

BE THE PARENT

Those who believe that there is one way, or “God’s way,” to raise children will be disappointed by my book. I don’t believe there is a formula for success when it comes to raising healthy and happy children, but there are good practices and bad practices. There are things that generally work and things that generally do not work.

The key to being a good parent is to continually pursue better practices and attitudes. We need to be constantly seeking a better way—by praying for wisdom, talking with other devoted parents, reading books, observing happy families, and trying to get better at helping our kids grow up well. We need to become better lovers and leaders of our kids.

The real dangers are parents who do not examine their ways. The parents who simply react, blindly following their own parents’ ways, like the father who shuts down when he feels awkward or encounters conflict, a coping mechanism he picked up from his father. The father may not realize that he is giving the cold shoulder to his child, but it is a clamp on the parent-child relationship.

On the other hand, many parents' default mode is to do the opposite of what their parents would have done. I know a young mom whose parents used to vent every little frustration by pacing, yelling, ranting and raving; now she can't yell at her own kids. She is too calm too often, and her kids get away with murder.

These are examples of knee-jerk parenting. These moms and dads don't think first, then act. Instead, they react first, then regret later. They do what feels right in the moment instead of seeking wisdom beforehand. They do not consult wise friends, grandparents, experts, or counselors to examine the roots of their children's disconcerting behavior or attitudes. They just react with gut feelings and family traditions.

Parenting Is a Unique Relationship

Parenting is a unique relationship in which parents are authorized by law and by God to protect, provide, nurture, and discipline their children. It is a special relationship, one in which the parent is fully responsible for the child in the early years and only a little less responsible as the child grows older. It requires enormous amounts of time, energy, and money. It requires tough love and tender affection, and there are many shades of grey in the middle. Parenting is challenging because every situation is complicated and varies from past situations. What works today may not work tomorrow, and the stakes are high, because the "success" or "failure" of a child directly impacts the good or bad reputation of the parents. What other relationship comes close to that kind of responsibility and intimacy?

Every Parent is a Role Model

Some people are not at all comfortable with being role models for kids, but parents are the role models for their children for better or for worse, like it or not. Parenting, then, should be more about controlling ourselves than controlling anyone else. Perfection may be out of reach,

but striving for honesty and transparency will be incredibly helpful to children. Christopher DeVinck explains, “The more a parent points out things to their children, the more the children will take it upon themselves to select, identify, listen to, see, embrace. Life imitates life. Children do what adults do.”¹

Our kids, no matter the age, need us to be with them, explaining what makes one thing beautiful and another ugly, why one thing is important and the other trivial, and why this is quite right and that is all wrong. “With” is the key. A “with each other” relationship is what makes the world a better place, one person at a time, but this kind of relationship is not born of a few quick high-quality moments per day. It is born of quantity time and quality time. The sooner we embrace that, the better.

Parent Traps to Watch Out For

Many people fail to identify the kind of parent they want to be. They just do what seems best moment by moment, and the next thing they know, they find themselves regretting being too lenient, too strict, or too distant. Below are a few of the common traps that parents fall into.

The Friend

Perhaps the biggest trend in parenting is the role of best friend: supportive, kind, funny, sharing, generous, and cool. Being the best buddy trumps all other roles. Being cool and accepted by the child is paramount.

Cool parents are interested in all the details of the child’s social life, wanting to know about all the boyfriends and girlfriends. They want to make certain that the child is on the right team, wearing exactly the right clothes, and attending the right events. In some cases, they dress and talk like the kids, trying to impress them. As time goes on, children learn that these parents can be controlled socially.

The Judge

The oldest parenting role is that of supreme ruler. This is the old-school mentality that a parent must dish out memorable punishments for every crime. This mindset is all about behavior modification, and it depends on setting up just the right rules, punishments, and rewards. This parent is typically tough and rarely tender.

Judges take great pride—sometimes to the point of bragging—in how strict they are in meting out punishments for poor behavior or attitude. Judges are certain that their children will not respond to anything but spankings, hot sauce on the tongue, lengthy groundings, or whatever they think is most clever in their penal system. The child rarely, if ever, gets hugs or praise unless some very high standard is met. The judge is hard to please.

The Distant Uncle

Perhaps the most common role is the parent that provides a house, food, clothes, transportation, and cable TV, but does not engage with the child on a personal level. This parent is like an out-of-town uncle: nice, supportive, but uninvolved in the kid's daily life.

Uncles give good gifts at Christmas, are fun to be around on vacation, and are decent family members, but they do not know much about the inner being of the child. In fact, the child's teachers and coaches know more about the child than they do. The child wishes for more but cannot see a path to greater closeness because the parent will not engage in talk or play.

The Helicopter

The overly involved helicopter parent has gotten headlines lately. He is so concerned about the safety and success of the child that failure is not an option. He hovers around the child and makes sure that she never fails or gets hurt in any way. He runs interference against anything that might

upset the child. He is the rescuer. But in reality, he is an enabler. He is creating codependency.

The helicopter parent will do the child's homework if the child is crying about it. He will demand explanations from teachers for every low grade. Some will even fill out their teenagers' college applications. It is more important to the helicopter parent that his child be appreciative than independent, but the umbilical cord needs to be cut. The child needs to grow up to be independent, not codependent. An old Native American proverb says, "Do not prepare the path for the child. Prepare the child for the path and he will find his way."

Avoid the Extremes

There is no perfect balance, but a good balance can be crafted. Simply put, avoid the extremes. Do not be the most permissive, most cool, most involved, most strict, or most anything parent. Think of the Friend, the Judge, the Distant Uncle, and the Helicopter Parent as four corners of a boxing ring; you want to keep in the center of the ring, since the corners are where you get beaten. Extremes cause problems—usually in the form of resentful, rebellious teenagers.

Get Connected

It's no mystery that the best parents are the ones who are well connected with their children and offer support and guidance all along the way. They're the ones who care enough to say, "No, you can't do that, because I love you too much to let you settle for that kind of life." Good parenting is about being confident that you have a far higher calling than to just be a friend or dish out punishment. It is about being an authority who loves always and takes the time to guide and train a child to grow into an independent person. It is about being the one who plants love, truth, and hope into the mind of a child.

Ultimately, children are far less likely to engage in problem behaviors when they feel deeply loved, known, and respected by their parents. Author Danny Silk writes, “The goal isn’t to get them to clean their room; it is to strengthen the connection to your heart. We will deal with the room, but if we lose the connection, we’ve lost the big stuff. We may win the battle, but we’ve lost the war.”²

Parents, I invite you to lead your children wisely. Be the one who calls the shots, sets the agenda, and makes the tough choices. Be the strong one. Be the one who loves. Be the one who serves. Be the one who teaches. Be soft at some point every day, and yet be willing to be the tough cop when an authority is needed. Take pride in your attempts to be a strong, loving parent.

At times, parenting is the toughest job in the world, especially in those early years when it is so difficult to communicate with a hysterical three-year-old, or in the second toddlerhood of adolescence. And yet, once a healthy, loving, authoritative relationship is established, it is not so hard anymore. In fact, it is not only deeply satisfying, it can be fun.

All parents can be better than they once were. It is never too late.