

Positive Parenting

Being a Parent

Being a parent is the most important and challenging job many adults will have in their lifetime. The aim of good parenting is to raise healthy, well adjusted children who have the skills they will need in adult life. Most adults begin their parenting careers unprepared for what lies ahead, and learn their parenting skills through trial and error. Many also have high expectations of themselves—how they should feel and cope with being a parent. Unrealistic expectations can lead to feelings of disappointment or inadequacy. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you manage the challenges that come with being a parent.

Learning To Be a Parent

Being a parent involves caring for, protecting, teaching and guiding children and young people. However, being a good parent is not something that comes naturally or just happens. It takes time to develop the knowledge and skills needed to promote children's physical and emotional development.

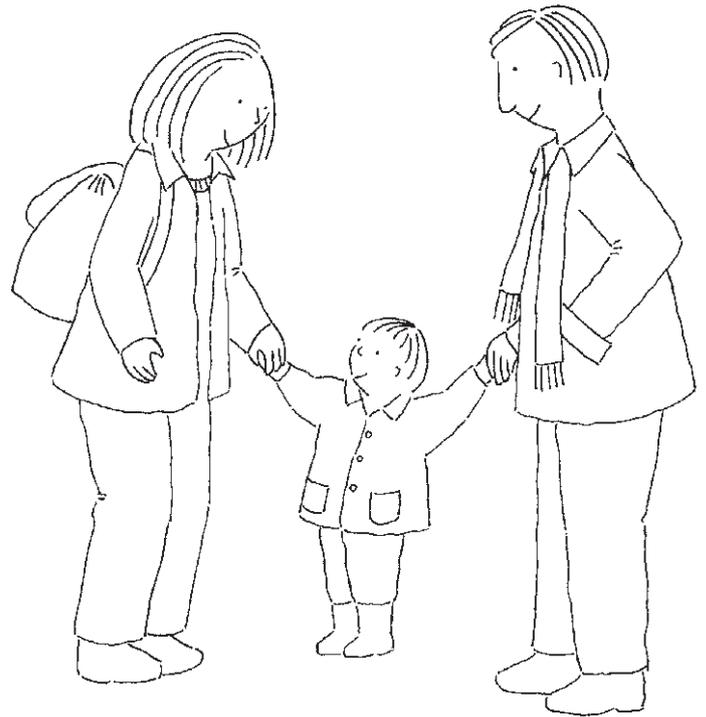
Each parent's approach is influenced by their own parents, their life experiences, the opinions of their relatives and friends, and what they read and see in the media. Parenting is also strongly influenced by a parent's beliefs and expectations—of their child and themselves.

Although there are common parenting challenges, each family has its own unique challenges as well. There is no single right way to be a parent and there are many different views on how to go about raising children. The best you can do for yourself and your family is to find the approach you feel comfortable with and think will work for your family.

Common Parenting Traps

Parenting traps, like the ones outlined below, add to the stress many parents experience and make the job of raising children more difficult.

- **The criticism trap.** This involves getting into frequent power struggles with children. It typically involves parents reacting to their child's misbehaviour with criticism—*Robert, why can't you ever just leave your*



brother alone?; threats—If you do that one more time you're in big trouble!; yelling—Robert! Leave him alone! When parents get angry like this, it can lead to resentment and more conflict. Parents can also fall into the trap of only noticing and responding to their child's problem behaviour. This attention can accidentally reward problem behaviour.

- **The 'leave them alone' trap.** This often occurs in combination with the criticism trap, and involves parents ignoring their child when they are behaving well or playing nicely. If good behaviour is ignored, it will occur less often in the future.
- **The 'perfect parent' trap.** This trap comes from the desire to be a perfect parent rather than just a good or competent parent. All parents are human and make mistakes—the trick is not to keep making the same ones. Since there is no such thing as a perfect parent, trying to be one only leads to stress, disappointment, frustration and guilt.
- **The 'perfect child' trap.** It is unrealistic for parents to expect their children to be perfect. This is likely to lead to disappointment and conflict with their children. All children whine, complain, make a mess, have disagreements with their parents, and become upset at times. The way parents deal with these issues influences whether the problems stay the same, get worse, or improve as their child grows older.

