

**Be Your Child's Therapist:  
Easy Tips to Improving Child Behavior**  
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***"The way we talk to our children becomes their inner voice."***

***— Peggy O'Mara***

***"Children have more need of models than of critics."***

***— Joseph Joubert (1754-1822)***

***"It is easy to substitute our will for that of the child by means of suggestion or coercion; but when we have done this we have robbed him of his greatest right, the right to construct his own personality."***

***— Maria Montessori (1870-1952)***

Read on to learn how you as a parent can help treat your child's behavioral problems. ***YOU are your child's best therapist.*** How you parent your child on a daily basis has direct, long-term effects on his brain development, which affects how she thinks, feels, behaves and interacts with others.

The sooner you start, the better chance your child has at success. A child's brain is not fully developed at birth. It grows by 90 percent in the first five years of life and continues to develop until age 25 or so. This means that every day your child's brain is developing and growing. Through daily positive interactions with parents children learn crucial pro-social skills such as empathy and their brains develop in emotionally healthy ways. Once your child's brain development time is lost, it is lost forever. Don't put this information down to read later. Do it now! Start today!

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Many elements affect a child's personality, behavior and social skills, including events that happen in his life and his natural temperament. In this handout I'll explain some aspects that parents can control, including:

1. Attachment or bond between parent and child
2. Reducing fear or anxiety
3. Encouraging healthy brain development for cognitive and emotional health

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## **1. ATTACHMENT**

Learning about something called ATTACHMENT THEORY is key to becoming a better parent. Many adults were not raised using this concept, so don't be surprised if you are parenting in a way that is different from what is described below.

Attachment theory was developed by psychologist John Bowlby in the 1950s. Bowlby conducted research on how babies bonded with mothers and noted that it is a biological need for infants to **feel safe**. As social creatures, all humans are born looking toward our caregivers to protect us, feed us and nurture us. This ancient survival code is wired into our brains and actually is our greatest strength. Our ability to team up, cooperate and care for each other has led to the success of the human species. We continue to have this need to connect emotionally and physically with others throughout our lives.

Physiologically, our bodies evolved to expect CO-REGULATION from others. This means when we are experiencing an emotion, such as fear, we turn toward others to help us share and experience this feeling, to make meaning of it and to calm down. **Parents must be emotionally and physically present to help their children regulate their emotions.**

The absence of danger in an environment doesn't make people feel safe. It's receiving cues from others that triggers our sense of safety. Having a strong social engagement system that includes lots of safety cues is how we grow and develop and acquire resilience.

A 2014 study of 243 people born into poverty found that children who received "sensitive caregiving" in their first three years not only did better in academic tests in childhood, but had healthier relationships and greater academic attainment in their 30s. Parents who are sensitive caregivers "respond to their child's signals promptly and appropriately" and "provide a secure base" for children to explore the world.

A number of studies show that cold and distant parent-child relationships predispose a child to later depression, adult-onset diabetes and heart disease. Poor social skills, dysfunctional relationships and anxiety have all been linked to insecure attachment.

The relationships between parent and child is what is key to developing an emotionally and socially healthy child.

Research has segmented out different ATTACHMENT STYLES based on the mother's warmth and caring.

1. A baby who is SECURELY ATTACHED has learned that when she cries a parent responds quickly with warmth, care and reassurance. This teaches a baby that her needs will be addressed in a prompt manner and she will feel safe. A securely attached child believes her parent is available and responsive when she is in distress. The caregiver's presence helps the infant learn to regulate distress. Eventually, even if the parent isn't always available, the child will learn to self-regulate. Securely attached children grow into resilient, emotionally healthy adults who can feel trust and vulnerability in relationships and enjoy interdependent relationships.
2. INSECURELY ATTACHED children do not feel confident that a caregiver will be attuned and responsive to their needs. Insecure attachment can result if a child is raised by parents who themselves are insecurely attached, which may lead them to be harsh, critical, anxious, overly protective, emotionally distant or self-absorbed. It can also occur in cases of trauma, where a child is neglected, abused, harshly punished, witnesses violence or abuse in the home, is exposed to substance abuse, is exposed to crime, or just has a chaotic home environment.
  1. Insecure attachment is divided into two types:
    - ANXIOUS ATTACHMENT
    - AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT

For securely attached children, the thought is: "If I call, someone will come and that feels warm and safe." For insecurely attached children, relationships can become an emotional or physical danger: "If I call, no one will come (consistently)" or "If I call and they come, they are threatening."

This threat does not necessarily mean a physical threat. When parents dismiss a child's normal developmental needs, such as the need to explore or laugh or make loud noises, it can signal to a child that his "self" is not desirable. This disapproval by a parent can lead a child to develop feelings of self-rejection that can continue for a lifetime.

Children learn to reject themselves as a way of pleasing the parent to ensure feeling safe and protected. But as a result, the child's sense of self diminishes.

**Attachment occurs beginning at birth.**

Communication with your child began the moment you looked into his or her eyes and made a joyful connection without speaking a word. As a child grows, remember those early, happy times of being with your child and engaging back and forth with touch, smiles and snuggles. This same emotional connection or attachment is what makes relationships strong and what we want to encourage in your relationship with your child.

**A Parent's Emotional State Matters**

Children's emotional stability is typically gauged on their ability to attach to the parent. However, the parent-child relationship is a dyad, meaning there are two people involved. The parent has to be "inviting" to the child — calm, happy and emotionally secure. Being happy means being safe and emotionally open and it gives your child the message that, "I can handle you."

A key to healthy brain development is the availability of safe, attuned, responsive, predictable and nurturing relationships in childhood, especially before age 6.

**If a parent is more emotionally attuned to her own needs, perhaps due to experiencing feelings of anxiety or depression, then the child learns to defer his own needs. He learns not to depend on mom because she is busy with her own emotional needs.**

Many parents have anxiety related to being afraid of being judged for the child's misbehavior: "If my child throws a tantrum in church, others will think I am a bad parent and judge me." Children can be attuned to this fear and may react in fear themselves with escalated levels of dysregulation and anxiety, leading to more tantrums.

