

Parenting Today’s Youth: From toddlers to teens

It seems like it takes so long ... then the day finally comes. Into your hands is placed a perfectly helpless but powerful baby, whose cries and smiles will control the next decade of your life. Along with the joy and amazement in your new baby sneaks in a little bit of concern about the biggest job you will ever have – that of a parent.



Every parent wants happy children who become responsible citizens and resilient human beings. As we all know, there is no one minute answer or technique - children are born with individual characteristics and temperaments which play a role in their everyday interactions. However, not everyone knows that researchers have established 10-20% of children have difficult temperaments. These children are more active, impulsive and often have short attention spans. These children are also much more difficult for any parent to manage. The task then for parents is to find an approach to discipline that is both comfortable and effective.

Despite their best efforts, most parents have wondered from time to time why their children act the way they do. At these times, we scratch our heads and ask ourselves if we could, or should, do something differently. According to Quebec-born award winning researcher and program designer Carolyn Webster Stratton, early interventions have big payoffs. She has designed a series of programs for students, parents, and teachers, which have been shown to promote emotional and social competence in children. These programs also prevent, reduce, and treat behavioural and emotional problems in children 2 to 10 years olds. These programs are called “The Incredible Years” series. In this program, Webster Stratton sheds new light on the power of parents to make changes in the lives of their children. Unlike other programs which begin by eliminating misbehaviour through consequences – this researcher begins with praise.

Praising our children’s positive behaviour allows us to encourage and support them building the skills and behaviours that they will need to grow up and be those responsible people. Some parents believe that praise should be reserved for exceptional behaviours; they don’t see why they should praise their children for doing what is expected of them. Dr. Phelan, author of “Magic 1-2-3”, poignantly reminds us that “angry people speak and happy people are silent”. In our experience, Dr. Phelan is right on. Think about this situation: after a week of reminding your daughter to put her dishes in the dishwasher, you notice out of the corner of your eye (while you are talking on the phone) – that she puts away her dishes as expected. Many of us think to ourselves “well, it’s about time”. Few of us would stop talking on the phone to notice her positive behaviour and let her know that we appreciate her efforts. If you did, she might not even seem pleased that you noticed her good behaviour. Some children, and teens too, may respond to it with a scathing look, comment, or rolling of the eyes. Now let’s look at the other side. If after a week or so of reminding your daughter to put her dishes in the dishwasher you then notice she forgot her dishes in the basement again, you might be likely to say “How many times have I asked you to...” thereby giving attention to the behaviour you don’t want. It seems hard to believe that encouragement and praise can direct the outcome of children’s appropriate behaviour – or misbehaviour. Yet research shows that a lack of praise and attention for appropriate behaviours can actually lead to increased misbehaviour.

Tips for praising well

- **Make praise more effective by using “labeled praise”.** Instead of saying “good girl!” (vague), you could say, “you’ve done a good job of picking up” (specific). Other examples of effective praise: “Thank you for...” “Wow, what a wonderful job you’ve done of...” “It really pleases me when you...” “That’s a perfect way of...”
- **Avoid combining praise with put-downs.** This occurs when praise is followed with a “but” (ie “thanks for bringing up the dishes, but why can’t you do it every day?”). Praise is effective when it travels alone - without reminders of prior failures or imperfect performances.



- **Add non-verbal praise:** a smile or pat on the back.
- **Double the impact of praise by praising in front of other adults.** In-laws, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, even telling your friends on the phone, all make wonderful audiences to praise children in front of!

Encouragement and praise are critical in shaping how our children see themselves. From toddlers to teens our words, and the messages those words carry, help shape our children's future. Our praise and encouragement carries them forward through the many steps it takes to master new skills, whether that skill is reading or making friends. Dr. Scott Sells, recognized therapist and author of "Parenting with Love and Limits" is a strong believer in the power of parents to heal themselves and their teens – given the right set of tools. However, this is sometimes easier said than done. It can be very challenging to stay positive and on track after years of difficult behavior, numerous calls from camps, schools and others, and countless broken promises to do better next time. Some parents sadly tell us that they deeply love our children - but no longer like them.

Like most things in life, parenting turns out to be a balance - the glass is both half empty and half full. Our kids need praise, but as author Robert McKenzie ("Setting Limits") emphasizes – they also need firm limits to feel secure. Like adults who are setting out on an adventure, children count on us to give them signs when they are veering off course. Despite their complaints (It's not fair!) and their frustration (You never let me...), they count on us to help them learn to share, wait their turn, respect others and accept responsibility for their own behavior.

Often parents struggle with designing a plan for disciplining their children. Finding the balance means constantly monitoring and deciding which problems need firm discipline and which behaviors can be left up to their children. It means at the end of the day parents need to decide which battles they are going to choose. If we focus on everything, we will end up constantly correcting our children, without having time to have fun with them. Would it surprise you to know Webster-Stratton's research showed average parents give their children 17 commands in 30 minutes? Imagine that your supervisor at work gave you that many. Might you tune that person out? It seems that as parents we may need to evaluate both the number and type of commands we give our children.