- **The ‘it’s all my fault’ trap.** Sometimes parents blame themselves for all of their child’s problems. It is possible to guide a child’s development and teach them social skills and values, but it is not possible to control all the things that make children behave the way they do. Parents may feel guilty or depressed if they think they are totally to blame for their child’s behaviour. This makes it even harder to be patient, calm and consistent with their children.
- **The ‘it’s all their fault’ trap.** This belief places blame for problems and misbehaviour totally on the child, such as *She’s so stubborn, she never does as she’s told*. This may make parents resentful and lead them to overreact to misbehaviour. It may also stop parents from looking at how their own actions contribute to problem child behaviour—many difficulties are the result of the way parents and children talk and relate to one another.
- **The ‘martyr’ trap.** This occurs when parents become so involved in parenting that they neglect their own needs for intimacy, companionship, recreation, privacy and fun. When they do this they often find their relationship with their partner suffers and they can end up feeling dissatisfied and resentful. Quality parenting takes place when adults have their own lives in balance. Being a martyr does not produce quality parenting.
- **The ‘for the sake of the children’ trap.** This involves parents in unhappy relationships staying together for the sake of their children, rather than learning ways to resolve their problems. Children who live in families where there is a lot of conflict are more likely to develop emotional and behavioural problems. Serious relationship problems should not be ignored. Conflict over parenting can cause inconsistency between parents, which in turn makes many child behaviour problems worse.
- **The ‘they’ll grow out of it’ trap.** Another common trap is for parents to see a child’s behaviour problem as simply a passing phase and expect their children to grow out of it. Problem behaviour needs to be dealt with early so it does not turn into a more severe problem later on. Assuming children will simply grow out of a problem behaviour may prevent parents from finding out why the problem is occurring, looking for solutions to the problem, and making changes or seeking help.

Positive parenting is a way to avoid these parent traps. It involves learning how to motivate children positively through encouragement when they are behaving well, to guide children’s behaviour without resorting to yelling or smacking, and to work as a team with your partner on parenting issues.

Hints To Help Manage The Challenges of Parenthood

Families come in all shapes and sizes. Different family types have different challenges for parents. Managing a family alone as a single parent with little support can be difficult. It can also be difficult for parents in two parent families to develop a shared parenting plan they both agree with. Step-families have their own special challenges as they learn to live together. No matter what your family is like, the following hints aim to help make parenting easier.

Have Realistic Expectations

Have realistic expectations of yourself. Do not think you should know all there is to know about parenting just because you are a parent. As you learn to be a parent and meet the challenges that face you every day, remind yourself that every parent makes mistakes and learns as they go. Have realistic expectations of your partner too—they are learning like you are. Try to be understanding of your partner’s mistakes, and avoid placing unfair demands on each other.

Try to have realistic expectations of your child. Check if the demands you are making, such as chores or standards of behaviour, are appropriate for your child’s age and abilities. It can be helpful to check whether the parents of your child’s friends all have similar expectations. In general, expect reasonable behaviour but do not expect perfection.

Enjoy Your Child

In a busy family it is easy to get caught up with the demands of work, school, homework, after school activities, visiting, household chores, favourite television programs and so on. Make time to enjoy your child’s company and have some fun together. Find out what has happened in your child’s day and talk about what you have been doing. Spending time with your child is important for your relationship and shows your child that you care.

Look After Yourself

Just because you are a parent does not mean that your own needs are no longer important. It is much easier to look after your child if your own needs are also being met. If you find it difficult to make time for yourself, start by doing at least one thing you enjoy each day—half an hour can make a big difference. Everyone needs some time away from children. This is normal and healthy. Providing your child is being well cared for and you have plenty of positive times, it will not harm your relationship to have time apart.

Avoid Conflict in Front of Your Child

Do not argue or fight in front of your child as it can be upsetting for them and children learn a lot through watching others. Children who see their parents arguing or fighting can learn inappropriate ways of dealing with problems. These children may yell and shout or become aggressive when faced with a problem. Children who grow up with a lot of tension and conflict in their home can develop behaviour problems and have trouble getting on with others. They may become aggressive, disruptive, withdrawn or anxious.

Get Support

Everyone needs support in raising children. Family, friends and neighbours can be good supports. It may also be helpful to look in the community help section in the telephone book and the community notices in your local newspaper for agencies and support groups for parenting, child and family related issues. Meeting with other parents like yourself can provide social contact and allows you to talk about your ideas and share experiences. Having friends in a situation like your own means you can support each other, share care, such as babysitting, and have someone to talk to when you need to.

