


A panda plush toy with a green and white striped shirt and black limbs is lying on a light-colored couch. To its right, a small red and white toy block is visible.

# ENJOYING THE PARENTING ROLLER COASTER

Nurturing and Empowering Your Children  
through the Ups and Downs

A large stuffed rabbit with a red and white striped scarf is lying on a wooden floor. Scattered around it are several toys, including a yellow car, a blue truck, a blue car, a purple car, a red and white toy block, and a wire basket filled with colorful wooden blocks.

Marie Masterson, PhD · Katharine Kersey, EdD

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# INTRODUCTION

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Whether you are a new parent who desires a deeper understanding of your child, an experienced parent who wants to build more meaningful relationships with your family, or a struggling parent on the verge of desperation, this book will inspire you and give you the practical help to make parenting the joy it is meant to be. Instead of getting bogged down in cycles of frustration, you will leave behavior struggles behind and turn children on to cooperation and respect. You will be able to maximize the influence of your relationship and become your own best self—as you show your children how to live.

In each chapter, you will find quick and helpful strategies that show what works, with parent perspectives that reveal daily struggles and successes, challenges and insights. Each section is power-packed with tools and resources to help you recharge your energy; boost your skills; and give you words, actions, and activities to put into use right away. The practical tips are filled with advice that will positively affect your daily life and relationships with your child and others who matter to you. You can explore one section at a time or investigate the chapters by topic in any order that meets the need of your own unique parenting journey. As you read, you will find a philosophy of respectful, relational parenting that will change your child's life and your own.



# CHAPTER 1

## ANCHORING YOUR PARENTING HEART

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### Beginning the Adventure

*Becoming a parent is like walking into the most powerful love ever felt. But in the beginning, it can feel overwhelming. On top of the pressure you may feel from others, it's common to put even more pressure on yourself. You may have waited a long time. You want to do everything right. In the first few weeks, the best idea is to put aside your plan, try to relax, and get a little sleep. Enjoy lots of snuggles. The rest will fall into place.\**

You may have had thirty hours of labor. Maybe your child came to you through months of planning to secure paperwork for adoption from another country. Maybe you are the busy parent of multiples who needs uncommon energy. Perhaps you adopted siblings or older children who need patience and love. Maybe this child came when least expected and altered your plans. As all of us discover as we embark on the journey, parenthood changes your life.

\*Editor's Note: Highlighted throughout the book are unattributed quotes that offer personal perspectives on parenting. They are not intended to be from any particular individual but are, instead, compilations of responses that the author has received from many different parents. They reflect perspectives commonly held by many individuals.

Perhaps everyone has given you advice: Feed on demand. Put him on a schedule. Comfort him immediately. Don't pick him up right away. Put him down while he is awake. Place him in bed asleep. Use a swing. Don't rely on a swing, or he won't fall asleep any other way. Not only is this child missing an instruction manual, but the information offered by others often conflicts.

If you're lucky, you have close friends with children. You can watch what they do and take notes on what you like or declare with certainty what you will never do. You may wonder if you have what it takes to do parenting well. You may wish your childbirth classes would give more information about how to be a parent—after the baby arrives. You may wonder what you'll do when your sweet baby turns into a tantrum-prone toddler, an inconsolable preschooler, or an eight-year-old with attitude.

As children grow, parents often waste a great deal of energy trying to stop misbehavior. You stop it today, but it starts up again tomorrow. Parents often fall into a cycle of negative focus and frustration and never really figure out a different approach. We see this all around us in restaurants and malls: parents at their wits' end, and children who are discouraged. Many people think that the most important factor in getting children to behave is the child. The truth is that your own actions and words have tremendous influence on behavior. In fact, what you say and do can radically influence your child's response. You need effective skills to get your child to do something when needed—and to turn a situation around when necessary.

With positive relational guidance, you can learn how to come alongside your child to inspire and enable success. Instead of stepping into power struggles, you can understand how to boost cooperation and build needed strengths. Your child will tune in to you and become sensitive to your influence. You'll spend less energy yet get the results you want.