**Normal Stages of Attachment**

Recognize that all relationships will have times when they feel close (attunement), then rupture or "break," and can be repaired. Just because your child acts out, does not mean the child is "bad," that you are an ineffective parent, or that the relationship is a failure.

**1. Attunement Stage**

To encourage attunement, learn to match the emotional state of your child. Be "present" with your child, even if it is in a moment of contentment and pleasurable companionship. Accept that your child is a different person, with unique viewpoints and emotions.

Be curious about your child's thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. Don't insert your own opinions or thoughts.

Match your child's emotional state when talking to him (mirroring): If he is angry, put an angry expression on your face, use an angry tone of voice, and reflect back to him: "You are very angry at your sister for hitting you." This helps the child begin to identify, contain and regulate the expression of emotions. It will not make him more angry.

Research shows that babies who first experience mirroring, then experience comforting, have the best emotional health. In other words, don't immediately reassure a child everything will be OK. First respond to her feelings of fear or discomfort. When parents dismiss her feelings, she will learn to dismiss her self.

Parents must be able to regulate their own emotions and be available and responsive to the child. A parent's anxiety must not make a child's anxiety worse. **If you have feelings of rage, anxiety or disgust toward your child, your child will develop an impaired view of self and risk not being able to regulate his own emotions.**

Work to understand why your child's behavior "triggers" a reaction from you.

Make home a safe haven. Avoid "jumping on" kids when they come home from school with questions and nagging about homework or chores. Allow unscheduled time at home for kids to play and decompress. Find time to just "be" with children in a playful, relaxed way.

**Stop evaluating, fixing, and correcting. Start listening. When your child misbehaves use reflective listening and try to understand why the child is doing what he is doing. This also helps him understand his own motives and behaviors. (See additional handout.)**

## 2. Breaks

All relationships have conflict. Look at behavioral problems as small events, not major ruptures in the relationship.

**Parents must stop viewing a child's anger as "disrespectful," and view it as a normal relationship break.**

Look at your child anew. Assume he is most often doing the best he can. Children want to please you as a parent. So try to eliminate your negative assumptions — that your child is malicious and defiant. **Children become excessively angry and oppositional when they believe they are not loved or worthy of love.**

Understand that the power you have as a parent is NOT in lecturing and enforcing punishments to MAKE a child please you, but in engaging emotionally and empathically with your child so that he WANTS to please you. This gives parents influence over a child's behavior in positive ways, and teaches a child that healthy relationships are not about control, power or judgment.

Never threaten to withdraw your love or support as punishment. To a child, parental abandonment is the most severe trigger of fear — a primal fear of survival. By using the relationship as a negotiating tool you teach a child to use manipulation, control and emotional threats. You teach your child that relationships are unsafe and frightening.

Frequent breaks that do not get repaired cause mutual distancing or withdrawal by parent and child.

Do not look at repairs as "giving in," "loss of authority and power," "a forced apology," or a possibility for rejection by the other.

Parents who over-focus on correcting behaviors and under-focus on staying engaged emotionally with their child can have a negative influence on behavioral problems. Stop worrying so much about a child's "bad behavior," and focus on just loving him — this will lead to better behavior and a better relationship.

## 3. Repair

Children must feel the relationship can be rebuilt after a conflict, separation or mis-attunement.

To do this, speak with empathy not anger. Anger threatens relationships; empathy repairs relationships.

Soothe your child when he is in distress. To change problem behavior you have to recognize and calm the arousing emotions your child is experiencing. When your child becomes afraid (throws a tantrum, cries, gets angry), soothe first, discipline later. When a child is in the fear state, he is being controlled by his emotions. His "thinking brain" is not engaged. Disciplining him at that moment is a huge waste of time and often increases his distress. Comfort, hold, and calm him. Later, when his cognitive brain is available, talk about his emotional experience and behaviors in a teaching way, not a punishing way.

Don't worry that your affection is spoiling him. Spoiling is more about failing to learn that there are consequences to actions. Spoiling is not too much love.

Children left alone to manage their feelings have difficulty learning to accept and regulate those feelings. **Avoid the use of "time-out," which isolates a child when he is experiencing strong emotions and is most in need of comfort and reassurance.** One psychologist stated: "The two worst things for a mammal are isolation and restraint." And this is exactly what a timeout entails. Use time-outs only if you are not in control of your emotions, or if the child's shame is so intense that any contact with others makes it worse.

Anger should be treated as just another emotion, such as fear or sadness. Parents should share this emotional experience to show that it is not a time to be rejected, does not have to be faced alone, and is not something to be ashamed of.

The presence of calm, matter-of-fact caregivers when a child is “dysregulated” gives the child a safe place to turn to in her time of fear. Being with another human at this time and talking about and jointly experiencing the emotions teaches a child that relationships and emotions are safe and manageable.

Use physical touch. Firm touch calms anger, gentle touch calms an irritated or annoyed child, and caresses communicate love.

Children even into their teens need ongoing reassurance, comfort and love far more than they need nagging, criticizing and demeaning.

Discipline: Correct firmly, but quickly repair the relationship by recognizing the child's shame at misbehaving. Change your tone of voice to nurturing and give gentle direction on correct behaviors.

If you use shame and harsh discipline it leads to the child believing that the relationship itself is in danger. A conflict now represents more than a behavioral problem and becomes a threat to both the relationship and the sense of self.

“The way individuals connect with the people close to them reveals what they've learned from past relationships. The problems they have in establishing and maintaining bonds are informative. On the simplest level, these problems demonstrate whether they've learned that relationships are safe and people can be trusted, or that being close to others is dangerous and people are likely to end up hurting you.”  
 “Receiving Love,” by Harville Hendrix, PhD, and Helen LaKelly Hunt, PhD, 2004

When in doubt, parent with love, not anger or fear. When parents are warm and caring, kids feel safe and they are more likely to do the right thing. Children lie or steal or hit because they are in “fear mode.” In fear mode, we all care more about ourselves than other people. To get children to care and show empathy, they first have to be calm and safe. Only then can they love others and be compassionate.

