

Responsive and Nurturing Parenting
Sets the Stage for Children's Social, Emotional and Academic Development

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Parenting children ages three to eight years can be a difficult time for both parents and children. For children it is a period of major transitions when they are moving from a world where fantasy and reality are often confused to a more concrete world where rules and ideas become permanent. One minute they need security and affection, and the next they need to be independent and prove they can do things by themselves. It is a time when they test the limits of their environment, finding out what will or will not be tolerated. When they move out of the home to preschool and kindergarten, they discover there are new rules and responses from other adults and children. And as children experience these conflicting needs and pressures, they may throw tantrums, whine or become destructive when they don't get their own way; or they may lie or steal in order to get what they want or to get attention; or they may withdraw and avoid feared situations. Did you know that one out of four social interactions with another child in preschool is aggressive? Or, that approximately 70% of toddlers have at least one temper tantrum a day.

For parents, these reactions and behaviors are often surprising, and sometimes difficult to handle. As your children grow from infants to preschoolers, you may feel a sense of loss of control over their experiences, and anger when they refuse to cooperate. You will probably feel anxiety about their vulnerability and concern that they do well in school and make friends. Often you may wonder how much discipline or control they need versus how much freedom. You may frequently feel guilty about not having handled a problem more effectively or about having perhaps expected too much from them. And you may not realize just how much stress is created when children misbehave. In fact, parenting is probably one of the hardest jobs an adult will undertake, but probably also the one for which the least amount of training and preparation is provided.

Parents who are responsive and nurturing can help their children become less aggressive and more socially competent by teaching them alternatives ways to self-regulate and problem solve and by using appropriate discipline. Here are a few basic parenting principles for promoting your child's social, emotional and academic development.

1. PROMOTING RESPONSIVE AND SENSITIVE PARENTING

Competent parents are those who are sensitive to the interaction between themselves and their children. That is, they learn how to be responsive to the temperaments of their children and the cues that their children give them that they are ready to learn and they use these cues to guide their parenting responses. For example, the parent who notices when their child is getting frustrated and offers just enough support and guidance (without taking over) to give their child a sense of accomplishment. Or, the parent of a hyperactive and impulsive child who adjusts his or her expectations to understand that their child is socially and emotionally younger than other children the same chronological age and needs additional monitoring and support to learn social skills and to follow through with instructions.

2. THE ATTENTION RULE

The "attention rule" is the basic principle behind much of the ways that children learn new behaviors. Simply stated, it is that children will work for attention from others, especially parents, whether it is positive (praise) or negative (criticism) in nature. If they do not receive positive attention, then they will strive for negative attention through misbehavior since that is better than none at all. Therefore, if you want to promote more prosocial behaviors you need to give it attention.

3. CHILDREN WILL LIVE UP TO OR DOWN TO PARENTS' EXPECTATIONS

Children recognize their parents' expectations for them much quicker than most people realize. If parents label their children negatively by telling them how bad or incapable they are, the youngsters may come to believe this image of themselves. Therefore, parents need to think positively about their children and project positive images of their future and their ability to successfully cope with situations. Statements such as, "Let's try again" and "You'll do better next time" and "You stayed calm and patient and that was frustrating" give children confidence to learn from their mistakes.

4. NONVIOLENT DISCIPLINE

Parents need to develop an ethical approach to discipline that teaches their children that there are consequences for misbehaving, while at the same time letting them know they are loved and expected to do better next time. There are serious disadvantages to spanking and physical punishment as a discipline strategy and many alternative nonviolent approaches that provide better long-term results for the child's emotional and social development as well as for the parents' ongoing relationship with the child.

5. ACCEPT EACH CHILD'S UNIQUE TEMPERAMENT

Parents need to understand, appreciate, accept and adapt to the unique temperament and development of each individual child and to highlight their strengths as well as accept their limitations. By temperament, I'm referring to a person's natural, innate style of behaving and traits such as activity level, mood, intensity, adaptability, impulsivity and persistence. Think about your children-are they slowpokes and dreamers, or moody and hypersensitive, or perhaps they are social butterflies flibbertigibbets, and chatty, or on the other hand, reserved, somewhat withdrawn and quiet? Perhaps one of your children is even-keeled ,malleable and cooperative and the other the opposite-stubborn, resistant to change and inattentive.

