

10 Parenting Gems

It's the most important job we will ever have – and no training? No manual? No mentoring? Here are ten insights I've gleaned from research, my clients and my children that you may want to keep near you. – *Matt Case, LPC*

1. Take care of yourself

Worn out, stressed or otherwise compromised parents are either too mean, too easy or just not present -- or all of the above! Our kids need us to be "on our game". Take time to recharge your batteries: get good sleep, get regular "quality time" with your spouse and friends, take a walk, take a bubble bath – whatever rejuvenates you and makes you feel whole and healthy, do it... and do it regularly. If not for yourself, for your children.

2. Model the values and behaviors you want to see in your children

This is perhaps the hardest – and most important – parenting strategy. Sorry, but "Do what I say – not what I do" just doesn't work. It won't matter if we tell our kids to treat people with respect, for example, if they see us disrespecting others. Try this one: "I will talk to you when your voice is as calm as mine."

3. Notice your children's strengths

No one likes the nagging parent – least of all you or I! Make an effort to notice out loud when your child has done well. No need for over-exaggerated praise; just a simple, "I see you cleared the table" is enough to reinforce that behavior and boost your relationship. Be careful not to say "Good job!" too often, as that can lead kids to become overly-oriented towards pleasing others and will leave them vulnerable in life.

4. Provide a steady diet of choices

Everyone needs to feel some control, and if they don't, they will (rightly) fight for it! Give your kids the experience of control within limits acceptable to you. In fact, you can smother them with control in the form of choices. These can range from, "Would you like to brush your teeth with your left or your right hand?" to "Would you like to go to the state university or get a job to help pay for that private college?"

5. Use empathy when your child is upset – even when upset with you!

Power struggles cannot escalate if we respond with empathy. Learn a few key phrases to use whenever your child is upset: "What a bummer.", "How sad", "I would hate that too." And be sure to deliver them with sincerity; sarcasm only undermines what you are trying to do here. You will be surprised to find how this simple response can dissipate power struggles and deepen your relationship with your child.

6. If you don't know what to do, give yourself time

There is no "super parent" who says the right thing every time. Cut yourself some slack. We usually have more time than we think to consider our reaction. Try this: "You know what? I don't know how to respond to that one. I'll have to think on it. But don't worry – I'll be sure to think of something fair." While you think it over (you might also consult other adults for ideas),

your child will be thinking it over too – which is exactly what we want them to do. When you return, your response will be more reasoned and your tone more calm (and effective).

When problems arise, ask yourself “Whose problem is this?”...

Parenting is hard enough without taking on more issues than we must. So before you do anything, ask yourself the question, “If nothing is done, who will be directly impacted?”

7. When it is their problem: Let life do the teaching

We all learn best through direct experience. Has anyone ever learned about fire without touching it at least once? Skinned knees, poor grades, getting wet in the rain – these are parents’ allies. Let them do the teaching. Bight your tongue and keep your “I-told-you-so’s” to yourself. They only serve to derail the lesson and direct your child’s attention towards you instead of their his or her bad decision (i.e. opportunity for learning). Instead, butt out or use empathy and join with your child in his/her pain – and avoid becoming the source of their struggles.

8. When it is your problem: Say what you will do (not what they must)

Controlling kids, if you haven’t noticed, is futile. But we can control ourselves and the things we allow. If your child has a habit of leaving her toys in the living room and won’t pick them up (our problem), try this: “No problem. Clean up only the toys you want to keep; the rest will be going to Goodwill.” If your son won’t do a chore, do it for him (or hire the neighbor kid) and pay yourself out of his allowance. If they won’t honor the rules about video games, don’t waste your breath, simply flip the circuit breaker, or remove the game (or at least the power cord) while they are at school. When they come home and throw a fit, use your empathy: “I am so sorry, you must be so upset. I know this is your game, but it’s my electricity, and I will be happy to let you use my electricity when I can trust that you will turn your game off at the times we have agreed upon.” Then walk away.

9. When you make a mistake, be kind to yourself

You will give in when you shouldn’t. You will yell and threaten to ground them for life when you shouldn’t. If you are hurtful to your child, you can apologize for the hurtful part without giving in on whatever the issue was that you were upset about. Apologizing both heals the relationship and models personal responsibility and good character.

10. Remember, some defiance is normal – and good!

A free democratic society requires citizens who are able to speak their mind and stand up for what they believe in. And for our children to withstand the influences of peer pressure, they have to learn to know what they think and to not be afraid to speak it. Our challenge is to nurture that independence and strength, while also teaching responsibility and thoughtfulness ... while trying to run a household! (Where is that manual?)

Note: Tips 4, 5, 7, 8 come courtesy of the Parenting With Love & Logic program.