

You and your Child - Common Parenting Mistakes

Pitfall 1: Having Unrealistic Expectations

Not only must you have reasonable expectations for the rate of change, you need to have realistic expectations for what your child can achieve. You must see your child as he/she is--not as who you thought he was or who he ought to be. If your child has a developmental disorder, it's unreasonable to expect him "to act his age" without training. Similarly, most children with ADHD are easily distracted by anything that crosses their radar screen at the moment. Therefore, when you send your child upstairs to put his shoes on, he may never come back. The fact that his younger sister returns promptly should not be your measure of whether your child with ADHD can realistically be expected to do so. Nagging, yelling, and lecturing won't increase his ability to successfully complete the task. You are increasing his stress level and raising your own blood pressure. Unrealistic expectations frustrate parents and defeat their children. Knowing what your child is reasonably capable of achieving makes it easier to recognize incremental progress. Based on past performance, what would constitute improvement? Using this measure assures that your expectations are reasonable. Stepping back and focusing on what your child is actually doing (not what you wish he'd be doing) will help you recognize progress when it occurs.

Pitfall 2: Relying on Punishment Alone to Change Behaviour

The children who most challenge us are usually those who have been punished the most. Although this approach comes naturally to parents, it does not result in effective behavioral change. Punishment doesn't change behavior because it does not teach your child a better way to behave.

Despite the fact that it hasn't worked, parents keep right on punishing their kids "to make them behave." They punish and punish until "there is nothing left to take away." These children descend into a cycle of misbehavior that results in their digging a hole from which they cannot emerge. To break this cycle, you need to help your child climb out of that hole by looking for positive behavior and rewarding it as soon as you see it.

Pitfall 3: Sermonizing and Dramatizing at the Point of Infraction

Punishment can interrupt the behavior for the moment. Your child may (if you're lucky) make the connection between the penalty and his own behavior but not if he attributes it to your outburst. The more talking you do when a child misbehaves, the less likely your message will get through. Emotion diminishes the capacity to think, let alone speak. And since this isn't one of those Hallmark moments, when your child is interested in hearing what you have to say, why say anything?

Pitfall 4: Punishing Without Warning

Imposing punishment without previously having told your child exactly what the consequences of his behavior would be invites meltdown. Your child can only make the connection between his behavior and the punishment if he knows what the punishment will be in advance. Otherwise, he believes you're being unfair. Prevent meltdowns by posting lists of infractions with specific penalties that will be imposed every time. This eliminates arguments and helps your child make the connection between punishment and his own behavior. Punishment without warning is unfair and perpetuates your child's notion that the punishment is a function of parental whim rather than a consequence of his own behaviour.

Pitfall 5: Extending Punishment Too Long

Taking away a toy or privilege for an extended time only teaches your child to do without it. This may not be bad, but it probably isn't what you'd intended. Moreover, the longer he goes without, the more likely he will focus his resentment on you rather than connecting its loss to his own behavior. Punishments that last too long usually end up punishing the parent and the whole family as much or more than the child.

Moreover, extended loss of a toy or privilege doesn't make sense. There's no logical relationship between leaving a bicycle outside and not being allowed to ride it, because the penalty doesn't teach the child to put it away. Short-term loss of bike-riding privileges paired with the following procedure will more likely teach him to put it away.

If your child leaves his bike out he;

- 1) loses the privilege to ride for the next twenty-four hours and
- 2) can't ride again until he has practiced ten times walking the bike between the point where he left it and where it belongs, parking it with the kickstand down each time. He can't ride any bike (not just his own) until he fulfills both requirements.

When you take something away for a long time, you deny your child the opportunity to handle that item or privilege appropriately. Grounding a teen for being late precludes the possibility of practicing checking his watch and coming in on time. Taking away toys for a month when your child fails to put them away doesn't give him practice at tidying up. Eventually, he'll be adept at putting his toy away because that's all he will have--one toy. You will have taken the rest away.

Pitfall 6: Failing to Give Clear Directions

Only give directions when you are prepared to enforce them. Unless you are willing to get up and ensure immediate compliance, avoid using the term now. You're inadvertently teaching your child to ignore you when you delay or don't follow up your direction to, for example, "turn off the television now." What child in his right mind would promptly respond when experience tells him that no one will check for at least ten minutes? If you tell your child he must pick up his room before he gets to play outside, don't convey that it's all right to ignore your direction by not checking that he has done what you have asked.

Pitfall 7: Establishing Too Many Rules

Too many rules frustrate everyone. Your child has no chance of remembering (much less abiding by) all of them if you can't even keep track of them. An excessive number of rules makes consistency between parents impossible and enforcement a function of whoever is present, their mood, and what they remember. Too many guidelines lead to arbitrary parenting, which can make a child angry. Then, when he can't meet your expectations, you'll fall into the trap of pointing out each of his errors. When he continually fails to get your approval, your child feels like a failure.