Parents must model empathy and caring; children learn best by watching behavior, not by listening to what you say. When you model caring, kid feels this warmth and enjoys this feeling. They will then behave in ways that gets more people to give them this feeling of warmth, caring, and belonging. Caring is the only lesson to worry about teaching — good behavior will be the natural result.

Focus on establishing a warm, loving, caring, respectful relationship with your child. Don't get so busy lecturing and disciplining to teach about “bad behavior” that you do not teach or model warmth.

***When in doubt about a parenting approach ask yourself: “Will this make my child feel safe or scared?”***

*“Only when children feel right can they think clearly and act right.”*

*— Haim Ginott, “Between Parent and Child:”*

## **2. UNDERSTAND THE FEAR RESPONSE**

First, here are some basics on the fear response. All humans react the same way when scared. This “fear response” was originally used to respond to physical threat, such as a predator. Today, we mainly use it to respond to emotional or social threats, such as the fear of being shamed, teased, rejected, embarrassed or bullied. Reactions can include:

1. Avoidance (avoid the danger if possible, appease)
2. Freeze (vigilance or scanning)
3. Flight (submission or retreat)
4. Fight (dominance or attack)
5. Fold (helplessness, fainting, or fear paralysis once captured)

These fear responses trigger a cascade of changes throughout the body, preparing the body to quickly retreat or attack. If this fear response gets turned on constantly it results in permanent changes to the brain and its neurochemicals. With these brain changes, children become chronically overactive, impulsive, anxious, angry, hyper-sensitive, emotionally dysregulated, argumentative, and behave inappropriately. These behaviors and thought patterns can follow them into adulthood, resulting in depression, anxiety, panic attacks and substance abuse. Stress also has been directly linked to poor physical health, such as diabetes and heart disease, later in life.

Neuropsychology research shows some powerful results:

- When triggered into the “fight-or-flight” mode the brain produces cortisol. Overproduction of cortisol in children who are exposed to stress has now been shown to cause brain damage. Brain scans of children who have experienced significant trauma or long-term stress show black holes of inactivity in the brain especially in the areas of thinking, memory, impulse control and the emotions.
- Early stress causes an overflow of brain chemicals. This leads to abnormalities in the brain that permanently alter the ability to respond to stress appropriately. For example, during the fear response the brain decreases dopamine (a neurotransmitter) and increases adrenalin. Dopamine controls movement, comprehension and social behaviors. Is it any wonder that children with behavioral problems have uncontrollable movements, impulsivity, inability to follow directions, difficulty with making friends, and inappropriate social behaviors such as arguing, tantrums and fighting?
- Early trauma causes the threat system to be “sensitized” so that small threats cause an overreaction. The brain’s capacity to regulate mood, social interactions and abstract thinking are weakened. Over time the “thinking” regions of the brain get weaker.
- Those exposed to chronically stressful environments tend to exhibit memory deficits, poor concentration and have inadequate blood flow to the brain. The Franklin Institute suggests that chronic stress and depletion of a brain chemical called dopamine creates the internal body environment perfect for Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, heart disease and cancer, in addition to numerous autoimmune disorders that can be disabling.
- In anxious children a part of the brain called the hippocampus actually shrinks. This brain structure is important in memory processing and emotional reactions.
- One study directly linked poverty and stress to reduced adult brain functioning because early trauma can change the biology of the brain. Children learn to easily move to experiencing a state of fear and the thinking part of brain may not properly develop.

Fearful responses learned in childhood are especially powerful, because they couple the sense of terror with a sense of helplessness, leading a child to believe he or she is unable to respond to emotionally frightening situations. Trauma is most damaging when we feel helpless to respond with “fight-or-flight.”

### **What causes fear in a child?**

- living in a chaotic household with lots of yelling and arguing
- parents who are overly permissive or spoiling or who enforce rules inconsistently
- living with parents who are judgmental, and harsh not warm and accepting
- parents who “over-share” about their own fears and stresses
- frequent moves
- witnessing or experiencing physical or verbal abuse
- experiencing emotional neglect
- witnessing or experiencing sexual abuse
- witnessing or experiencing domestic violence
- loss of either or both parents due to divorce, abandonment or death
- inconsistent involvement by parent(s)
- foster care
- exposure to substance abusing caregivers
- living in a crime-ridden neighborhood
- poverty and insecurity
- exposure to crime or family member in jail
- family member with mental illness

- exposure to excessive violence in media
- accidents, natural disasters, fires
- witnessing suicide or murder

*But even if your child has not been exposed to trauma, if she is behaving with anger or anxiety or depression, she is really experiencing FEAR. Keep this perspective in mind when reacting to or disciplining your child. Work to have compassion for your child as SCARED or feeling UNSAFE, not just ANGRY.*

Is your child hyperactive, impulsive, easily distracted, aggressive, and argumentative? Or does she become overly clingy, become withdrawn, zone out at school, become “paralyzed with fear,” and act overly “pleasing” or “good.” Today, the first type of child may be labeled with ADHD or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. The second type we often ignore when they are younger, but in their pre-teen or teen years these children often have problems such as depression, substance abuse, and cutting or self-harm. However, these labels are not important. These children are really just both reacting normally to what they perceive are “threats” or “stress.” The trick is to get them to be less afraid and to relax.

“Parents must lead by example not by fear.” — Harper West

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### 3. UNDERSTAND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AND THE BRAIN

The brain is complicated, but what you need to know most is that the emotional, more “primitive,” regions of the brain develop first in childhood. These areas help the child learn the “fight-or-flight” response and social/emotional responses. The more advanced “thinking” parts of the brain develop much later -- some not until the teen years or early 20s.