There is a wide range of normal in regard to temperament traits. Studies have shown that 10-20 percent of normal children have temperaments which would be considered "difficult." These are children who are highly active or impulsive with a short attention span and they are much harder for parents to manage. Such personality traits are not related to intelligence, they are associated with uneven neurological development. Therefore, it is important if you are the parent of one of these children to remember that these behaviors are not intentional, nor are they deliberate attempts to thwart your efforts. And while you can help temperamentally difficult children manage behaviors and channel their energy in a positive direction, you can't fundamentally change these traits-nor would you want to. No one can make hyperactive, energetic, boisterous youngsters into quiet, reserved ones. Such an attempt will not only be frustrating for parents, but harmful to children. These children will each have their own kind of adjustments to make to the real world and parents can help best by being tolerant, patient, accepting, and understanding of their children's temperaments-in order for them to reach their full potential.

6. USE PARENTAL POWER RESPONSIBLY

One of the most basic areas of confusion among parents is whether or not a family is a democracy. If parents feel it is one, composed of equals, then they usually avoid leadership and back off from discipline. But a family is not a democracy-neither are power nor responsibility equally distributed between children and adults. In order to feel secure children need their parents to provide behavior control and decision making in the early years because they can't solve problems alone. They need to be taught to share, wait, respect others and accept responsibility for their behavior. Although limit-setting may make children feel frustrated and resentful, it helps them to feel safe, to learn self-control and to balance their wishes against those of others.

Parents must learn to use their power responsibly however. They need to determine which problems need firm discipline and close monitoring (such as destructive behaviors and not complying) and which can be left up to their children (such as what they eat or wear). The key is to strive for a workable balance of power. So as long as children behave appropriately, they may be given some control; when they behave inappropriately, their parents have to assume control. If children are never given any control in family relationships, power struggles will occur and they will strive to get control in inappropriate ways (such as refusing to get dressed). In order to foster cooperative relationships in a family and promote children's self-confidence and eventual independence parents must avoid being too permissive or authoritarian. Necessary commands and discipline should be balanced by warmth, praise and sensitivity to children's special needs.

7. PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

As parents try out positive parenting strategies, they may feel artificial or even phony, especially if it is the first time they have used a particular technique. This awkwardness is a normal reaction whenever people are learning anything new. Don't be discouraged by the apparent complexity and don't expect to feel comfortable immediately. With practice, positive parenting skills become more natural until you will use them automatically.

8. ALL CHILDREN HAVE BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

It is important to remember that it is normal for children to have behavior problems and they are likely to be controlled if they are managed appropriately. Although such problems can't be stamped out, being creative and trying out strategies will make a big difference. Parents should not be alarmed if after an initial period of progress with managing a particular behavior problem, children revert. Progress is marked by spurts, regressions, consolidation and further growth.

9. ALL PARENTS MAKE MISTAKES

Just as all children have behavior problems so do all parents feel angry, guilty, frustrated, helpless or incompetent at times. Parents, like children, learn, experiment, and make mistakes all the time. There is no permanent harm done to children when parents make mistakes since they are remarkably flexible and resilient. The important thing is that children see their parents continuing to learn and cope in more effective ways. Parents need to watch for new learning opportunities and give themselves permission to try out what will work best for them and their children.

10. ENJOY PARENTING

Since there are things to remember and things to avoid in becoming a competent parent, parents may mistakenly believe there is a perfect solution that can be followed consistently. Or they may worry there is no room for spontaneity of fun. This is not true. If parents are confident and ready for inevitable problems and pitfalls, there will be room for flexibility, whimsy, and creativity. For instance, if a reserved child finally opens up five minutes before bedtime, a confident and sensitive parent will realize that this is a good time to make an exception to a rule and let the child stay up later. Consistency is a virtue but not when it becomes an inflexible policy. Once parents understand the temperament and developmental stage of their children, as well as basic behavior management principles, then they can try out different strategies, adapt the advice to suit their priorities and enjoy the creative process of parenting. Indeed, there is no magic blueprint or pat formula for parenting. Every situation is different and parents must invent their own parenting style that will work best for them. They need to have faith in their children and in their own common sense and imagination as they and their children learn together.

TO SUM UP...

The social, emotional and academic development of children is an incredible process-as is the growth and development of parents! Give yourself permission to enjoy this process by trusting your instincts, learning from your blunders, laughing at your mistakes and imperfections, getting support from others, taking time for yourself, and by having fun with your children. It is the incredible years -with all its tears, guilt, anger, laughter, joy and love.