Something else happens that is priceless. Positive guidance entirely reorients your role in your child's life. You become the kind of parent you really want to be—joyful and confident—with a child who is fun to be around and happy with himself. Your child will become self-directed, requiring less time from you to attend to behavior issues. Instead, you spend more time accomplishing your real goal—empowering your child to take control of his life in meaningful and healthy ways.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed with sleep-interrupted nights and responsibilities to juggle. It helps to keep a clear perspective. Understanding your remarkable influence

in the life of your child opens the door to make parenting all you hope for—a satisfying and fulfilling adventure. When these years have passed and you look back on the memories, only one thing will matter most: having created a close and loving relationship with your child—one that will keep you connected for life.

## Mastering the Care and Feeding—of You

*After the birth of my first child, I struggled with my emotions, and my physical pain was exacerbated by that struggle. I realized it wasn't just me who was trying to learn to nurse; it was my baby, too. Some friends reminded me to give myself lots of grace during this period and to take time to adjust. It helped to think of parenting as something my baby and I needed to figure out together.*

For some people, parenting feels natural and satisfying. For others, it takes time to figure out patterns and routines that feel right. You need a comfortable amount of space, privacy, and help—in ways that work well for you. The more secure you feel about your choices, the sooner you can relax and settle in. The key to a successful approach is to realize that what you do may not be the same as what others do. Make decisions about the practical issues that will work best for yourself and for your family.

It will take time to get into a regular rhythm. There are some things that lie outside of your influence, but there is also a lot that you can control. It helps to make a mental list of what matters to you and what does not. Things will go much more easily if you let go of the nonessentials and keep your expectations realistic.

When you feel frazzled, want to calm the chaos, or simply need a workable plan of action, it helps to have some practical steps in mind, especially for the first six weeks after the child comes home. Get back to basics and make sure that things work in a way that helps you thrive and not simply get by. The following strategies are essential for new parents and remain critical as children get older:

- **Take emergency and planned refreshers.** A five-minute break can energize and renew the body, mind, and spirit. Listen to music that makes you feel happy. Keep an inspirational book in the bathroom. Take short naps at every opportunity. Eat and rehydrate on schedule to nourish and renew so that you can be the best you.



- **Communicate well.** Effective teamwork takes practice. Talk ahead of time with your spouse or partner about what would help you the most. Be clear about what you want. Give specific instructions if you care how something is done. Be direct, so that others can feel effective in the ways they support you. Your gratitude will be genuine.
- **If you need help, get it.** Whether you need assistance with an errand or food delivered, don't wait until you feel desperate or out of sorts. If something doesn't work one day, make quick adjustments to get what you need rather than repeating yesterday's plan in the hope that things will turn out differently. A proactive mindset will make all the difference.
- **Speak up.** Don't be hesitant when talking with your lactation consultant, doctor, or pediatrician. Describe what you observe and what you want to know in detail. If you don't understand something, keep asking questions until you feel satisfied. Having adequate knowledge and resources will help you design an effective plan for the health and well-being of your child.
- **Protect your need for space.** If you need privacy, be sure to ask for it. If you don't want visitors right away when the child is born or comes home, say, "Thanks so much for caring. I look forward to spending time with you soon." Not everyone is comfortable figuring out things with others around. Set boundaries to protect your energy.
- **Maximize resources.** Reach out to parent-support groups, child and family services, and community and faith organizations. Find websites that suit your style and sense of humor. Make use of all available options to find information, inspiration, and encouragement.
- **Take notes.** Keep data on feeding and sleep schedules. Record what works and what doesn't. Write down questions and to-do notes as things cross your mind. Keep track of details when your child is ill. You can use these records when you visit the pediatrician or talk to others for advice.
- **Build relationships.** Parenting is not an isolation sport. Make friends in your parenting class if you are new to your area. Renew relationships with others who are parents you admire. Reach out to families at the local library, YMCA, or house of worship. Having people around you is so important. You need a support system

to bounce around ideas, share goals, and talk with when what you are doing is not working—and when things are going well. Nurturing friendships and keeping them strong will lead to more fun and helpful solutions to problems.