***When disciplining, remember that a child's cognitive brain is not fully developed. Explaining, reasoning, or being logical are not very effective due to your child's limited thinking capabilities.***

The lack of cognitive development also makes infants and younger children more vulnerable to trauma than older children because they cannot use their cognitive brain function to help them understand and explain what has happened. Children need a much lower level of “trauma” to experience fear than adults do. What might not scare you at all may be very frightening to your child. This means that to a child's developing brain trauma may merely be parents who regularly:

- yell
- punish harshly
- criticize and demean
- threaten
- reject or isolate the child with “timeouts”
- become anxious or overly emotional
- over-share adult information
- or are physically or emotionally unavailable to comfort a child

**Development of the thinking part of the brain is dependent on the healthy development of the emotional part of the brain.** A child exposed to threat and fear early in life, even at a few months old, may have problems later with learning. A child exposed to responsive, soothing and warm caregivers can learn to self-soothe and to care for others (empathy).

The brain is a sponge starting at birth. Infants learn huge volumes of information including how to talk and walk. But this also means they can easily and quickly learn unhealthy things too. Proper brain development is based on genetics or inherited abilities, but also on what a child experiences. This includes everyday experiences starting from birth. How a parent responds to a baby (ignoring or comforting) teaches a lesson that can affect emotional development. Add up millions of daily interactions with caregivers and this forms a child's emotional, social, intellectual, physical, and behavioral health for life.

“So the way you listen to your child, play with him, cuddle him, comfort him, and treat him when he is being naughty are of real significance. It is these times with you as a parent that can stack the cards so heavily for him thriving or failing to thrive in later life. With emotionally responsive parenting, vital connections will form in his brain, enabling him to cope well with stress in later life; form fulfilling relationships; manage anger well; be kind and compassionate; have the will and motivation to follow his ambitions and his dreams; experience the deepest calm; and love intimately and in peace.” (*The Science of Parenting*, by Margot Sunderland, p 22)

The good news is that early support from you and a psychotherapist can help stop this damage and help the child develop normally.

## **What can YOU do?**

### **1. Get your own emotional house in order.**

*This can be the most difficult lesson for parents to read because it provokes difficult emotions such as shame. So please stay with me.*

“If your heart is a volcano, how shall you expect flowers to bloom?” wrote Khalil Gibran.

Parenting expert Heather Forbes, LCSW, says: “One of the best ways to make a change in your family is to make the change within yourself.”

Research shows that a part of our brain called the amygdala can actually sense the emotional states of other people. Children can intuitively sense fear. Even newborns are exquisitely attuned to their caregivers' emotional states. If parents are angry, anxious, or depressed, children pick up on this instantly and also become anxious and depressed.

**Parents who are struggling with insecurities and anxieties will not be truly attuned to the child's emotions and needs.** These insecurities signal that the parent is wrapped up in her own self-preservation and is in an emotional “fight-or-flight” survival mode. When self-absorbed, a parent can't notice and react to a child's fears, facial expressions, concerns and body language. The baby will wonder if you have enough attention left over to keep her safe. The child senses this lack of attention and becomes frightened. She learns that no one is there to soothe her when she gets distressed. The baby gets hyper-aroused and emotionally dysregulated. This sets a pattern for her emotional response to threats that can lead to behavioral problems later in childhood and into adulthood.

Even if your child is older, you can fix this situation. Become self-aware. Learn to manage your own nervous system and emotions through therapy, mindfulness meditation, and self-calming. Talk to a psychotherapist about your own childhood, how your parents raised you, and events that happened to you. Understand and manage your own motivations, fears, and insecurities before they harm your child.

You must heal your own trauma first to heal your child. If you cannot soothe yourself, how can you soothe your child? If you do not accept yourself, how can you accept your child? If you are not compassionate toward yourself, how can you be compassionate toward your child?

Be the best person you can be so you can be the best parent possible.

Heather Forbes, LCSW, says: “Parenting is governed by your confidence, inner strength, and love for yourself.” Don't equate your worth as a parent or person with your child's behavior.

***Bottom line: To calm a frightened child, you must first calm yourself.***

***Recognize this important fact: If you don't step up and take responsibility for your effect on your child due to your behaviors, beliefs and actions, then she learns the shaming lesson that SHE is to blame. Is that the lesson you want to impart on your child's heart and mind?***

### **2. Be tuned in to the emotional state of your child.**

Can you tell if your child is sad, mad, or glad? A caregiver's emotional attunement to a child's emotional state is key to letting the child feel safe, understood and respected. If you are too busy, too caught up in your own emotional problems, or too irritated to recognize and respond to your child, the child learns his emotional needs are not important.

Learn your child's emotional states and expressions and be able to handle them and respond to them. Ignoring a child's emotional signals is actually a type of chronic trauma. Repeated, patterned caregiving responsiveness teaches child that the world is safe, predictable, and manageable. Unpredictable, irrational, inconsistent, angry parents teach the opposite, which triggers the fear response. Without a feeling of safety in relationship with parents, children learn that relationships are threatening, setting them up for a lifetime of anxiety, depression, isolation and lack of trust in others.

### **3. Be a “pack leader parent.”**

I have written a book called “Pack Leader Psychology” with a couple of chapters on parenting. Since safety is the number one need of children, parents must act with calm confidence to signal safety to the family. We know that all ages of people can read very small changes in facial expression, body language, posture and vocal tone. This can be communicated in very small ways — even a raised eyebrow or pursed lips can be powerful communication.

The definition of leadership is the ability to influence others. Are you being a leader or a follower with your child?

I even notice leadership differences in our waiting room. I see parents come into the waiting room where a 10-year-old child is seated and stand in front of the child saying: “It's time to go, give me your tablet, get your coat, come on now, we've got to go, get up, listen to me, we really have to go...” As the child sits there playing on the tablet and ignoring the parent. Who is in charge here?

Compare this to a pack leader parent who strides into the waiting room, announces in a calm, cheerful voice: “It's time to go.” And keeps right on walking. Who is in charge here?

Notice how you may subtly and unthinkingly put the child in charge. This may feel “nice” and “loving” but it is not. Remember that children need safety above all else. A child who is in charge feels anxious and unsafe, because he knows that he is not suited to being the leader.

