

How to Be a Good Parent — In Spite of What You Read and Hear

By Judy Myers-Walls

Advice for parents is everywhere.

Popular books, newspapers, radio, television, newsletters, friends, relatives, and neighbors are full of ideas. They all have helpful hints to make you a more successful and efficient parent — and to make your child a smarter, healthier, and better-behaved youngster.

But for almost every suggestion, you can find a conflicting or opposite suggestion — sometimes from the same source!

So what should you do? Should you ignore everyone else and go your own way? That is one possible solution, but it may not be the best one.

Most parents realize that being a good mother or a good father is not an inborn instinct. Every parent runs out of ideas at some point. There are important skills to be learned and shared with others, so a more constructive approach for dealing with this information overload is to learn how to sort through it.

Evaluating Information

The first step in evaluating parenting information is to know yourself as a parent. Because there are so many “experts” telling you what to do, you may overlook your own expertise. You may feel that, because you don’t have a child development degree, you can’t really know the best way to raise a child.

Remember, though, that no one

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knows your child better than you do. You have the unique role in your child’s life of teaching values and direction.

You need to develop a sense of competency and consistency in the teaching of these values and directions. If you do not, or if you depend entirely on whatever advice you hear, you will begin to feel like a ping-pong ball, bouncing from one approach to another. Both you and your child will suffer, because neither will know what to expect next.



Get to know your skills

To get to know your parenting skills and needs, sit down with your spouse or a close friend and consider the following questions.

- What is your overall philosophy of parenting? What makes a good parent good? For example, is a good parent one who always has

the child under control or one who lets children make their own decisions? Should parents be totally open with their children or should they maintain a distance?

- What kind of person would you like your child to be? For example, do you want him or her to be obedient, quiet, and well-behaved or questioning and a little rowdy? Do you want him or her to be competitive or cooperative?
- What skills do you already have? In what areas do you need help? For instance, you may be very comfortable with your ability to help your child learn to read, but weak in helping him or her get along with others. You may feel good about your own abilities to deal with the child, but uncomfortable about cooperating with your spouse in the parenting role.

Think about yourself as an individual and also about you and your spouse as parents together. Give this step some time. It is probably the most important.

Judging information

You can use the following four-step process to judge the information you get.

- 1. Recognize your needs.** Just as advertisements attempt to convince consumers that

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everyone needs a fur coat or a new car, some parenting information implies that all parents need to spend more time with their children or that all children need to be given more responsibility.

Rather than being swept away by the "sales pitch," take time to sit back and consider your own needs. Answer the following questions whenever you read parenting advice:



- Have I ever talked about this problem before? Can I easily picture myself in the situation described?
- Is the information stirring up guilt feelings? If so, where is the guilt coming from — my own expectations or what I think someone else expects of me?
- Is the family form or lifestyle described anything like mine?

Answering these questions should help you avoid changing successful behavior. It should also help you avoid trying to be something that "they" expect you to be, or trying to fit a square peg into a round hole by trying to follow advice for a lifestyle or family form different from your own.

On the other hand, try not to be so skeptical that you lose the op-

portunity to learn something about yourself.

2. "Shop" for good quality information. This step can be compared to shopping for a car to meet your needs **after** you have decided that you do indeed need a new car.

When you judge the quality of parenting information, consider the following:

- Be skeptical of statistics.
- Consider the source of the information. Can you trust the individual or organization? Have you gotten useful information from this source in the past?
- Be cautious of any source that claims to have the final answer on anything. Family life is not simple and all parents and children are not alike.

3. Apply the information to your own life. Unlike cars, dishwashers, or watches, parenting information does not come with a user's manual. You will need to compose your own directions for use. The advantage of this is that you can use the informa-

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tion in the way it best fits your needs and lifestyle. Some hints for doing that:

- Determine if the recommendations fit your value system. Do you feel comfortable with the values you and your child will be supporting if you follow the advice?
- Is the suggested approach really better than what you are doing now? Would it be possible to change back to your current behavior if the new approach does not work?

- Listen carefully to the advice as it is given. Adapt the information to fit your situation, but make sure you understand the original version first.
- If you decide to make a change that involves other family members, share the ideas with them first. Any change you make will affect the entire family.

When you decide to make a change, be as specific as possible. Determine exactly what you will do, when, and who will be involved. The more specific you are, the more likely you are to succeed.

4. Evaluate your behavior. If you change your behavior based on parenting information, the next step will be to decide if the change was helpful in meeting your needs. This step is often overlooked. Do not continue with a practice that is not working simply because it was recommended.

To evaluate whether a change worked, consider what it cost you in time, emotions, or money. Most important, did you feel

comfortable with the change? Does it "feel right" for you?

No matter what the cost and quality of the information, the best approach for you is the one you feel comfortable with. If you feel comfortable, you are likely to be more consistent and flexible, and therefore, more successful as a parent.

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