- **Laugh a lot.** Nothing helps more than to realize that you can't do much about spit up on your shirt except change the shirt and move on. Just laugh and remind yourself that this, too, will pass. Laughing releases positive endorphins and will make you feel better when challenging moments come.

Keeping a clear perspective helps you stay aware and sensitive to your child and to yourself. Start with the care and feeding—of you. Honor your needs. Nurturing yourself and your partner will set a lasting pattern for ongoing health and happiness.

## Gaining Insight into Your Emotions

*When I was growing up, our family had pleasant dinner conversations. If anyone started talking about something negative, my dad would clear his throat and we would know to change the subject. I love that I had that protected space.*

Many people know families that they want to emulate. Others may worry that they cannot be all that they hope to for their children. You may have role models in your past that you don't want to be like or who weren't able to give the love and nurturing you really needed. No matter what background you had, you can be a good parent. The lessons you have learned from your own life can now give you vision and determination to create a strong and healthy home.

Each family is unique. Maybe you were raised in a home where everyone covered up, but you married someone who runs around in a towel—or less. It may be that you talk openly about your feelings, but your significant other broods and doesn't get to the point. You may have a short fuse, and your partner may be the most patient person you know. Maybe you have a close, safe relationship with your own family, or perhaps you really need more distance. Reflecting on the past can give tremendous insight as you decide what will work best for you today.

Some people have experienced abuse as children. A dad reflected, "I think my parents spanked because they didn't know what else to do. They had a misguided belief that it

helped. Instead, I felt hurt and angry. I want to raise my children with respect and love and use high expectations but not pain. Our children are now four and eight and have never been spanked. They are the sweetest, most thoughtful girls. I love that I changed the pattern. We did it together.”

A mom said, “I was teased by my brothers and was determined to protect my own children. My mom was critical of my hair and clothes, so I let my daughter express herself. My father gave us the silent treatment, and even though I said I would never be like that, I find myself closing up when I feel upset. I want to work on this pattern and change it.”

Another mother shared this perspective. “When I grew up, I didn’t have a mom. My childhood held a great deal of anxiety. But when I became a mother, I realized that my friends were trying to be like their moms. I understood that I had the freedom to make this relationship with my children work in a way that was good for me. I never resented putting my children to bed or the sleep-deprived nights, because I knew what it was like not to have that kind of care. My past has made me grateful for every moment I have today. I appreciate the boys and love being able to nurture them. Because I didn’t have the love I wanted, I treasure being able to give it to my children.”

When you become a parent, you have the opportunity to choose. You can create life as you want it to be and become the kind of person you aspire to be. Talk with your

partner and other significant people helping to raise your child, and together figure out a path that works for you.

What really matters is the stability, faith, hope, and love that you bring forward.

Keep a journal and record experiences that go well for you. Take notes about areas that raise unfinished business. Some parents write poetry or prayers that reflect their hopes and commitments. Talk to a good friend or visit a professional counselor or clergy member if you find you want to understand and solve problems that revisit you often or if you desire healing for past experiences. Your children will benefit from your determination to be a truly healthy role model.

Treat the child the same way you do other important people in your life—the way you want him to treat you and others. Think before you speak: How would you want him to say that to you?

## Understanding the Power of Your Influence

*Memories of The Nutcracker and other holiday traditions meant a lot to me growing up. But the first time we planned a sleigh ride for our girls, I was so stressed getting out the door that I was still tense as we bundled together on the sleigh and the horses started down the road. I could feel my daughter looking up at me. She was watching to see if I was having fun. There may be times when your plans sound good, but the reality doesn't match your ideal.*

The root of empathy for yourself may have been affected by the way someone once spoke to you. "I am relaxed and can take things as they come, but when I am late, I feel so anxious!" a busy mom shared. "I remember how my dad would get upset with us when we were late. I am really trying to reorient that message with my own children." Making connections to the past can give us positive determination to speak kindly and be gentle with ourselves and our children in the present.