As a parent, you need to be able to influence your child, preferably in the calmest, most effective way possible. If you yell and nag with no effect, it seems clear that you have little influence on your child. By yelling you may be trying to control, but it is actually a sign that you are angry and out of control — not exactly influential.

Do your child a favor: Be a leader.

### **4. Teach warmth and compassion.**

Research proves that children are born with strong pro-social emotions. Even infants cry when they see that other children are sad or hurt. They share, they laugh and love and connect. So why do parents worry so much that kids will turn out to be “bad?” Why do parents get so upset when a child lies or does something wrong? Even adults lie, misbehave and make mistakes, so maybe parents should lighten up about these occasional behaviors in their children.

In fact, all this focus on “bad” behavior tells the child he is bad. Do people who feel shameful about themselves act with love, compassion and caring toward others? Not usually. The people with the lowest self-worth and self-compassion turn into sociopaths. People who lack empathy for self or others have no problem committing crimes and being cruel.

**The first goal of parenting should be to teach caring and compassion. Worry less about whether your kids will be good and be more accepting of them as naturally good.**

The skills of empathy and sympathy are taught through the early relationships we have with parents and caregivers.

Stop lecturing about doing the right thing. Just model warmth, compassion, love and caring in your actions, your tone of voice and your words. Praise your children and praise others in front of your children. Be happy and relaxed around your child. Let your heart warm when you are with your child. Smile, hug, give praise.

**A child's feeling of joy in relationship to a parent is essential for him to develop the capacity to care, to love, to have a moral conscience, to have empathy for others, and to regulate his emotions.**

You do not have to be constantly worried about disciplining and correcting the child. If you are warm and caring it is likely this alone will help him develop a good moral conscience. Then he will behave without you yelling at him. If you yell at and shame him, he will have a harder time developing a good moral conscience. Relax and just be with your child in a loving, caring way. Not every moment needs to be a learning lesson.

Being warm and loving to a child improves his self-worth and self-acceptance. With these feelings he can be empathic toward others, love, and have healthy relationships. With caring as a foundation, you don't need to worry if he will lie, cheat or steal.

#### **5. Recognize your child's history of trauma.**

It can be painful to admit, but it is necessary to examine. Did your child experience any of the traumas mentioned and at what age? Share this with your child's therapist. The age at which your child was exposed to a single episode of trauma or chronic trauma helps a therapist plan treatment.

#### **6. Become a sensory detective.**

Figure out what is triggering your child's fear response. Is it something he touches, hears, or smells? A room, situation, time of day, a single person or large crowds? Share this with your child's therapist. Help your child learn to stop over-reacting to this trigger.

#### **7. Soothe your child when he is in distress.**

When a child is distressed and throwing a tantrum, he needs your help to calm down. It may seem counter-intuitive, but hug and comfort him at these times. Do not react with anger or harsh punishment. He is scared, not "being bad."

"With consistently emotionally responsive parenting like this, your child's frontal lobes will start to develop essential brain pathways that will, over time, enable him to calm these alarm states in his lower brain." "Not helping a child with his 'big' feelings can mean that his brain's key response systems are in danger of being permanently wired as 'over-reactive.'" ("The Science of Parenting," by Margot Sunderland, pp. 24 and 29)

When your child becomes afraid (throws a tantrum, cries, gets angry), **soothe first, discipline later**. When a child is in the fear state, he is being controlled by his emotions. His thinking brain is not engaged. Disciplining him at that moment is a huge waste of time. Comfort, hold, and calm him. Later, when his cognitive brain is available, talk about his emotional experience and behaviors in a teaching way, not a punishing way.

Don't worry that your affection is spoiling him. Spoiling is more about failing to learn that there are consequences to actions. Spoiling is not caused by too much love. (That's a topic for another lesson!)

Avoid the use of "time-out", which isolates a child when he is experiencing strong emotions and is most in need of comfort and reassurance. Anger should be treated as just another emotion, such as fear or sadness. Parents should share this emotional experience to show that the child is not rejected when he becomes emotions, does not have to face this scary experience alone, and that emotions are not something to be ashamed of.

Use reflective listening when a child is distressed. Repeat back to her what she is saying, feeling, or expressing: "You are so very mad at mommy for making you go to bed." "You look very upset about not getting to go to the park."

#### **8. Recognize that trauma creates fear which leads to anger.**

Children often express fear or shame through anger. Recognize that children are not always trying to be willfully disobedient. Something is triggering a fear, which then causes an angry or oppositional response.

Be aware that refusal to do what adults ask may not be defiance, but fear. Just as deer freeze in the headlights of a car, children who are in fear mode may not "fight-or-flight" but may freeze. Their cognitive brain stops working and they are in survival mode.

### **9. Look at what you are doing to create fear.**

This one is also hard for parents to hear. Think about your behaviors from the framework of fear. If you were a scared, insecure child how would you react to a parent yelling, shaming, hitting or threatening? What can you do to increase the relaxation and calm in the household?

Be aware that your anger creates what is called a "double bind" for a child and this in itself is very stressful. When your child is afraid, his brain tells him to go to you for soothing. But when you are a source of terror this gives your child confusing messages and leads to significant problems in brain and behavioral development.

***When in doubt about your behavior as a parent think: "Is this making my kid feel safe or scared?"***

### **10. Look at how you are modeling self-regulation.**

Kids learn what they see. If parents can't regulate themselves regarding anger, overeating, under-exercising, disregarding laws and rules, lying, or constant video gaming or TV use, then don't expect kids to regulate themselves. Model your own self-control every day to your child.

Model a calm, rational, thoughtful response to stressful situations. Remember that getting angry only teaches a child:

- you are weak and can't control your emotions
- you are unpredictable and not stable and steady
- anger and lashing out are appropriate responses in relationships
- he is not worthy of loving, accepting relationships
- you are not someone he can turn to for soothing when he is distress
- treating others with disrespect is OK

Disciplining with anger models anger as a solution to conflict. It also teaches the child to respond to an angry attack with either submission or dominance. This can lead to abusive, power-based relationships in the future. Instead, a lack of emotional reactivity to a child's anger shows that you are in control of yourself. She cannot manipulate you into a reaction. Every time you react with emotions to a child's emotions, the child learns she can provoke an emotional response in others. She learns that her emotions can be used to dominate, manipulate, and control.

