

43rd Storyworth: What Is Your Best Advice for Raising Children?

I am pretty certain I can give you some BAD examples of ways to raise children, but I am far from an expert. And I don't know that ANYBODY is. I was certainly fortunate that my daughter turned out so well, and I believe there are principles which if applied will increase the chance of a child becoming a productive adult. However, the list of variables over which you have no control is also enormous, so at best these would be merely rules of thumb, and might not prove to have any value whatsoever in specific circumstances.

A fundamental consideration would be the examples which were set for me, and for which I was privileged to be the recipient. But I was also lucky to have been born at precisely the right time and place to receive those, and can readily see that merely changing my birthplace, say from the USA to North Korea, or my sex, say to that of a female in Afghanistan, might have made this discussion silly at best.

Those two example factors are a good starting point, because if a child cannot be taught to be aware of their surroundings, and to appreciate all the advantages they possess, much of the rest of this discussion would become moot. So a basic premise is that children need to understand personal humility and empathy. It is, sadly, all too evident that many parents today have no clue about this. Telling a child that they are precious is NOT the same as telling them they have no responsibilities, nor that they are as deserving of rewards for success as those with whom they have just competed in a fair competition and lost. The whole idea of competition is Darwinian and based on the simple facts of life. I have never met ANYONE who was happy to receive a "participation trophy" knowing their own actions caused their failure to win.

Children also need to be judged and measured against reasonable expectations based on their age, experience, surroundings and support. It is patently absurd to expect a child who lives in poverty to compete directly on a level playing field with a child of privilege. But it is ALSO a mistake to NOT expect both children to accomplish all they are capable of. And THAT is the distinction worthy of mention; expectation.

If nobody expects a child to do anything, it should come as no surprise when they will be unlikely to achieve even that. Proper parenting involves providing adequate resources to allow a child the opportunity to stretch for achievement, and the positive reinforcement when they do so and negative when they do not. But this is an area where anyone can observe the largest pool of examples of bad parenting as well. Telling a three year old to do something and expecting them to do so flawlessly reflects an incompetency as a parent. Just as failure to expect some degree of that perfection from a late teen would as well. The variable is REASONABLENESS and APPROPRIATENESS to the situation. Sadly, however, most parents fail well before either of those could be predicted by simply failing to be consistent in the first place.

Watch parental behavior in any department store and you can see examples of both good and bad parentage. How often have you seen a minor child (under 10) throw a tantrum? How often did the child simply get away with it, vs how often did the parent take them back outside the store until the bad behavior stops? The BEST parents NEVER allowed the minor child to be in control; not because they wanted to prevent the child learning self-control, but because they were simply incapable of such judgement yet. Just as the US Marines believe they must first remove most of the sense of self from EVERY recruit in order to make them dependable team members, so it is with a child. But it requires the same commitment to that ideal by the parent EVERY time.

The WHY of that needs to be explained; unless a child knows where boundaries are dependably, they have no way to adjust their behaviors to comply. If they get an ice cream for exactly the same behavior today that they got a spanking for yesterday, how likely are they to know what to do tomorrow? And it is fundamental.

A child also needs unconditional love. Note, however, that I do not suggest they should be given ANYTHING beyond the bare essentials needed for survival; food shelter, clothing and a safe environment. Within the legitimate means of the parent, support also means providing them the opportunity to reach for stretch goals. But it is essential that the child can reach those ONLY with extra effort by the child. Where it requires commitment from the parent is in keeping perspective, and constantly monitoring and adjusting so the child never believes the stretch goal is beyond their ultimate ability to reach it.

If you note, I mentioned “spanking”. I personally NEVER needed physical punishment with my child. If I with a Master’s Degree cannot conceive a means to motivate a child, which does not involve violence, then I am the one with the need for re-education. But I ALSO needed to be prepared to sometimes be demonstrably wrong in favor of my child. MY daughter was encouraged to experience life, which meant we could never predict EVERY answer she would need. So we had a rule; she would never receive punishment for a “bad decision” so long as she could rationally explain why she believed it to be a proper decision at the time.

You can imagine how well that taught her to learn to think through her story and its explanation, which may well have frustrated me as a parent, but ultimately prepared her better to deal with life and the unknown. I like as well to believe such approach helped her decide to become an ethicist, because I do not believe it is possible to become one if you have never lived with someone who WAS ethical. Examples matter, and only by being exposed to such possibility as my own failure could her ability to flourish be prepared. Key was balance. Along with consistency and predictability, the foundations of child preparation to become a true adult.

Adulthood is the status reached in life where you no longer expect “do-overs”, and instead expect to receive consequences for bad behaviors, and rewards for good ones, with honest appraisals for real likelihoods for both. A toddler cannot be expected to recognize the dangers in a hot stove or live electrical wiring, but by the time of late teens they most assuredly should. Parenting is the job of recognizing those risky situations and performing whatever tasks are needed to protect the child from them, even while somehow trying to show them what those consequences COULD look like so they ultimately WILL learn to respect them as they grow. It is an unfortunate law of nature that becoming a parent is all too easy, merely by allowing our baser instincts to take control over our selves. But the JOB of being a parent can be one of the toughest roles for ANYONE, in part because it requires a person to subjugate their baser instincts and interests in favor of thoughtful awareness of our impact and willful determination to assure our child will be the best adult he or she possibly can be.

I would, however, want to suggest strongly that the number of books and advice columns purporting to be able to “know” the right way to be a parent are probably worth little more than the grains of salt left on the table after a typical meal, not least because there are SO MANY ways in which such advice can be shown to be wrong in so many situations. So if there is any REAL advice I would suggest, it would be to be kind to YOURSELF. So long as your effort and intent are aimed at providing your child with good examples, support for their efforts and guidance in their understanding of the world and its realities, and a place where they feel wanted and safe and cared for, you are most of the way already in earning their respect. Keep at it and be consistent, and they will know where their real boundaries actually exist, and when they can test those boundaries with minimal risk and repercussion, because taking risk is an essential part of growth. You want to foster a willingness to accept a certain degree of failure as part of that same growth. As the old saying goes; “Please grant me the strength to change what I can, the courage to accept what I can’t change, and the wisdom to know the difference”. That is what being a good parent is all about, and I hope I have been one ;-)

Joe Holzer 10/11/2021