Respect can only truly be given to others when it is rooted in respect for the self. This begins in the way you talk to (and about) yourself. In the grocery-store aisle, you might mumble, "I'm an idiot. I left my shopping list at home." In the coffee shop, you might say, "I want a cookie, but I'm going to have to run three miles to make up for it." If you speak this way to yourself when your child is present, he sees and hears these messages.

What would happen if your child heard you say instead, "I left the grocery list at home. Can you help me remember what we need?" Or in the coffee shop: "I have been looking forward to my time with you. Why don't you pick out a cookie for yourself, and choose one for me? I will love whatever you decide." Wow. The world would be buzzing with positive feelings of respect if we all talked like that.

Children internalize the words they hear. Your affirmations or criticisms become their inner voice. They remember the experiences that make them feel competent or inept. They internalize a mindset of compassion or complaint based on the patterns set, often inadvertently, for them. Think carefully about and become purposeful in how you respond. It is important to see how your own actions and words can influence your child's developing life perspective.

One father said, "Treat your kids with respect. It seems simple enough, but it's not. As a parent, you feel that you are the boss. What you say goes. And while that can be true, your child is still a little person with a little soul who hears and absorbs anything and everything that you do."

Treat children the way you want to be treated—with respect and kindness. To do this, you need to set your inner voice to renewed empathy and acceptance. Write out a positive affirmation and post it in a visible place to remind yourself to stay grounded in respect. Accepting and valuing children begins with the determination to accept and value ourselves.

Parenthood can motivate us to become more honest and thoughtful about the way we live, knowing that we are leaving a lasting legacy and impacting the direction of our children's lives. Like a hand pressed into wet cement, our words leave a positive or negative impression that hardens over time and changes the perception children have about themselves and the world. Keeping the camera on the amazing strength of your own influence in the lives of your children is at the heart of positive parenting.

## Handling the Hard Work

*My kids are driving me crazy. They've been home three days in a row. I want to yell at them when they are climbing all over the house. They are bored, and I am at my wit's end. Being a parent is really hard.*

Parenting is one of the hardest jobs you'll ever do. In a typical day, you need a plastic mat under the highchair to catch spilled food, the laundry piles up, the babysitter calls in sick, and you need a break. Your three- and five-year-olds can't seem to stop squabbling, and the baby is teething. This day is going to require nerves of steel and determination.

Even more, you get little relief from constant requests. Someone needs you around the clock to soothe a hurt, give a kiss, wipe a bottom, and find a clean shirt or dry pajamas. When you're alone in the night rocking a teething baby, or when you're awakened at six in the morning by your preschooler, you may realize this is going to take a level of selflessness that you didn't know you had.

It is easy to get bogged down in the daily challenges, and some days will press your limits. Children have a way of letting us know what we are honestly made of. They reveal our true grit and make us dig deep for strength and faith. Your children's needs often will conflict with your own. It requires a lot of flexibility to make the best decision in the moment and to keep your priorities straight.

When you don't have time for a shower, can't get in the bathroom alone, and have already read their favorite books so many times that you can say the words by heart, you need a fresh perspective. This may be the time to scrap your plans, refocus attention, and tell yourself that you can do this. Be like the Little Engine That Could and repeat, "I think I can. I think I can," until you get through the day. Tomorrow, things really will feel better.

Stay aware of your limits. Get support and help when you need it. Don't wait until things are out of control and you feel like you are in over your head.

Big journeys are made up of small steps. Some days will make you feel like being a parent is so easy. Other times, you'll feel certain that you're not up for the challenge. The following ideas can help you find renewed strength and stamina and will remind you to focus on maximizing each moment.

- **Be realistic.** Don't overshoot the schedule. Make plans, but be willing to let things go.
- **Find (or beg for) company.** Have a family member or a friend come over for an hour to give you a mental-health break and an extra hand.
- **Plan a play date.** Invite another mom. Let the children romp in the living room or take turns holding babies.
- **Switch it up.** Scrap the routine, pack up the lunch, and eat outside. If it is raining, have a picnic on a blanket indoors.
- **Be creative.** Let the children pretend to go on vacation in their bathing suits with the tub as their pool. Provide water crayons that rinse off the tub and tile. Have a pajama party and play in bed during the day.
- **Get out.** Take the children to the library, the children's museum, or to the park. Pack them into the stroller or wagon for a walk around the block. It is worth the effort of putting on jackets, coats, mittens, and boots to get a breath of fresh air. The change of pace will do you all good.