Anger and yelling also teach a child that you as a parent are not safe, but are actually a threat. Would you turn to someone for reassurance and comfort if you felt that person wasn't safe?

Remember that the brain of your child will become what it is exposed to. If you want your child to be kind, you must be kind. If you want your child to be good at self-regulation and not lose his temper, then you can't lose your temper.

And don't forget that even babies can feel and learn about emotional expression. Don't yell just because it's "only the baby" in the room.

### **11. Do not spank.**

Research on 7,000 families in 32 countries over 40 years (solid stuff!) shows that spanking promotes antisocial behavior and slows mental development. Clearly, spanking can trigger the fear response.

Spanking children is associated with:

- poor mental development
- weaker emotional ties between parents and children
- increased risk the child will hit other children
- increased risk the child will later hit their partner
- increased mental health problems

This article reports on how spanking reduces cognitive function (makes kids dumber!): "Spanking the grey matter out of our children." <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/23/health/effects-spanking-brain/index.html>

**12. Increase the calm and relaxation in the home whenever possible.**

Is a TV or video game on 24/7 at your house? Turn them off, especially during family meals. Is there constant yelling and uproar? Instead, promote long stretches of quiet time at home. Sit together quietly and talk. Read books together with young kids. With older kids, have family book reading time as a group. Play board games, jigsaw puzzles or card games. Take quiet walks in the woods or sit in the yard.

Calming can include sensory comforts like soothing music, the touch of a blanket, snuggling with a favorite toy, massage, and hugs.

Best: Learn to meditate together!

**13. Increase the use of exercise, rhythm and movement in your child's life.**

Daily physical activity is a REQUIREMENT for children with ADHD, anxiety or depression. Exercise wears them out and calms them down. Kids who exercise sleep better, which improves school performance.

Research shows exercise decreases depression and anxiety. Make exercise a family affair. (Remember: Model good behavior!)

If you feel kids should not play outside in your neighborhood for safety reasons, be creative. Make a race out of running each piece of clean clothing up the stairs. Have everyone do 50 jumping jacks for each commercial break on TV time. Turn on some music and dance together for 15 minutes. Teach rhythm by tapping along to music in the car, or humming and singing as a family while doing chores. Make up songs and tunes. Skipping, jumping rope, hopscotch and clapping games used to be common place in playgrounds. Research shows that body movements, especially those using rhythm, help teach a child to self-soothe and regulate his emotions.

Check out this excellent article on why movement is important to brain development and learning: The Real Reason Why Kids Fidget:

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/angela-hanscom/the-real-reason-why-kids-fidget\\_b\\_5586265.html?ncid=fcbkinkushpmsg00000063](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/angela-hanscom/the-real-reason-why-kids-fidget_b_5586265.html?ncid=fcbkinkushpmsg00000063)

**14. Help your child develop healthy relationships with stable, positive adults.**

What heals trauma is connecting to other humans who are kind, sensitive, attuned, comforting and supportive. Look toward a religious organization, a school, a mentoring program or relatives to establish stable, trusted relationships for the child to explore relationships.

**15. Stop exposure to violent media and reduce all media.**

Research is very clearly proving that exposure to violent TV, movies and video games is damaging, especially at young ages. Ask yourself if being exposed to fast-action games with brain-eating zombies is increasing or decreasing a child's fear. (The answer is... Increasing!) Video exposure increases the levels of dopamine, a pleasure-seeking neurochemical in the brain, leading people to continually seek more and more — an addictive response just like drugs.

Kids who throw too many tantrums, get angry easily, and are hyperactive, often don't understand the effect their behavior has on others. Remember that the brain is developing every day for children, including large parts of the brain that help them with personal relationships. To get better, these parts of the brain have to be used by children at all ages so that they learn how to be social, how to be good friends, how to interact with others, and how to care and cooperate and empathize.

Kids learn best by interacting with other people in play or social learning. Children need lots of social interactions with a large number of all ages of people. They don't need more time with computers. Staring at a screen is not an interactive social experience. And once that developmental time is lost, it is lost forever.

**16. Put down that gadget.**

Children learn social and emotional skills by looking into the eyes of a parent and feeling the love and attention and by interacting, even if it is with singing a silly song. If you are buried in your cell phone, how can these important interactions occur? Put down your device. Look at your child. Notice her emotions, talk to her, sing to her, laugh with her, tickle her. Be warm, not distracted and distant.

<http://www.nbcnews.com/health/parenting/put-down-cellphone-study-finds-parents-distracted-devices-n47431>

### **17. Get kids to talk about their feelings.**

Children exposed to trauma before age 3 generally do not have the ability to remember or talk about these experiences because they were “pre-verbal.” But you can still encourage them to label and describe their feelings. Use “reflective listening” as often as you can. (See handout.) If a parent is empathic and validating of a child's experience, the child learns that her internal feelings are not overwhelming, threatening or confusing, but are safe to explore. She can then regulate these feelings, rather than act out, throw tantrums and become anxious.

### **18. Stop forcing kids to be submissive.**

Babies are hard-wired by evolution to crave the safety and protection of parents. Kids want the approval of parents and will actually do a lot to avoid their disapproval. Especially at a young age, they really do not want to anger you. Kids are naturally submissive to parents to varying degrees depending on temperament. Parents generally do not have to force or teach kids to seek parental approval because this happens naturally. In fact, when parents push too hard to demand submission, rebellion or oppositional behavior can occur. Constant or abnormally intense fighting can result when the child feels she has no other alternative. Her submission to the parents has not worked and acceptance is never forthcoming. So she fights back, because fighting is the only remaining choice for her to protect herself.

