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G90-991 Parenting Your Child Effectively (Revised November 2003)

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Parenting Your Child Effectively

This NebGuide contains guidelines to help parents interact with their children.

Revised by Kathy Bosch, Extension Family Life Specialist Originally written by Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Life Specialist

Parenting is both an action and an attitude! Being a parent is one of the hardest jobs you will have. One of the most difficult aspects of parenthood is the multitude of split-second decisions needed to guide and discipline children.

Although parenting is never easy, it becomes considerably more manageable when parents look at their attitudes about raising children. If they wish to change their parenting styles or improve discipline techniques, they need to begin by looking at how they "correct" their children's misbehavior and how they feel afterward.

Check the techniques that apply to you:

1. The way I <i>usually</i> correct my children is to:			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yell and scream	<input type="checkbox"/>	Spank
<input type="checkbox"/>	Shame my child	<input type="checkbox"/>	Let the child suffer the consequences
<input type="checkbox"/>	Show disapproval	<input type="checkbox"/>	Threaten, but don't follow through
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ignore misbehavior	<input type="checkbox"/>	Distract
<input type="checkbox"/>	Scold	<input type="checkbox"/>	Remove privileges
<input type="checkbox"/>	Isolate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hope the other parent will deal with the child
2. When I correct my children I <i>feel</i> :			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Great! I'm a perfect parent and nothing I do can be improved.		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Terrible! Everything I do seems wrong and makes our family life miserable.		
<input type="checkbox"/>	So-so. Sometimes I'm effective, and sometimes I make mistakes, but I'd like to improve.		
<input type="checkbox"/>	I'm a good parent, but would like to improve my ability to correct my children lovingly.		

If you are not satisfied with your techniques, you may want to use a nonphysical guidance technique. But, if you radically change your style, you can expect a temporary increase in misbehavior as your child tests you and tries to figure out whether you are serious and mean what you say. Usually, if you remain calm and persistent in your use of positive techniques, the child's misbehavior will eventually diminish.

Guidance Principles

Sometimes in the heat of battle, parents search desperately for something to help temper an emotional exchange with their children. At the very least, they search for something that resolves the confrontation without loss of dignity for either the child or parent.

The following guidance principles help provide an overall framework of discipline to remember in stressful times. It's when things are difficult that parents are most likely to lose their temper and say or do things that they regret.

Principle Number One

Focus on "do" instead of "don't." If your language is overloaded with negative words (no, don't, stop it, quit that, cut it out, shut up), your children may decide you are not interesting to listen to, and effectively tune you out. When children hear many negative words, the meaning of those words is weakened. This may lead to a situation in which you really need your child to hear and obey, but like the story of the boy who cried "wolf" too often, the child ignores or disobeys you. For example: A 2 1/2-year-old who hears "don't touch" the cup, TV, cookies, CD player, range, etc., may: 1) decide it's dangerous to touch anything and become passive and uninterested in learning, or 2) decide that adults just say no, and the way to deal with them is to touch as many things as possible before they get angry.

Here are some examples changing *don't* into *do*:

"Don't throw your silverware."	"Put your fork and spoon beside the plate like this..."
"Don't drop your milk."	"Carry your milk in both hands like this."
<i>Translate this don't into a do.</i>	
"Don't talk with your mouth full."	
"Don't talk to me like that."	

Principle Number Two

Protect and preserve your children's feelings of being lovable and capable. You can help your children feel lovable and capable by building their self-esteem, helping them feel secure and providing them with opportunities to learn and function well. How children feel about themselves will depend on what they experience, particularly in relationships with other people.

The following examples are ways in which adults can hinder or foster children's feelings of self-worth.

Situation	Destructive responses	Better responses

Antonio spills the juice he is carrying to the table.	"Can't you ever do anything right?"	"That's a hard job. We'll wipe it up and you can try again."
Sharon cries in frustration because she can't unscrew the lid on the peanut butter jar.	"You're too little to do that--let me do it for you!"	"Let's see if we can do it together."
Three-year-old Sam runs away from you in the supermarket.	"What's the matter with you, Sam? You're acting like a baby! I thought you were a big boy!"	

Principle Number Three

Offer children choices only when you are willing to abide by their decisions. Parents often want children to like them and offer them too many or inappropriate choices. Children take parents seriously when choices are offered. Difficult situations occur when adults offer choices they do not intend to fulfill.

Give them only the choice of behavior they can, in reality, choose.

Situation	Likely to lead to trouble	Instead, try
Diana and Bruce are engaged in an elaborate game of camping out under the dining room table.	"Would you like to come to lunch now?" (They might say 'no', they want to keep playing.)	"You campers will know it's lunch time when the timer rings in 5 minutes," as you set the timer.
It's shopping day and your groceries are in short supply.	"What would you like for breakfast today, kids?"	"Would you like toast and jam or cereal for breakfast?"
You are going to a restaurant for Sunday dinner and will meet some friends.	"What would you like to wear to the restaurant?"	

Principle Number Four

Change the environment instead of the child's behavior. Adult/child conflicts occasionally arise because some part of the physical setting or environment is inappropriate for young children, or because adults expect control or more mature behavior than children can achieve.

Behavior	Environmental changes
Some preschoolers have many milk spills at every meal. Their paper cups seem to tip over every other minute.	Provide heavy-bottomed, wide plastic glasses or cups.
Fifteen-month-old Eric sits next to 4-year-old Beth at the dinner table. Eric can't resist the temptation to reach over and play with Beth's braids, especially when his hands are sticky with peanut butter.	Move the children farther apart. Let an adult, who is more adept at dodging, sit where Beth sits.
Three-year-old Samantha jumps from the couch to the chair and back again, over and over.	