- **Escape with a purpose.** Visit a pet store or petting zoo to explore the animals. Infants and toddlers, especially, will learn so much. Older children can return home to draw and talk about the animals they saw.
- **Retreat.** Grab the blankets and pillows, and cuddle on the couch and read books together. Make a fort. Add pillows and flashlights, and snuggle underneath.
- **Find a helper.** Invite an older child over to play with your younger children for a few hours. The helper can set up craft time and snacks or hold the baby while you have time to focus on needed tasks.
- **Sleep when you can.** When you are a new parent, go to bed when the children go to bed, and nap when they nap. It is tempting to tackle needed work, but you will accomplish twice as much in half the time after a few minutes (or hours) of blissful rest.

When you're having a hard day, it helps to focus on the child in front of you and to think about the outcomes you want to achieve. Reaching out to others for help really makes a difference. It is reassuring to know that you are not alone in the parenting journey.

## Surviving the Roller-Coaster Ride

*Parenthood is the biggest emotional roller coaster you will ever ride. Some days you will feel like you have been on it forever. Some days the ride is over almost before you get your seatbelt fastened. Embrace the moment. Realize you will never be the same. From now on, you will always be thinking about what you can do to improve your child's life—today and for the future. Enjoy it all. Cry when you need to. Laugh a lot. Have faith. Remember that what your child really needs is your love.*

A three-year old boy said, "I can tell when my mom is mad, because she walks like this!" He marched across the room with his feet wide and his hands on his hips. His facial expression looked just like hers. If you ask your children to "be you" and to show you what you look or sound like, you likely will be surprised at what they can do! They can capture Mom or Dad perfectly.

Even the best of us wish we could take back a moment gone wrong or rewind our words when frustrations happen. Children can tell right away if you are upset about something that just happened. You will have many moments that try your patience. When the toilet paper gets unrolled, the new crayons are used on the living-room wall, or that pretty flower arrangement has been pulled apart, recognize your limits and plan for better ways to handle things.

When you feel upset or frustrated, you can say, "I am sorry I got mad. Please forgive me. I wish I had been patient." When your child is upset, you can say, "I am sorry you're upset. I know you were playing. Let's read for a while together." It takes practice to manage the demands when you feel under pressure. Children forgive quickly, and they understand when things are frustrating.

Make sure you aren't living close to the emotional edge and that you keep a reservoir of strength and energy. When you are detached, children become clingier. When you are anxious, children become concerned. When you are rested, your reactions to everyone are gentler, your responses easier, and your temper less likely to be short. You will be able to handle the ups and downs when you've taken good care of yourself.

Children pick up on our emotions and responses. They model our ways of handling feelings, so you want to do your best to be good examples of healthy behavior.

## Taming Stress

*The last three texts to my mom were, "Sorry can't talk now. Taking family pics and Aiden stepped in poop," "CU later, John is hollering at kids," and "Help! Dog ate dinner off table." My stress level is through the roof, and more often than not, something gives. I hate it when it's my patience.*

With worry about finances, panic when you need to be in two places at once, interpersonal irritations, and lack of sleep, the pressures of raising children can pile up. Stress and children go hand in hand, and things are bound to be unpredictable. Staying connected as a family can help keep the bonds strong and flexible, so that you all work better together when things get rough. But ultimately, when stress becomes a pattern, it is time to decide what is important and what can be let go. Weed out the necessary from the optional.



