

Parenting Pitfalls

Moms have long joked that when they leave the hospital with their precious newborns, no manual accompanies our sweet little bundles. We leave the comfort of our maternity suites with hopes and dreams as well as fears but no real instructions on how to rear our children. We are left to sort through the suggestions of generations of parents who have gone before us and a growing number of self-help books on the topic. "The Heart of Anger" by Christian counselor and speaker, Lou Priolo is one of my favorite resources. Although he directly addresses many of the dynamics involved in rearing a child who struggles with anger, he also lays out clear examples and advice on parenting children in general. One section is devoted to the mistakes we sometimes make as parents. I would like to paraphrase his main points and offer guidance to help us correct any ineffective habits we may have fallen into.

1. Lack of appropriate balance in family relationships. When roles are not properly set or consistently maintained, the natural relationships in a family become distorted. For example, when one parent is upset with the other, he confides in or draws closer to one of the children for support. Not only does this burden the child with too much responsibility, it completely undermines the other parent, stresses the relationship, and may cause the child to disrespect both parents. Likewise, in families where the roles are not clearly defined, confusion may result for the children. For families to function in a healthy way, clear lines of authority need to be established. Parents must communicate with each other, solving their own issues and accepting responsibility while giving their children the freedom to grow without undue stresses or concerns.
2. Creating a child-centered home. To prevent children from believing they are the center of the universe and are entitled to all of their desires, they must grow up understanding their place in the family. That means parents prioritize their relationship to each other before their relationships with the children. This seems a rather odd statement in today's culture. However, parental unity is critical to the development of healthy children. Of course, parents are to love their children and treat them as a priority. But their commitment to the husband-wife relationship will provide security for the children and let them know that they are safe in this world.
3. Inappropriate anger. This could include yelling, attempting to win an argument rather than instruct the child, disciplining while angry or being inconsistent in discipline. When we participate in these activities, we harm our children. It is often better to have the child sit in a confined, safe area then go back to him when we have gathered our emotions and thoughts. Because the goal of discipline is to teach, correct and guide, it is preferable to talk with our children about what has happened when we are calm. We also need to have clear boundaries and expectations that we act on every time and not just when it is convenient.
4. Guilt, scolding, belittling or ridiculing. These are behaviors that tear our children down causing them to feel shame and worthlessness. As parents, our goal is to encourage and build up our children so they may become all they were created to be. Instead of using harsh words

with children, speak to them in terms that foster true sorrow for what they have done but not cause them to despair for who they are. Praise them when you can and let them know how special they are. Remind them they are uniquely and wonderfully made.

5. Hypercritical and Double Standards. In most cultures there are lines drawn between what is OK for adults and OK for children. These lines serve a purpose and protect our children. However, there is a difference between such rules and a “do as I say not as I do” style of parenting. If a parent teaches a child not to lie but sneaks him into the theater on a child’s ticket when she is actually above the age limit, then we have sent a mixed message. How can we expect children to behave morally and responsibly when we are unwilling to do so? How can we expect them to respect us if we do not act honorably? We can’t. Very simply put, we must “practice what we preach”.

6. Being harsh, legalistic, or not allowing enough freedom. Often out of fear, parents set boundaries that are too strict which causes discouragement in their children. It is easy to go overboard, thinking we are protecting them from the world and all of its influences. We need to be very careful that the rules we set for our children are realistic, age appropriate and provide room to grow and learn from their mistakes. We need to also filter any advice we receive, making sure it aligns with our beliefs.

7. Allowing too much freedom. Our children are not our friends. They need the wisdom of their parents to set limits for them until they are mature enough to do that for themselves. This may mean they do not always get what they want. It may also mean they will be angry with us, their parents. That’s OK. Parents need to teach strengths to their offspring by carefully considering what is good for their children’s welfare and acting on it.

8. Setting the bar too high or living through your child. It is normal to want our children to be their best. But what if our definition of best is not appropriate for a particular child? What if we want a football player but our son is more interested in lab experiments or camping or tutoring other kids who struggle in math? What if straight A’s is more than he can manage? We sometimes forget that our children are created for a purpose, a purpose they may not see or understand at the moment. It is our job to help them grow in wisdom and character, not pressure them to achieve unrealistic expectations.

9. Comparing them to others, playing favorites, not taking each child’s account of an event seriously. Each of us is made uniquely as our own person. When we compare them to others or show favoritism, we distort what they believe about themselves. Either they become convinced they are either superior to others or not good enough. Both extremes rob them of living freely as themselves. Accept your child for who she is, including his flaws. When correcting her discuss her own strengths and weaknesses. Encourage her to also see herself as wonderfully created. Encourage trustworthiness by valuing her opinions even if she needs instruction on viewpoints other than her own.

10. Blaming and finding fault. As parents, it is our job to correct our children. However, there is a difference between pointing out a misbehavior versus blaming, criticizing or accusing your child. A child who feels he only hears negative words from his parents may become discouraged at best or bitter at worst. One way to combat negative behavior is to look for positive deeds and give praise as often as possible. This will encourage a child's self-worth.

11. Not Keeping Promises. How many times have we said "We'll do that later" or made other promises that we truly intended to keep but forgot about? Over time, we run the risk of losing the trust and respect of our child. With repeated rejection, he may also begin to feel he is incompetent and unloved. To combat this issue, seriously consider the promises you make to your children and only commit when you are sure you will be able to follow through.

12. Correcting them in front of others. At times our children act inappropriately in public such as speaking disrespectfully, complaining or rolling their eyes and at those times may be acceptable to correct them in the moment, depending on your words and tone of voice. However, when children commit larger offenses, like temper tantrums for example, it is best to speak to them in private in order not to humiliate them and give them time to consider their actions. This also holds true if a child misbehaves in private. If she talks back to you or torments her siblings, deal with her there and not in front of others.

13. Not enough time "hanging out" or talking with them. Busy schedules and the belief that teens do not want to spend time with parents often causes atrophy in our relationships with our kids. Parents need to build in time as often as possible just to talk to their children, listening to what is important to them and on their hearts. Game nights or family movie nights encourage security while showing interest in their lives fosters a sense of acceptance and love. Even if their interests are not exciting to you, they are to your kids. Initiating conversation about things that are important to them shows your children they are important to you,

14. Not asking for or giving forgiveness. Kids and teens are not the only ones who speak rashly or harshly. Sometimes in our frustration, parents also make mistakes. When that happens, it is important to acknowledge our actions, the pain it may have caused and ask for forgiveness. When we humble ourselves by admitting our mistakes, it not only increases their trust in us, it models for them how to handle their own transgressions. Once we ask for or receive forgiveness, it is important to practice never bringing up the offense again.

15. Never abuse your children. Ever. Disciplining our children is necessary in correcting and training them. However, when we discipline out of frustration or anger or when our discipline becomes punishment, we run the risk of becoming abusive. If we find a pattern of this in our parenting, it is very important to seek help from a professional counselor to help us change our approach.

"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the instruction of the Lord"
Ephesians 6:4 NIV