### **19. Beware of your own need for approval.**

Humans are social creatures and need acceptance by others. However, as a parent you should not look to your children for acceptance. You are not their friend. This fundamental attitude shift is essential. If you want your child's approval, you will be less likely to enforce consequences or be firm. Instead, you will use negotiation, permissiveness, and capitulation. This models for your child that it is ok to use these in relationships.

### **20. Teach respectful behavior.**

Usually the only household rule needed is the “Golden Rule” which essentially says: “Treat others with respect and they will treat you with respect.”

When an older child is behaving disrespectfully to you, call that out right away. Label the behaviors for what they are. Do so calmly and firmly. State: “You are behaving disrespectfully to me. I will not discuss this with you now.” This is called a “process” statement. You are pointing out HOW the child is talking, not what he is talking about (“content”). Many family communication styles involve endless arguments about content: “Can I stay out past 10 pm,” etc. These discussions are necessary, but when the child is disrespectful, do not continue arguing about content. Stop and point out the “process” errors. Some parents give up in frustration because they have fought for years over “content.” It may seem easier to give up, but you will pay the price in increased disrespect and maybe even significant misbehaviors later on. Regain power by discussing “process” and teaching respectful behavior.

Model respectful behavior by having a rule of “No put-downs or namecalling of any kind.” for your home. No adult or sibling is allowed to name call or bully others. This negativity fuels stress and resentment and lowers self-worth. When you say things like: “You never get ready on time,” be aware of how this labels the child in a negative way.

### **21. Discipline equals education.**

Stop thinking of discipline as punishment. Think of it as education. (The word “discipline” is based on the Greek word “disciple,” meaning “learner.”) Children will sense the difference. Punishment is felt as a shaming “attack” so the child tends to respond with lashing out at others or inward at himself in self-shaming. Education is not so emotionally threatening. You are guiding your child in the correct behaviors as a way to help the child live a happy, socially healthy, emotionally healthy life.

### **22. Think long term.**

It may seem easy to give in to a tantrum, screaming match or silent sulking. But you are not doing your child a favor by allowing misbehavior to continue. Think about what you are teaching your child: That if he

itches a fit he gets his way. In 10 years, how will his friends, colleagues, and spouses view your child's behavior?

You are actually doing your child a favor by being firm, consistent, and patient, no matter how much he misbehaves. Some parents may say that they don't care if they are disrespected, they would rather have peace. But even if you are willing to be disrespected (which you should not be!), it is not doing the right thing for the child to allow him to disrespect you. This teaches misbehaviors that he will carry into adult life. Parents do the right thing for the child, no matter the emotional cost to the adult. Plus, a child who learns to behave respectfully toward others will be more able to respect and love himself.

### **23. Stop talking.**

Words may seem powerful but they are not. Endless arguing, explaining, nagging, and lecturing are a sign the child has power over you and controls the conversation. There are age-appropriate times and situations for you to explain your choices and disciplines. But most young children lack the cognitive brain development to understand adult logic. Plus: Explaining weakens parental power. Stop using the word "because." "Eat your spinach because the doctor said it is good for you." This invokes the power of other authority figures, rather than relying on your power alone.

Act, don't talk. Use your physical presence to signal your serious intent. (This does NOT mean corporal punishment or physical abuse or spanking.) If you have to discipline, do not yell across the house. Get up and go to the child. Stand tall and assertively in front of him. Be very calm and firm. Tell the child ONCE what you expect. Then with a serious, calm expression look directly at him and do not break eye contact. Assertive body language and direct eye contact are more powerful communicators than an avalanche of words, especially with young children.

### **24. Be consistent.**

Children want limits and rules. If they protest against rules it is because they are calling out for calm, firm leadership, not less discipline. Giving in shows you do not have power. Be fair about applying rules and consequences that are age-appropriate. For example, grounding for a week for one dirty dish in the sink is too harsh.

### **25. Stop negotiating.**

Terrorists and gangsters use coercion, extortion, and bribery. Why should parents encourage this skill in children? If you use coercion to control your child, the child learns to control parents and others coercively. There are age-appropriate times to listen to your child and mutually agree on expected behaviors and consequences. But these must be discussed ahead of time. Avoid deals like: "If you do X, I'll give you Y." This sets the child up to be in control of the situation and have power over you. He gets to choose NOT to do X if he wants to! External rewards also teach the child to look to others for approval and motivation. Intrinsic self-motivation is the skill that should be taught. Expect good behavior as a natural, respectful parent-child relationship. This is fundamentally non-negotiable.

- Parents should speak in clear, firm statements, not always ask questions. Don't say: "Let's go to the store, ok?" Tell, don't ask!
- Don't say, "WE have to do the dishes," if you mean, "YOU have to do the dishes."
- Don't offer bribes for behavior. Children should behave because you tell them to, not because there is an external reward. This does not teach internal self-regulation and self-motivation.
- Don't explain every decision you make. This puts the child in charge.
- Speak and move on. Don't stand and wait for a child's response. Act AS IF he is going to obey. Don't want for his refusal or negotiation.
- There is no rule that says you have to continue a conversation with an oppositional child. Walk away, change the topic, start singing, go on about your business. If you stand and wait for a response to your directive, it implies a response is needed.

**26. Don't be afraid to have your child experience disappointments.**

Disappointments are part of life. If you are afraid to have your child experience disappointments, you are only teaching him a fairytale. He will never learn to manage disappointments and to self-soothe. We all will experience heartaches and difficult situations. It is how resilient we are in dealing with these disappointments that is important.

Being overly concerned that your child is always happy also gives away your power because he learns you will cater to all his needs. Your calm acceptance of distressing situations will communicate that he should also just accept things and move on. It teaches him to handle distress well.

**27. Stop practicing "child-olatry."**

"Child-olatry" is putting your child at the center of every thought, worry, concern and situation. While a child's welfare should be a priority, if he senses that he rules the roost, it means parents don't have power. Adults should be the sun and the child should be a planet that circles the sun, not the other way around. Solving this mainly involves an attitude shift: Adults are the most important people in the room, not the children. Stop including children in every conversation. Stop asking the child what he wants constantly; make a decision yourself. Stop waiting on the child or catering to the child's every whim. Make the child do chores and help out. Children should not interrupt adults, should not join in every adult activity and conversation, and should generally be "seen and not heard" when it is a mixed activity.