- **Take a stress test.** Give yourself the “How painful is this?” test, like the one used in hospitals to gauge perceived pain. Keep track of your schedule, and assign a 1–10 rating for your stress level at various activities, with 10 representing unbearable stress and 1 signifying minimal stress. After several weeks, make a plan to change the way you handle the tasks and obligations that you rated consistently high in stress. If possible, let go of the high-stress activities.
- **Make small steps.** Don’t make stress relief an all-or-nothing proposition. You can’t ditch it all and take a vacation, and you can’t keep up the pace. Instead, take five-minute exercise breaks to rejuvenate. Enforce a ten-minute quiet time, during which everyone hangs out together but doesn’t talk. (Providing books and a snack may help.) Relax with your children, lying on the floor and listening to music to calm your nerves.
- **Maximize “now.”** If you’ve been at work and have come home to chaos, let everything wait. Push aside the cleaning and the ringing phone and the piled-up mail, and spend some focused time together. Children will never remember the mess, but they will remember your hugs and attention. Put their feelings and spirits first.
- **Review weekly.** Hold a once-a-week review meeting—with yourself. If your family’s stuff is piling up, put laundry baskets or cartons in those areas of the house. A contained mess feels less overwhelming than one that spreads out. You can tackle it later by the boxful.
- **Honor your way.** Stick to the kind of cleaning routine that works for you. If you prefer a weekly organizing binge, go for it. Or if it works better for you, complete one small project per day so that you stay on top of things. If you are not a daily mail opener, make sure it all heads to a single basket to be handled on Saturday morning over coffee.
- **Give yourself permission.** Accomplish just one of your top three chores. Let the other two go for today. Focus on the essentials.
- **Play office.** If you have “work” work to do, let children play office. Put a container or basket filled with markers, rulers, pencils, maze books, drawing books, tape, scissors, graph paper, and a clip board in your office space. They can sit with you and do their “work” while you do yours. Ask them to make a card or a sign for you.

They understand when you need to get things done. A little planning ahead can make all the difference.

- **Sit together.** When children are doing homework, sit with them to read, balance your checkbook, sort mail, or pay bills. It is a nice feeling to have your presence while they work, and you can share the quiet, focused time.
- **Add technology wisely.** For school-age children, educational games on a digital tablet can give you a few minutes to yourself. Just make this choice a now-and-then, special activity instead of your instant go-to. If you need critical work time on the computer, that's a good time to have children nearby "working" on their computer, too.
- **Keep emotional tanks filled.** Take a few minutes to tune in to your child's world. Before you shift your attention away to a necessary task, give a hug, spend a few minutes reading a book, or share a happy activity.
- **Try to keep things in perspective.** If you are safe, have a roof over your head, and your children are near, count those blessings. Breathe deeply, light a candle, pray, and repeat positive affirmations. Your child is learning from you how to handle tense moments and stressful interruptions. It will pay off for you to be able to keep calm and refocus your energy.

Remember the importance of taking good care of yourself physically as well as emotionally. Eat well, sleep well, and get plenty of exercise. You will cope better and serve as a good role model for your children.

A dad at the end of his sanity said, "I heard this great quote about how being negative only makes a difficult journey more difficult. The author and speaker Joyce Meyer said, 'You may be given a cactus, but you don't have to sit on it!'" Accepting what is and then making the most of it is a skill that will change your child's life and your own. This perspective gives you the option to determine what happens to you rather than to taking on the role of victim. Show your children that the way you respond matters by not blaming on someone else all of the things that go wrong.

## Taking Steps to Jump-Start Your Day

*We were constantly late leaving in the morning, and my daughter kept melting down. I realized how much my own feelings were wearing off on her. When I calmed down, she calmed down. We decided to put a “go to school” box by the door, and make sure things were there the night before. Also, I started getting up ten minutes earlier. It was painful at first, but that little change made a big difference. I could give more attention to help her.*

A positive morning routine can brighten the mood for the rest of the day. Nothing helps you feel so instantly great about being a parent like a morning routine that works or so discouraged about parenting when your morning doesn't go as planned. Taking a few minutes to reflect on what works well—and what needs tweaking—can make all the difference for your family. The following suggestions will get you started on a successful beginning to your day:

- Get up five minutes earlier to take a little time in the bathroom by yourself.
- Anticipate the timing to greet your child before he is fussy.
- Stay realistic about how much time you really need before you have to leave home, so that late experiences are minimized.
- Set up your morning coffee routine with mug ready the night before.
- Keep plenty of healthy grab-it-on-the-go breakfast options ready.
- Lay out clothes for yourself, so you don't need to find them when your child wakes up and needs you.
- Choose your child's clothes and set out needed books and materials the night before.
- Offer puzzles and books to keep your child occupied while you straighten up.
- Keep toothbrushes in a bathroom near the kitchen to streamline the routine.
- Play soothing music to boost the morning mood.

