to do what is best for them.

One fundamental requirement for confident parenting of children is the ability to tolerate being disliked and to ignore expressions of frustration that are intended to undermine your authority. If children play the drama card by exclaiming, "I hate you," or "You're the meanest," avoid getting "hooked."

We are "hooked" when we argue, defend our decision, or worse, give in and change our minds to make peace! Where appropriate, empathize briefly with your child's frustration. If you have broken a "promise," apologize. We need to model accountability if we expect our children to be accountable. Then set your limit

or state your command firmly and repeat it as necessary without adding threats for leverage.

## ★ Set limits carefully and thoughtfully to secure consistency

Unless you are dealing with a true emergency, when you are uncertain how to respond, ask children or adolescents to "wait." This gives you time to make a confident, sensible decision.

Avoid reactive, knee-jerk parenting. It pays



# LESS BRIBING, LESS THREATENING & LESS EXHAUSTION

to remember that "an emergency on their part does not constitute an emergency on our part." Reactive parenting is knee-jerk parenting, and it is ineffective. When we manage behavior according to our mood or energy level, we tend to be inconsistent.

**R**eactive parenting often results in yelling, threatening and bribing. We engage in shortcuts to managing behavior when we feel hurried, lazy or out of control. Our children are clever enough to recognize and exploit this beginning at a very young age.

A worn-down mom enters my office announcing, "I am a screamer...my mother was a screamer...the problem is I keep screaming, and they don't listen anymore!" This parent is feeling more powerless than ever. She feels she must do something even more threatening or dramatic to be taken seriously. That's called "learned helplessness." We learn to be helpless after repeatedly feeling ineffective.

As parents, we need to watch what is working and what is not in order to plan in advance. In this respect, parenting is not different from good management skills. Imagine if your boss responded to requests or problems on a whim, according to her mood at that particular moment. She would not earn or deserve respect.

★ **Communicate specific and age-appropriate expectations for behavior...**

A mother is standing in a deli line trying to place an order, but her 2-year-old is clearly annoying her, bouncing up-and-down and grabbing, so she snaps, "Be good!" Her son is not certain what "be

good" means. She did not tell him specifically what he was doing wrong or specify what he should be doing instead. Quite innocently, he continues to bounce up-and-down. Now she adds, "If you don't stop that, we're not going to get ice cream." The child gets the "no ice cream." He freezes. Then he wails!

Too often, parents threaten consequences that they cannot follow through with. Try to state the behavioral expectation rather than focusing on the unwanted action. It is also more helpful to emphasize the reward of cooperating, rather than to threaten a loss. To say, "If you don't get dressed right now, no TV for you!" is to threaten loss. To say calmly, "When you are dressed and ready, we can watch some TV," is to emphasize the reward that comes with cooperation. Expectations for behavior, or rules, as well as positive or negative consequences need to be spelled out calmly and specifically. When expectations are unclear or emotionally threatening, misbehavior is more likely. In the example above, the mother might have bent down to her son's level and calmly said, "Please hold my hand and stay with me." There's no need to mention ice cream.

Behavioral expectations need to be age appropriate. We would not ask a 5-year-old to fold and put away the laundry. If your child is distractible, it would not be effective to give him five commands and then leave the room! When rules are not suitable to a situation or to the child's ability, limit testing and misbehavior are inevitable.

Finally, most children cannot read our minds or anticipate our expectations. So get in the habit of stating the expectation for behavior. We do this all the time

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when we say things like, "All done! Let's put the toys away now," "Before you leave the table, bring your dishes to the sink, rinse them and set them in the dishwasher."

## ★ Keep "one foot in and one foot out"

Lessons in cooperation and accountability must include one more ingredient: *empathy*. Without sufficient empathy, motivation may diminish. Having empathy does not equal indulgence. Empathetic limit setting prevents resentment and opposition. Confident parenting requires the ability to "keep one foot in and one foot out," with enough empathy for validation but enough emotional separateness to avoid overreacting or indulging, sabotaging your own authority. For example, if your son loses his temper and hits his friend, you tell him, "It looks like you are having a hard time. I know it feels bad to be that mad, but we cannot hurt people when we are mad. Playtime needs to end now. Next time use your words." Because you have "one foot out," you are calm. Because you have "one foot in," you have empathy.

## ★ Confident parenting requires thinking about the big picture...

How do we figure out what expectations are appropriate for a particular child or situation? By stepping back and looking at the big picture! In this manner, we might be able to repair a problem with the system rather than harping on behavior. Here is an example.

"Mornings are a disaster!" reports one mother. Her husband works late and sleeps in. She wakes her boys who go straight to the television while she showers. After the shower, she yells at the children to get ready for school, sending her 4-year-old "to get dressed." Ten minutes later, after emptying the dishwasher, she finds him playing with his toys. Again, she starts yelling at him and threatening.

This couple needs a new "system." What they are currently doing is not helping their very young boys get ready. Mother may need to reschedule her shower. Parents may also forbid TV or allow it only after the children are ready from "head to toe." Dad may need to change his work schedule in order to help in the morning until the children are older. There are no absolute rights. There is what works for you and your family.

Systems change and are not absolute. Behavioral expectations evolve based on changing needs and



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certainly be helpful in our efforts to remain mindful about how to refuel ourselves and stay focused as parents. We have only a brief time to use our own influence to empower our children with the confidence and reasoning required to navigate and succeed in our ever-changing world.

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motivations. By stepping back and assessing the big picture, you can develop a system that works for you and each of your children. Hopefully cooperation is enhanced, while threatening and yelling are minimized.

## ★ A word of caution

Whenever you significantly change your parenting style, children need time to adjust. Often, misbehavior and noncompliance worsen before improvement is seen. Your children want things to stay the way they are, even if it has not been good for them or for you. At least it is familiar. And naturally, as you become empowered, there is some loss of power for them. This is why it is especially hard, but not impossible, to parent during adolescence. As one out-of-control teenager wisely said, "It's too late now! All this time they let me do whatever I want! Now that I'm in trouble, they think they can parent me!"

The job of parenting is a privilege and an honor. Parenting for the children in the new millennium is an overwhelming challenge. No one of us alone could possibly master all the job attributes required to parent with confidence and consistency. Job training would certainly

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