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7 Tips for More Positive Parenting

By Dr. Paul O'Connell

Parenting probably ranks as one of the hardest jobs anyone takes on in their life.

Having said this, I am sometimes surprised at how discouraged parents can become when they feel their efforts aren't good enough, or that their children are too difficult to handle. Usually, parents such as these are still doing a good job of parenting, but simply aren't feeling positive about their efforts. For all of us who sometimes feel overwhelmed as parents, I've compiled a few tips on maintaining a positive outlook while parenting.

1) Focus on positive behaviours whenever possible. Typically, as parents we react when things are going wrong and we have to criticize and redirect behaviour. Parents can build on positive situations by "catching their kids doing something right" As examples, "Wow! You've been sitting and reading quietly for 20 minutes," or "I love it when you two play without fighting like this!" Ideally, the positive comments will outweigh the negative ones. Even in situations where conflict is common, however, you can build up some goodwill by noticing when things are going right.

2) Don't feel that you have to win every battle with your children. Researchers at the world renowned Oregon Social Learning Centre have found that the average child complies with about two thirds of parent requests. Do you really want to have your child follow every request you make, or just the important ones? You may be able to give

some leeway on requests such as "sit up straight at the table," while remaining firm on "in this house we don't hit."

3) In situations where positive strategies such as praise and earning rewards aren't working, try having your child work with you to come up with reasonable consequences for their problem behaviours. What's reasonable, and how much negotiation occurs, depends on the age of your child. As an example, grounding a teenager for two months because they're an hour late home from a party is probably unreasonable. Worse still, it's nearly impossible for you to enforce this consequence. When you have to set consequences, have them fit the severity of the infraction and make them possible to follow-through with.

4) If you're in a two-parent family, form a "united front" with your partner. Parenting styles that vary too greatly can be frustrating for both children and adults. Work out a list of rules and consequences for your household that both parents feel comfortable with. Recognize, too, that it might take some effort to bridge any gaps between you and your partner's parenting styles.

5) Do a self-assessment of how you discipline your children. Try to think of three things that you'd like to do more often and three things you'd like to do less often. Then try and think of what leads up to your behaviours and see whether you can think of ways to respond more positively.

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6) Do an assessment of your children's behaviour and decide on a few specific things that you'd like to change (this ties in with tip number two - just a few improvements can make a large difference in how you feel about parenting). Then try using an incentive chart to keep track of the behaviour. For example, if the goal is to have your nine year- old in bed by 8:30 p.m., put up a weeklong calendar on the fridge and place happy faces or check marks on each day when she manages to get to bed on time. Decide ahead of time what a "successful" week will look like (e.g., success on at least 5 out of 7 days), and then reward your child for meeting the goal. Note: the reward has to be something your child wants - try asking them about it before beginning the incentive chart.

7) Try having a regular family meeting each week. This can instantly increase harmony in your household because disagreements can be saved for discussion at the next family meeting. Here are a few guidelines for organizing the meetings.

- First, try to find a regular time to have the meeting, ideally when people aren't too rushed (for example, you might combine it with a Sunday brunch).
- Encourage everyone to contribute items to the meeting agenda
- Take turns on jobs like chairing the meeting and recording decisions made (even a seven-year-old can do this with some help).
- Make sure that you start by reviewing what positive things have gone on during the week, then move on to problems and problem solving.
- When you get to working on problems don't simply re-hash any arguments that may have occurred. A little venting of anger is fine, but try to steer the discussion towards "What can we do to fix things?"

Many of the families using this approach say that it has helped reduce the amount of tension in their homes. A fuller description of family meetings can be found in "Parenting Teenagers: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting," by Don Dinkmeyer and Gary McKay. This book, which I often recommend to parents, is easy-to-find, easy-to-read, and contains a lot of useful tips on parenting.

One final point: If you or someone you know is having ongoing and severe difficulties with parenting, there may be a need for some professional help. Some of the available services, which can be provided in either individual or group settings, include counselling for parents and children, family therapy, and marriage counselling. Further information on these supports can be found through social service agencies in the Greater Toronto Area, or through the Ontario Psychological Association referral service (416) 961-0069.