While this may seem hurtful, go back to the "fear" response. Is putting the child in charge making the child feel safe or scared? Even though children may act like they want to be in charge, they instinctively know that it isn't the way it should be. If they start running the show, they know deep down that this is a frightening situation because they lack the competence to really be in charge. As a result, they may begin to misbehave in ways that signal their anxiety.

**28. Never let 'em see you sweat.**

Too many parents today are overly verbal and share too much about adult issues. Whether it is about your physical health, your emotional fears, financial concerns, disagreements with relatives or problems at work, the general rule is -- stop talking! Over-sharing can be "too much information" for children and can cause a fear response. This is especially true if you come across looking overwhelmed and unable to cope, which is a sign of weakness to the child. Never let 'em see you sweat. Children need to experience a feeling of safety and consistency, not upheaval, drama and uncertainty. Again, ask yourself if your behavior is increasing or decreasing an environment of fear.

Don't show signs of weakness by saying things like, "You are wearing me out," "You are too much for me," "I can't handle this," etc. Protecting children from fear is the job of a parent.

**29. Be wary of promoting competition.**

Humans are social creatures who thrive emotionally when we are supportive, cooperative and caring toward each other. If parents put excessive pressure on kids to achieve and compete through sports or academics, this throws the child into a threat-filled environment she is not designed or ready for. Pressure to compete and succeed promotes individualism, not altruism, empathy, and generosity. This can cause kids to feel depressed, isolated and stressed. They begin to develop low self-esteem because they believe they can never be good enough. It can also lead them to be overly focused on pleasing others and meeting their expectations, which can lead to a submissive/dominant relationship pattern later in life.

**30. Keep learning.**

Read parenting books, observe what you do as a parent, observe your child's reactions. Parenting is hard work, so don't expect to know everything you need to know. We used to have an extended "tribe" of people to help us raise our kids, but today that isn't always true. Look to others for answers and advice. (See attached list of resources.)

### School & ADHD Kids

When humans are calm, we can use the cortex or “thinking” part of the brain. We can solve problems, think abstractly, remember, and be rational.

When we are threatened, we react with the lower regions of the brain that handle the “fight-or-flight” response. Fear makes us smarter for survival, but dumber about complex thinking, learning, and memory tasks.

You’ve learned that stress causes the “thinking” regions of the brain to get weaker over time, even causing permanent brain damage, memory and attention problems, and inability to focus.

Kids need to feel safe to learn. Chronic stress causes kids to be very concerned about survival. They worry only about themselves. This natural survival strategy creates difficult behaviors in groups. Kids trapped in the fear response may be overly focused on the emotional state of the teacher or children around them. This makes it hard to focus on the lesson being taught. They may lack remorse and empathy and be violent toward others because they are in a self-protective mode. This makes getting along with other kids difficult and causes bullying and isolation. This then adds a sense of social rejection to school, which can also trigger the fear response.

Work with your child’s school to reduce stress and increase calm in the classroom.

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### Recommended Resources:

RECOMMENDED: Video: Attachment Theory and Emotional Regulation:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pignLj\\_bPsE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pignLj_bPsE)

Video on Infant and Adult Attachment with Sue Johnson and Ed Tronick:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0IYQGXiJxw>

[www.handinhandparenting.org](http://www.handinhandparenting.org)

Also a great video for parents to help understand your parenting style and how it affects your child: “Trauma, Brain & Relationship: Helping Children Heal”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYyEEMIMMb0>

*Between Parent and Child*, by Dr. Haim G. Ginott, Revised Edition. Great specific tips to foster connection, communication, compassion, and emotional regulation using words.

*Brain-Based Parenting, The Neuroscience of Caregiving for Healthy Attachment*, Daniel A. Hughes & Jonathan Baylin

*Beyond Timeouts*, Beth Grosshans, PhD: Good tips on calming extremely oppositional children.

**RECOMMENDED: *Parenting from the Inside Out: How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive* 10th Anniversary Edition, by Daniel J. Siegel, MD, and Mary Hartzell:**

**Helps parents understand themselves and how they were parented as a way of improving their relationship with their child.**

*Time-In Parenting*, by Otto Weininger

*Unconditional Parenting*, Alfie Kohn

**RECOMMENDED: *The Science of Parenting*, by Margot Sunderland. AN ABSOLUTE MUST, ESPECIALLY FOR NEW PARENTS. Very easy to read. Based on the latest neuroscience about the need for comfort and caring. Has development information for all ages, activities to do with kids, and lots of good information on how to handle behavioral problems such as tantrums.**

*Pack Leader Psychology*, by Harper West. Includes chapters specifically on being a calm, firm leader to your child based on common-sense concepts used throughout the animal world.

Article on the damage of electronics use on child development: <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/06/screen-addiction-is-taking-a-toll-on-children/?ref=health&r=0>

If your child has been exposed to domestic violence, watch this terrific video on YouTube:

First Impressions: Exposure to Violence and a Child's Developing Brain

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4zP50tEad0&list=FLf4ZUgIXyRcUNLuhimA5mA>

For parents who rush, rush, rush, here is a heartwarming lesson in slowing down with kids:

<http://brightside.me/article/the-day-i-stopped-saying-hurry-up-20655/>

If you feel inadequate as a parent:

[https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/anger-in-the-age-entitlement/201508/why-parents-really-get-angry-their-kids?utm\\_source=FacebookPost&utm\\_medium=FBPost&utm\\_campaign=FBPost](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/anger-in-the-age-entitlement/201508/why-parents-really-get-angry-their-kids?utm_source=FacebookPost&utm_medium=FBPost&utm_campaign=FBPost)

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[www.PackLeaderPsychology.com](http://www.PackLeaderPsychology.com)

[www.SelfAcceptancePsychology.com](http://www.SelfAcceptancePsychology.com)