Principle Number Five

Work with children instead of against them. When old furniture is refinished, we are told to always rub with the grain of the wood. Perhaps we also should work "with the grain of the child." Standing back and observing children, and then determining an acceptable way for them to do what they are trying to do can sometimes turn a conflict into a pleasant (or at least tolerable) experience.

Five-year-old Scott wants to help his parents with their preparation of a German dinner. Efforts to persuade him to watch television or ride his tricycle have failed.	Figure out the tasks Scott can do. Then find a workplace for him in the kitchen and let him pitch in.
Thirteen-month-old Kristin turns her head away when offered food on a spoon. If the food is placed on her tray, however, she dives in with both hands and eats with obvious enjoyment.	Put newspaper on the floor, find a big bib, and stand by with sponges.
Eight-year-old Michael announces he only likes three foods: hamburgers, french fries, and ice cream.	

Principle Number Six

Give children safe limits they can understand. Recognize their feelings without accepting their actions. Maintain your authority calmly and consistently. Children see the world differently from adults. Rules and safety precautions that may be obvious to adults need to be stated and explained clearly and simply to children. Be sure they know your expectations for their behavior. It's not fair to scold for a violation of rules they did not understand.

Jeff (age 3) is happily pouring milk onto his dinner plate.	"Jeff, milks stays in your cup or in the pitcher. When your cup is empty, you may pour some more. But, you may not pour it over your dinner."
Michelle (age 2) has pushed a chair close to the range so she can see what's bubbling in all those pots.	<i>No! you must never do that!</i> You might get burned if you are so close to the range. It is hot."
Jenny (age 4) has a screaming tantrum because you will not let her go out to play. She has been sick and the weather is damp and cold..	

Principle Number Seven

Set a good example. Speak and act only in the ways you want children to speak and act. The importance of parents as models for children cannot be overstated.

Correct the following	
"I have to have my coffee first thing or I'm no good the rest of the day."	
"Maria, if you bite your sister, I'll bite you.	
"If you don't stop that crying, Brian, I'll give you something to cry about!"	

It's particularly important to remember that if you have a warm and loving relationship with your children, and if you can communicate effectively, specific techniques are unimportant. Luckily for us, most children are remarkably tough, resilient, loving, and forgiving people.

Principle Number Eight

Look at the whole picture. A child's behavior is often related to stresses in some part of the family system. Perhaps you or some other family member are in the process of making a difficult adjustment. Take a good, close look at whether your marital relationship is functioning satisfactorily. Changes in your behavior are often accompanied by changes in your child's behavior. In these situations, a misbehavior may represent a cry for help and attention. The child may be upset and confused by the changes made in other parts of the family system and may need as much attention as you are able to give.

Some people seem to feel that giving children attention is sure to spoil them. It's curious that parents seldom hesitate to meet their children's physical needs such as sleep, a drink of water or larger shoes. But, for many reasons, meeting their children's needs for love and attention makes parents nervous and causes anxiety.

It is also important to look at children's behavior as a whole. Do they have plenty of interesting activities available so that they don't misbehave out of boredom? Do they tend to misbehave at certain times each day? Excessive fatigue or coming down with an illness brings out the worst in anyone. If a child seems to be continuously grumpy and short on patience, it would be wise to schedule a complete medical examination.

Conclusion

It's a good idea to view children as part of the total family system. Sacrificing everything for their sake is not a wise long-term investment. Parents have needs that also must be met. The marital relationship must be nurtured. Child development specialists suggest that children need to have people "who are really crazy about them." Parents are especially good at this kind of loving, also known as unconditional love. This type of love is the most important long-term contribution parents can make to their child's growth and development, and will positively impact the marital relationship and family unit, and strengthen their communities. .

My Blueprint for Improving Parent-Child Relationships

1. In my parent-child relationship, I am specifically concerned that:

2. My usual response to this specific parent-child relationship concern includes one or more of the following: (Place a check mark beside the concern(s) you consider most unacceptable.)			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Analyzing	<input type="checkbox"/>	Criticizing
<input type="checkbox"/>	Getting angry	<input type="checkbox"/>	Giving orders and commands
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ignoring	<input type="checkbox"/>	Lecturing
<input type="checkbox"/>	Punishing	<input type="checkbox"/>	Removing privileges
<input type="checkbox"/>	Staring, nagging	<input type="checkbox"/>	Talking, explaining
<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	

Threatening, warning	Yelling
Other _____	

3. During the past week in my own parent/child relationship, I believe that I:

	<i>More</i>	<i>Less</i>	<i>About the Same</i>
Acted more calmly			
Acted instead of reacted			
Listened			
Acted firmly and kindly			
Encouraged rather than discouraged			
Communicated love and mutual respect			
Withdrew from conflict that didn't involve me			
Stimulated responsible decision making			
Enjoyed my parent-child relationship			
Took time for myself			
Helped children solve own problems			

4. The *atmosphere* in our family has changed to one of:

	<i>More</i>	<i>Less</i>	<i>About the Same</i>
Friendliness			
Cooperation			
Mutual respect			
Understanding			
Tension and strife			
Involvement			
Self-discipline			
Planning and working together			
Fun with family members			
Distrust			
Confusion			

5. This week I learned _____

6. I plan to change my parent-child behavior by _____

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