

Plain Talk

About how to be a perfect parent



Did you know there's no such thing as a perfect parent?

And that no amount of attention to little Susy, and no amount of training, hugging, discipline, explaining, feeding, patience or even loving for little Johnny will ever push you or anyone else over into the "perfect" category?

You may be surprised, because mothers and fathers are forever being told the "right" way to raise children. Every toy manufacturer, TV personality, or grandmother in the grocery store seems to be an expert, and seems to be bent on giving advice to unsuspecting moms and dads. There are "right" toys to buy, and "right" cornflakes to feed your children. There's the "right" school to send them to and the recommended amount of time to spend with them every day.

It's no wonder that many women and men, especially first-time parents, are so concerned about doing everything "right." Their dream is to become perfect parents—of perfect children.

But somehow things never work out that way, and many parents wind up thinking that they've failed. They scold themselves. They feel guilty.

Little do they realize that they've cut out for themselves a job no human being could possibly accomplish. They are trying to fit their personalities and families into set roles—roles they've pieced together in their minds, consciously or not, from all the advice they've gotten. But trying to fit into someone else's role is like trying to fit into someone else's skin! Even if you could (and you can't), you would only succeed in making yourself—not to mention your children—miserable.

So what's a parent to do?

The wonderful truth is that down deep, each woman has her own unique and perfectly serviceable style of mothering, and every man his good way of being a father. Some like to play with their children, others like more time to themselves. Some spend their days working at home, some are in the paid work force. Some enjoy cooking and fussing, reading stories and nursery

rhymes, playing football and fishing with their children; others frankly prefer the company of adults. Some share the joys and trials of parenting, while others go it alone. Each must discover the mothering or fathering style that is appropriate, and that style will look like no one else's.

Finding your own parenting style is a matter of being honest with yourself. Take stock of your likes and dislikes, talents, panic buttons, sensitivities, circumstances. Then build on your strengths, and accept your limitations.

This means: Don't fight yourself! For example, if you really hate building blocks with your two-year-old daughter, don't do it. Instead, try finding a playmate she can do that with, then find some other way—that you enjoy—to be close to her, such as cuddling at bedtime.

Be relaxed about the fact that you will make some mistakes. All parents do. This relaxed attitude will reward you in two ways. First, you will be happier, and less likely to fly off the handle. Second, so will your child! Children often copy the moods and personality traits of their parents. For example, if you are tense and a perfectionist, you may be encouraging your child to be demanding, inhibited, or a worry-wart. On the other hand, if you are relaxed and accepting with yourself and others, chances are your child will be, too.

Here are some suggestions to help you as you discover your own good style of parenting:

1. **Don't think you have to have loving feelings toward your child all the time.** Loving is more than feelings—it's a commitment. The important thing is to give your child a general sense of security, and the knowledge that you will be there when needed.
2. **Don't be frightened when you have angry feelings toward your child.** That's normal—every parent that ever lived has had them! Just remember that having them isn't the same as acting on them.

3. **Don't feel you have to try your best all the time.** Expect that when you are tired, frustrated, sick, or angry, you just won't feel like being patient, listening carefully, or cooking a good meal. At those times, be especially kind to yourself! Get a babysitter, take a nap, get some exercise, go to a movie, soak in the bubble bath. If you are loving to yourself, so will you be to your child.
4. **You don't have to stop your child from making any mistakes.** Children, like adults, sometimes learn best through trial-and-error. (Of course, you'll have to stop Susy from jumping into deep water when she can't swim and Johnny from hitchhiking to New York.) Let your child know that you will be there for advice and help when needed, and that even if he or she does make a mistake, your love will be just as strong.
5. **Take care of yourself.** Being a parent is a demanding and difficult job. It is physically and emotionally draining, and you need to keep up your health, sleep and nutrition so you will be strong enough to handle it.
6. **Get a handle on stress.** Watch for the signs of stress: nervousness, exhaustion, irritability, frequent headaches or upset stomach. Do what you need to relax. Sometimes we neglect those common pleasures that make us "right with the world" again, such as sports, gardening, talking to a friend, or taking a vacation.
7. **Don't self-medicate with drugs or alcohol.** They only give you the false impression that you are escaping your problems. Meanwhile the problems continue, and probably get worse.
8. **Don't try to run a child-centered home.** Children feel more secure and less pressured when they know family life doesn't revolve around them. Part of their growing up is the gradual recognition that they are not the center of the world—not in school or with their friends, and later on, not in their jobs or communities. Don't give them the wrong impression now. Your family belongs to all of its members, including you. It's important for parents to have their own space, free time, opinions, friends and activities.
9. **If you are married, put a high priority on building and keeping a close and healthy relationship with your spouse.** This isn't easy when you have children. Try ar-

anging regular nights out together, occasional weekends or vacations alone, special efforts at tenderness and understanding. If you are happy in your relationship you are likely to be a happy parent.

10. **Don't feel that you have to "go it alone."** Keep up your friendships. Bring other adults into your life and your confidence. Find support in your neighborhood, church, special interest groups, or groups for parents.

Help is not far away.

Don't hesitate to get help if you ever think you're in a situation you can't handle.

For parent education and support groups in your area, call your County Extension Family Living Agent or Prevent Child Abuse Wisconsin, 211 S. Paterson St., Ste. 250, Madison, WI 53703, (608) 256-3374 or 1-800-CHILDREN. www.preventchildabusewi.org

You can call a parent helpline for assistance:

Milwaukee: (414) 671-0566
Madison: (608) 241-2221

If you want professional counseling, call a local social agency or county social services/human services department. If the agency you call doesn't offer the kind of service you want, ask to be referred somewhere else.

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