



Ten Tips to Parents

... on using effective (authoritative) parenting

For most adults with children, parenting is the most challenging and rewarding part of life. All parents want their children to grow into happy, healthy, well-adjusted adults. But what parenting strategies work best to foster these goals?

*Social scientists have discovered that one parenting style is particularly beneficial for most young people. Called “**authoritative parenting**,” it blends three important characteristics: acceptance, firmness, and encouragement of autonomy. Based on studies of authoritative parenting, here are some tips on effective strategies parents can use with their children. The first three deal with acceptance, the next three with firmness, and the next three with encouraging autonomy; the final tip is just plain essential!*

1. Show your child that you care. Like all human beings, children need to feel



accepted for who they are--especially by their parent. By sharing in activities that are important to their child, acknowledging the child's special skills or abilities, and accepting the child's limitations in other areas, parents can show that they truly understand and care for their child. Children who feel their parent genuinely understands and accepts them are far more likely to seek and follow a parent's advice than children who doubt that parents care for them.

2. Praise positive behavior and accomplishments. Our tendency as parents is to respond when a child engages in problem behavior, but to otherwise “leave well enough alone.” Children *need* to be praised when they do things right or well -- even when it is something small like getting to the dinner table on time or remembering to hang up their coat. Acknowledging a child's special accomplishments and positive behavior build's their sense of competence. It also motivates the child to repeat these behaviors in the future.



3. Listening beats lecturing. Parents have so much wisdom to impart to their children that it is difficult to refrain from a steady stream of lectures. In almost all cases, however, *telling* the child what to do or what was wrong does less for their development than *helping them discover* things for themselves. Stop to listen before you start to talk! Careful, active listening is a difficult skill that requires practice for parents to master. But by learning to listen first, parents can gain insights that will make their advice more useful. It also helps empower children to think through issues, recognize problems and mistakes, and gain confidence in their ability to make decisions for themselves.

4. Set clear, reasonable expectations. Like adults, children are uncomfortable with uncertainty; they want to know what the rules, the boundaries, the expectations are. Authoritative parents make their expectations for the child's behavior clear; they also make it clear what the consequences will be for meeting or failing to meet these expectations. But expectations must be sensitive to the child's interests, abilities, and needs. When children feel clear about parents' expectations, and comfortable with these expectations, they also feel confident enough to "stretch" their interests and try new things.



5. Keep calm! When children make mistakes, test the limits, refuse to comply with family rules, or engage in inappropriate or unacceptable behavior, it is often difficult for parents to avoid responding with anger. Studies show, however, that physical and verbal aggression (spanking, yelling) are remarkably ineffective discipline strategies. They undermine the child's self-concept and encourage aggressive behavior. Discipline is much more effective when delivered in a calm, rational matter. It is perfectly okay to tell a child "we'll deal with this later after I have calmed down."



6. Be consistent. No matter what discipline style you use, it will be more effective when it is consistent. Try to make consequences for a particular action the same each time it occurs. Or make consequences *gradually* more severe if the child keeps repeating a problem behavior. If there are two parents in the household, try to have both parents discipline in the same way. Studies suggest that children raised in households with this sort of consistency develop a stronger sense of self-discipline.

7. Discipline with choices and consequences, not demands and punishments. In saying, "This is the rule, period!" the subtle message that parents give their child is: "I don't think you're able to make good decisions." An alternative is to lay out choices and consequences. "You may choose to do this or you may choose to do that, but if you choose to do *that* please understand that the consequence will be . . ." Children whose parents use this strategy tend to have higher self-esteem and are better able to respond appropriately to peer pressure. They also tend to have closer relationships with their family!



8. Give your child opportunities to make choices. During infancy, parents



grow accustomed to making nearly all decisions for their child, so it is difficult to “change course” and give the child responsibility for making choices. This process should occur as early as possible, however, and parents should increase the child’s opportunities for making choices slowly and systematically throughout childhood and adolescence. Parents should remain active participants in the child’s decision-making, setting limits or exercising

“veto power” when needed. Children who engage in joint decision-making with parents display more self-confidence and self-reliance than children who are never allowed to make choices or those whose parents never restrain their choices.

9. Consider your child’s opinions and preferences. A family is a collection

of individuals with different abilities and interests. Healthy families take *all* members into consideration when making rules and deciding on activities. When parents consider a child’s opinions and preferences, they not only make the child feel important and accepted, they also encourage the child to take responsibility for the needs and feelings of others. This helps build the child’s capacity for loving and caring, as well as the skill of compromising and discovering alternatives.



10. Tell your child, “I love you.” Finally, and *most importantly*, a child never tires



of hearing and *feeling* their parent’s love. Physical expression of this love—a hug or a pat on the shoulder—is as important as the words. Through positive and affectionate words or reassuring smiles or “gentle bragging” to friends or hugs and playful tickle matches, parents should constantly remind a child—daily, if possible--that he or she is loved. No message that a parent gives to a child is stronger or more meaningful than a simple, “I love you.”

One final thought: Each child is unique, and so is each parent-child relationship. Even though studies show the benefits of authoritative parenting, it is not a magic formula for parenting children. So, these tips need to be adjusted for your relationship with your child.

This brochure was prepared by Dr. B. Bradford Brown, Professor of Educational Psychology and Research Scientist, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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