A few tips on commands:

- **Give clear commands.** Some rules are vague or unclear: "be good"; "don't be too late". Instead, try: "Use your quiet voice in the library". "Wait for me at the door as soon as the school bell rings".
- **Give "action" commands.** Asking children if they would like to do something implies there is a choice: "Would you like to go to bed now?" It is more useful to deliver commands as firm polite assertive statements, beginning with a verb: "Go to bed".
- **Avoid "chain" commands.** This is when many commands are strung together like a chain. For example, "The school bus will be here in 5 minutes. Finish your breakfast, go brush your teeth, get a drink from the fridge for lunch and put your lunch in your school bag, and don't forget your sweater". It would be more effective to give 1 or maximum 2 commands at a time, with positive reinforcement (praise) after each.
- **Make commands more effective by using replacement statements.** "Stop jumping on the sofa". "Don't hit your sister" leave a visual picture in the child's head emphasizing what not to do. Instead, focus the child on what they should be doing: "Sofas are for sitting". "Keep your hands to yourself".

Sometimes, even with the best planning, children do not follow their parents' instructions. At that time, Dr. Phelan cautions that it is important to distinguish between whether the behavior is a safety issue and needs to be addressed, or whether it is an "MBA" (=minor but annoying) behavior, for example whining. Webster-Stratton uses deliberate and planned ignoring as a method for modifying children's annoying behaviours. While ignoring can be highly effective, it is also probably one of the most difficult techniques for parents to master.

Tips on ignoring



- **Choose which behaviours to ignore.** Ignoring is not appropriate for all behaviours or in all settings. Safety issues, dangerous, or abusive behaviours should not be ignored. Ignoring is effective in most cases for MBA's: whining, arguing, eye rolling etc
- **Limit the number of behaviours to ignore.** Choose 1 or 2 behaviours to ignore. Then systematically move down the list.
- **Ignoring by having a "neutral" reaction to whatever behaviour the child is doing.** Effective ignoring involves the parent having a neutral facial expression; avoiding eye contact; stopping all discussions; and moving away physically from the child.
- **Praise positive behaviour.** As soon as the child stops the negative behaviour you are ignoring, praise the positive behaviour you want to increase. For example, if you are ignoring your child's whining, try to praise whenever they speak appropriately: "I really like it when you use your regular voice"
- **Ignore consistently.** The **key** to successful ignoring is consistency. Most children will initially react with an increase of negative behaviours to see if they can get their parents to back down. By giving in for the short-term benefit, sometimes parents inadvertently create a more long-term problem: children learn that if they persist long and hard enough, they can get what they want by wearing the parents down. **Remember that it is normal for children to test out if their parents are serious... and be prepared to hold your ground!**



If you are going to try this technique at home we need to caution you! Consistent ignoring will decrease annoying behaviour but it does not increase positive behaviour. To increase positive behaviour, you need to nurture a positive relationship with your child and to increase your attention and praise for positive behaviours. Over time our children learn that it is more beneficial to behave appropriately than inappropriately. And of course time is the issue. So much to do – so little time.

It seems that with all we as families have to do, "just playing" together has been relegated to the "if we have time" pile. Well, it turns out that through "play" with adults, children learn to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and needs. It also helps children learn social skills like taking turns and being sensitive to the feelings of others. Equally important, playtime helps to build a warm relationship between family members and creates a good will bank of positive feelings that we can count on to be a buffer in more difficult times. Through their play with adults, children can have the opportunity to be in charge of their world for a little while and to develop their creative skills. The ideal situation is for us parents to set aside some time to play with our children each day.

A few tips on play:

- **Follow the child's lead, imagination, and ideas** – let yourself go into their world and let them call the shots. This will lead to greater interest and will enhance their ability to play and think creatively and independently
- **Use Descriptive Commenting.** This is a running commentary on the activity and often sounds like a sports announcer's play-by-play description of a game for example "you are building a house, I see you are putting in windows. Oh, the windows are red". Descriptive Commenting is a communication style that gives children attention without pressure, and enhances vocabulary as well.
- **Remember that this is their time!** Playtime is one of the few situations children can control (as long as they behave appropriately).
- **Encourage and Praise children's creativity and their ideas.** Try and focus on ways to praise their ideas, thinking, behaviours and skills such as their creativity, persistence, problem solving efforts or cooperation.



Of course the *type* of play changes as they get older, but not the *need* for special time. Special outings and time for being together as a family always remains an important part of the picture - as a way of restoring, promoting, and keeping nurturance in our relationships with our children.

Then of course comes the guilt – did I do that right? There is no perfect solution, magic blueprint, or pat formulae to parenting. Every situation is different and parents must adopt the parenting style that will work best for them. Trying out a new strategy is always difficult at first. It takes 21 times to change a habit. At first, this may feel artificial or even phoney. This awkwardness is a normal response for all people when learning something new. Don't expect to feel comfortable immediately – and don't get discouraged! Using these techniques requires parents to be more



vigilant, but ensures that children are more compliant in the long run and leaves them feeling more successful and confident. It's not always easy, but they're worth it!

Underneath Ad

In the USA, the Incredible Years Training Series has been designated as an exemplary “best practices” program (OJJDP Family Strengthening Series). As such, the series has been subject to a quality evaluation, evidenced excellent effectiveness, and attained high overall ratings. In Montreal, Incredible Years student and parent programs are currently being offered to families at the Jewish General Hospital, Montreal Children’s Hospital, and Douglas Hospital. DM Family and School Services, trained by Dr. Webster Stratton in the Incredible Years model, offers these programs in the community to students, parents, teachers, support staff, lunch monitors, daycare operators, and early childhood educators. Individual, couple, and family counselling, as well as therapy through play for young children, is also available. For more information, contact DM Family and School Services at (514) 483-9339.

