

Parent-Child Relationships – Parents

Information from...

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

“I want so much to be a good parent.”
“I want my child to succeed in life.”
These anxious remarks are a common refrain among parents. All too often, parents are afraid of making a mistake that could mark their child or fear “leaving out” something important. But let’s make one thing clear right from the start: parenting is something you learn as you go along. Trusting your basic common sense and your instincts, and talking things over with others, is still the best way to go. Having faults does not disqualify you from being a good parent – we all have our strengths and weaknesses. After all, to err is human, but to be perfect is impossible.

These two fact sheets on parent-child relationships are aimed at giving you a helping hand. Although they are intended mainly for parents of school-aged children, the information is general enough to be of equal benefit to

parents of younger children. The first sheet deals with children’s development and needs, while the second focusses on the role of the parent and on ways of facilitating the parent-child relationship.

1. Being A Parent

All parents hope that their child will grow up to be a happy, independent adult. But how do parents help this come about? Therein lies the challenge. You cannot anticipate every situation your child will have to face, but you can show him from a very early age how to develop good judgment by offering him guidance: “How will you go about doing that? Do you want some help?”¹

The starting point is creating an affective relationship with him and seeing him for what he is. Your way of

thinking and doing things should also provide him with a clear direction. Finally, much can be gained from taking a long, hard look at the question: "What do I want for my child?".

2. Knowing Yourself

Parents are, first and foremost, people. Many of the experiences we share with our children bring out our good points, our bad points, our ways of dealing with things, our needs and our personal history.

If we take the time to ask ourselves some questions, we will be able to see ourselves more clearly and to change our approach, if need be. Do I take care of myself? Do I respect myself? Are my actions fuelled by my emotions (anger, sadness...)? Am I reacting against how my parents brought me up? Am I acting in the best interests of my child or for my own benefit? What do I want? These questions help us identify the model that we offer our children, a model that influences them considerably.²

It is important to note, however, that the fact that an adult was traumatized, neglected or physically abused as a child does not mean that he will be an abusive parent.³ Parents who are sensitive to what their children are experiencing find ways to develop good relationships with them.

3. Establishing Affective Relationships

Playing with your child, sharing in his activities, having fun with him – these are all ways of establishing an affective relationship with him. Here are some other ways:

- *Put yourself in your child's shoes* in order to learn what he may be feeling in a given situation. To do this, think back to how you would have felt in that situation when you were a child.⁴
- *Be an active listener.* Be attentive to what your child is experiencing by getting him to express his needs and feelings. Ask him questions so that you can think things through together, and not so that you can simply reject what he has to say.
- *Trust your child's abilities.* A challenge (within reason) can be stimulating. Mistakes can be due to a lack of maturity or something that has been improperly learned. Avoid questioning your child's motives.
- *Help your child learn without doing things for him.* Give him opportunities to experience success. When your child makes a mistake or suffers a setback, review the situation together to help him make better choices next time.

4. The Importance of Communication

Family communication should be kept simple. Discussions should not drag on forever. A five-to-ten-minute conversation is sufficient, even for a ten-year-old. Messages should be clear and non-contradictory. Your actions should reflect your words, and your words should be consistent with your gestures, body language and tone. This enables your child to feel confident and to grow up with a clear understanding of what is expected of him.

5. Parental Authority

Learning self-control

There are certain things you can do to help your child learn self-discipline:⁵

- learn more about your child by observing his behaviour;
- make sensible rules and stick to them;
- take the time to explain these rules;
- help your child choose behaviour appropriate to the situation;
- if you want your child to obey your rules, then follow them yourself;
- be fair and loving.

Teaching a child self-control requires a great deal of patience. It is a long road, and there will be setbacks. In order to successfully navigate this road, your child needs you to set an example.⁶ A Swedish study reports that disciplined parents who always act in accordance with their values do not have to use

pressure to have disciplined children. However, parents who demand discipline yet are incapable of self-discipline do not get any results.⁷

What if I lose my patience...

Certain situations can make us lose our patience. Try not to over-react or to put too much blame on yourself. To avoid “losing your cool”, try to recognize the warning signals, calmly tell your child what is happening and ask him to leave you alone.

But are spankings or other acts of violence so bad? A parent who punishes his child in this manner shows him that it is sometimes all right to:

- lose his self-control;
- hit someone, even if that someone is smaller than him.

The parent may win peace and quiet or obedience temporarily, but he will lose in the long run. There is no educational value in using violence, because violence does not teach the child what he should have done in a given situation. On the contrary, the child becomes bitter and aggressive, and looks for ways to get even.

Reward, punishment and consequences^{8, 9, 10}

Reward

There is every indication that rewarding a child for his good behaviour and sensible decisions is still the best way to raise him. This

encourages him to continue in that vein. There are very simple ways of rewarding a child: a kind word, a smile, an affectionate remark, a word of encouragement, a caress...