Extra Hints for Two Parent Families

Share Your Parenting Roles

Parenting is easier if you have support and both parents agree on methods of discipline. It is important to work as a team. To reach agreement over parenting issues, discuss your ideas on issues such as family rules and how to manage misbehaviour. Be clear that you are both responsible for discipline—problem behaviour should be dealt with straight away, no matter which parent is there. Share your child's care and make important decisions together. From time to time you may need to review how things are going and make sure that workloads are shared. See the *Supporting Your Partner* tip sheet for more ideas on how to support each other in your parenting role.

Take Care of Your Relationship

Parents with busy families can find it hard to have time alone as a couple and may start to take each other for granted. It is important for parents to look after their relationship, show care and respect for each other, and make an effort to do things they used to enjoy doing together before they had children. Do things that show your partner you care, such as saying *I love you*, making them a cup of tea, helping when they are busy, or saying *Thank you* for things they do for you. Try to have some special time with your partner every day—this may be brief time to talk, cuddle or do something together. Occasionally make time to do special things you like to do

as a couple, such as working on a project together or going out on a date. Share your ideas and experiences by talking with your partner and asking about their day. Let your partner know that you appreciate their efforts both in your relationship and in parenting.

Work Together To Solve Problems

It is good to let your child see how you solve problems calmly. When discussing problems in front of your child, avoid issues that cannot be easily solved and issues that involve disagreements over parenting or discipline. Discuss disagreements over parenting or discipline when your child is not present.

How To Improve Your Parenting Skills

Look for Information on Parenting

Parents are constantly facing new challenges and learning how to deal with new situations. It is good to keep looking for ideas and planning ahead. Talk to your family and friends about their experiences. You may find it helpful to read brochures, books or magazine articles about parenting issues. Many community services provide information materials, parent education programs and support groups.

Recognise the Warning Signs

It is important to be aware of signs that say you are not coping well or are struggling with your role as a parent. If you notice any of the following, consider seeking professional help.

- Frustration—if you often feel frustrated, as if you are not getting anywhere with your child, you may have become caught in one of the parenting traps mentioned earlier.
- Embarrassment—if you are embarrassed by your child's behaviour, or your own, it is a sign that you may have difficulties that are more extreme than the day to day difficulties experienced by most families.
- Losing your temper—if you lose your temper often or quickly, you may be experiencing unhelpful amounts of stress, or you may be stuck in a pattern where you feel you have to yell or make threats before your child does as you ask.
- Feeling hopeless or out of control—if you are feeling overwhelmed by the demands placed on you every day or you feel you are helpless and do not have the answers you need, you may be feeling down or depressed which makes it even harder to be calm and consistent in your parenting.

Look for Advice

You are the expert when it comes to your own child and family—you know them better than anyone. However, if you have any concerns, you can learn from a professional who has expert knowledge about child development and managing children's behaviour. If you have decided to seek help about a problem you are having, remember that there is no such thing as a quick fix. Changing your child's behaviour will take time and will mean changes for other family members too. When you seek help, the professional you see should listen to your concerns, learn about your family, provide some ideas on what you can do, work with you to develop a plan that is tailored to fit your family's needs, and then follow up on how things are going after you have put the plan into practice. Be confident that your goals and concerns are important. If there is anything discussed that you do not understand, feel free to ask questions and get further explanation.

Be an Informed Consumer

When you look for advice (either through written information or consultation with a professional), look for the credentials and expertise of the person giving the advice. If the information appears to be based on personal experience or opinion alone, it may not be as helpful as advice based on research into effective parenting strategies. Check if the advice given is based on any particular reasoning and whether there is any evidence that it has helped other families. Ask yourself whether the advice is practical—does it tell you what you can do? Finally, think about whether the advice will help you solve the problem you are concerned about or if it is based on someone else's ideas about what the problem is.

Set Yourself Goals

It is up to you to work on your own strengths and weaknesses in order to be the kind of parent you would like to be. Set yourself small goals and practise using different strategies, particularly in situations you feel you have not managed as well as you could. Look at what you did well and then look for anything you said or did or failed to do which you may be able to improve on next time a similar situation arises. Set yourself some clear goals—one or two things to do differently—try them out then review how you went. Keep working on goals like these until you are happy with the way you are managing the situation.

Key Steps

- Have realistic expectations of your child, your partner and yourself.
- Enjoy your child and spend fun time together.
- Work with your partner as a parenting team.
- Look after your own needs and take care of your relationship with your partner.
- Avoid conflict in front of your child—show them how to solve problems calmly.
- Get support from your family and friends.
- Look for information and ideas on parenting.
- If you are concerned about your child's behaviour or the way you are handling certain situations with your family, look for advice and set yourself some goals for change.

See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your parenting skills or your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.



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