Punishment

Another way of eliminating a certain mode of behaviour is to ignore it. Eventually, your child will stop repeating this behaviour (such as whining) if you stop paying attention to it. Of course, you should avoid this tactic if it endangers his safety or that of another child, or if he takes advantage of your indifference.

Punishment should not always be ruled out. In certain situations (such as when a child persists in acting in an unacceptable or dangerous manner), punishment is necessary. It should not, however, be administered in a climate of rancour, vengeance or aggressiveness, for this will leave the child bitter, frustrated and full of resentment. For punishment to be effective, a warm relationship must exist between the parent and child.

Asking a child who has misbehaved to leave the room in order to calm down and reflect on his actions can have a positive effect. He should be sent to a quiet area, with no toys. This method is also useful in that it gives the parent and the child a cooling-off period, allowing each to return to his senses.

Another method is to take away one of the child's privileges, such as going

outside after supper, riding his bicycle or watching a television program.

Consequences

In leading a child towards independence, it is wise to introduce the notion of consequences as part of his upbringing. The decisions he makes have consequences, and he is responsible for any positive or negative repercussions. This teaches him to assume responsibility for his choices.

Certain consequences can be self-evident. For example, if an object is broken on purpose, it will not be replaced. However, when it comes to rules, the consequences must be spelled out beforehand. The parent and child enter into a contract. For instance, the child knows in advance that if he does not come home for supper, he will not get a full meal (logical consequence) and will be forbidden to watch television (loss of privilege).

Consequences may also be determined jointly by the parent and the child. In the case of a broken window, it may be decided that the child will pay part of the costs of replacing it or will personally help repair it.

Whether it comes down to punishment or consequences, parents must take into account the following:

- The child must know what he is being accused of. A warning is appropriate and can sometimes suffice. Never set traps for him.

- The gravity of the misdeed and the degree to which the child is responsible determine the penalty.
- The timeframe must be reasonable; otherwise, the parent will give in (either from exhaustion or a sense of guilt), or the situation will become too heavy for the child to take.
- The parent has to stick to what he says. If he spells out what the consequences or punishment will be, this must be something that he can and will enforce. Misbehaviour is hard for a child to stop if it is punished one day and not the next.
- The penalty must be aimed at the child's misbehaviour, and not at him personally. He can be told: "I cannot accept this type of behaviour." On the other hand, telling him: "You never do anything right" is needlessly hurtful and leaves him with a poor self-image.
- The key elements of the daily household routine, such as bedtimes, meals and baths, should not be the target of penalties. These should remain enjoyable times.
- The parent must react quickly to the misbehaviour or even forestall it if possible. The sooner the child is warned or reprimanded, the sooner he will learn to refrain from misbehaving.¹¹
- The parent must verify whether the undesirable behaviour is being eliminated.

- An effective strategy may consist in suggesting and encouraging good behaviour. For example, instead of the parent angrily saying: "Your friends are coming over for lunch again? What am I, your servant?", the parent can suggest that the daughter check in advance whether it's all right.

Punishment is abusive if it lasts too long, is accompanied by blows, results in injuries, involves physical control (tying the child up, for instance), humiliation or threats, or is often administered for no good reason.

Rules¹²

For discipline to be effective, it must be based on clear, familiar rules. And rules – by establishing what is and what is not allowed – express family values. A value is something we care about. It can be respect for human dignity, authority, social status, non-violence, money, helping others and so on. For example, if I value human dignity, I will not tolerate any vulgarity in my home.

To learn more about my rules, I could do the following:

- First, make a list of my rules.
- Next, ask myself if all the members of my family understand and are familiar with my rules. Are my rules adapted to my child's abilities? Are they fair? Do they serve all the members of my family? Do they achieve the desired results?

- Are my rules influenced by my frame of mind? By other people? It is important that our rules reflect our beliefs, values and limits. If a child feels he can come home at 6:30 instead of the agreed-upon time of 6:00, he will do so.
- Are my rules open to discussion by members of my family? If children cannot question a rule openly, they will question it indirectly. It is better to promote a frank and honest approach. The parent should remain open-minded, but should never lose sight of the fact that he has the last word.

What causes and perpetuates aggressive behaviour in children¹³

- The child gets what he wants through aggressive behaviour.
- The parent tolerates aggressiveness. The message received by the child is that this type of behaviour is permissible.
- The parent encourages the child to use aggression to resolve conflicts with others.
- The parent himself is aggressive towards his child. Not only does this pose risks for the child, but it serves as an example of how he should handle situations. He sees that this type of behaviour is allowed and has no negative consequences. He too begins to tolerate violence. At some point, he may remark: "It's no big deal – just a little tap."

- The child is constantly frustrated because his needs are not being taken into account by the parent.

Research¹⁴ has shown beyond a doubt that severe discipline, including physical punishment, leaves the child angry, frustrated and aggressive. It also causes him to resent the parent and to flee him in order to avoid being punished. This fear of punishment leads him to lie.

6. Where to turn for Help

For your child to develop harmoniously, he needs respect, love, guidance and basic common sense. As a parent, your greatest challenge lies in realizing that you are up to the task and in trusting yourself. You have all the necessary resources. If you hesitate, make a mistake, recognize this and change your approach, you will be setting a good example for your child.

If you feel like sharing your experiences with other parents, go right ahead.

If, on the other hand, you:

- feel out of your depth or ill at ease;
- feel that your child is not responding to you any more, is always up to no good or is provoking you;
- feel that violence is the only way you can get your child to obey you;

do not keep these concerns to yourself. Talk them over with a person you trust or someone who can refer you somewhere else. You can also contact a

parents' self-help group, a hotline, Parents Anonymous, your LCSC, a shelter for battered women, a women's centre or a support group for violent men.

Suggested Readings and Audio-Visual Materials

Bettelheim, Bruno: Pour être des parents acceptables [A good enough parent], Éd. Robert Laffont, Coll. Pluriel, Paris, 1988, 400 p.

Gordon, Thomas: Comment apprendre l'autodiscipline – aux enfants. Éduquer sans punir. [Teaching children self-discipline at home and at school], Éd. Le Jour, Montréal, 1990, 254 p.

Satir, Virginia: Pour retrouver l'harmonie familiale [Peoplemaking], Éd. France-Amérique, Montréal, 1980, 306 p.

Your local public library also has some excellent books available.

The family violence audio-visual resource catalogue of the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence contains over 70 titles of films and videos. These may be borrowed free of charge from the regional offices of the National Film Board.

Footnotes

1. Satir, Virginia: Pour retrouver l'harmonie familiale [Peoplemaking], Éd. France-Amérique, Montréal, 1980, p. 252
2. Cloutier, Richard and Renaud, André: Psychologie de l'enfant, Éd. Gaëtan Morin, Boucherville, 1990, p. 617
3. Cloutier and Renaud, p. 633
4. Bettelheim, Bruno: Pour être des parents acceptables [A good enough parent], Éd. Robert Laffont, Coll. Pluriel, Paris, 1988, p. 23
5. Cloutier and Renaud, p. 582
6. Bettelheim, p. 113
7. Bettelheim, p. 114
8. Papalia, Diane E and Olds, Sally W: Le développement de la personne [Human development], 3e éd, Éd. Études Vivantes, Montréal, 1989, pp. 241-242
9. Bertrand, Lucie, Béland, Rita and Bouillon, Michel: Projet pilote de prévention du développement de comportements antisociaux chez des garçons agressifs à la maternelle. Guide d'intervention familiale., Université de Montréal, 1988, pp. 48-51
10. Portelance, Colette: Relation d'aide et Amour de soi. L'approche non directive créatrice en psychothérapie et en pédagogie., Éd. du CRAM, Montréal, 1990, p. 184

11. Schell, R E, and Hall, E: Psychologie génétique. Le développement humain. [Developmental psychology today], Éd. du Renouveau pédagogique, Montréal, 1980, p. 309
12. Satir, pp. 110-125
13. Papalia and Olds, p. 235
14. Gergen, Kenneth J and Gergen, Mary M: Psychologie sociale [Social Psychology], Éd. Etudes Vivantes, St-Laurent, 1984, pp. 266-267

In this text, for stylistic reasons, the masculine shall be deemed to include the feminine.

This document was prepared under contract by Danièle Fréchette, a psychosociologist specializing in conjugal violence and family crisis intervention. We would like to thank the following people for their invaluable assistance: Suzanne Dessureault, in charge of the parents program at the Centre Mariebourg; Janice Ireland and Gisèle Lacroix, program officers with the NCFV; Andrée Lamontagne, educational psychologist; Femmy Mes, program officer with the Child Care Programs Division, HWC; Richard Meloche, communications consultant; Ginette Pelland and Denis Provost, parents; Jean Tison, a psychoeducator with the Montreal Catholic School Commission; and Dawn Walker, Chief, Child and Family Health Unit, HWC.

For further information on family violence, please contact:

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

Postal Locator 0201A1
 Family Violence Prevention Division
 Health Promotion and Programs
 Branch
 Health Canada
 Ottawa, Ontario
 K1A 1B4
 (613) 957-2938

or call the following toll-free number:
1-800-267-1291



For TDD users, **(613) 952-6396**
 or call the toll free number,
1-800-561-5643

February 1993