The key to an easier start is to set up a morning routine that works. Necessary activities should be fun for everyone—or at least doable! The person who may need to adjust most, of course, is you. You may need to go to bed earlier, which acts as a domino effect for revisiting evening routines. When things do not work, make adjustments right away.

## Allowing Imperfection

*Saturday morning shrieks and laughter wake me up from sleep. I roll out of bed to find my five-year-old sitting on the floor in the midst of cereal, and my four-year-old pouring milk. He smiles and says, "Look, Daddy! I can do it myself!" Option one is to scrape the cobwebs from my sleepy brain and gripe, "I told you to come get me before you came downstairs." But I know there are only fourteen more summers before these cute fellows head into the big world. So I say, "Yes, sir. You are getting so big! Let's clean this up together." Next week, I'll get to the kitchen first.*

It takes a gargantuan amount of energy to stay patient when your children's needs conflict with your own. It may seem like you'll never have enough sleep and that parenting will last forever. But you have only a limited time to make your mark. So as you pour your coffee or juice, congratulate yourself on finding your cool—and keeping the end goal in mind.

We all know the feeling of needing a break, checking out emotionally instead of checking in, or wishing we could change our attitudes. It's easy to feel discouraged, and it takes time and patience to put new plans in place. Just as you don't expect perfection of yourself, be patient and give your children time to gain skills. When you feel frustrated or wish your children would "just grow up," remember that they learn—just like you do—step by step. They need your cheering and encouragement so that they feel good about their efforts.

Some of us spend a lifetime sorting out who we are from what we do. Once learned, perfectionism is a lens that can affect your vision for years to come. The messages we pick up shape the way we see ourselves and others. Your children are vulnerable to your words. If you force your children to be perfectionistic by criticizing, this can feel devastating. Negative words instill a basic hesitancy and insecurity at the core of a child's inner self. However, words of affirmation take root in a child's spirit and foster freedom to try new things and to grow.

If you have experienced criticism in the past, replace those negative messages with new affirmations. Look in the mirror and say, "This is going to be okay. You are enough. You have what it takes to accomplish this day. You can do this." Start by showing kindness and compassion for your own experience.

If you can embrace a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunity to be alive and present in each day, to accept your own unique perspectives, feelings, and gifts, then you can gain strength. You may wrestle briefly with the struggles but choose to grow. Celebrate the journey set before you. Nourish yourself with care so that you can grow fully into all you were meant to be.

In the same way, let your children know that they are enough for you. When they try to help and the results aren't perfect, let it go. When they make a mistake, forgive. When they need patience, show grace. When things are not going well, give a hug. Through your response, they can see that your love never wavers. They can know you are here for the long haul, ready to teach and guide, and that you will stay in their corner to cheer them on. All children need this pillar of strength behind them.

**Don't demand perfection.**

**Cheer the effort that sorted the toys, rather than focus on a stray few that have been left behind. Focus on good habits that are developing.**

You can't make life perfect, but stay sensitive to the way you come across. The way you speak, your body language, your tone of voice, and your facial expression all create meaning as much as the words you say. Becoming aware of yourself helps you understand how much your words have the power to encourage or discourage your children.

Children learn they are "just right" by the way you are patient and kind. You can't wait to talk with them and hear their ideas. You enjoy watching them work and play. You love being with them and love your time with them.

You need to say these things out loud as well as show them in your actions. We all want to know that we are valued and honored for who we are. It helps to consider the messages we give.

- **Focus on internal character qualities rather than on physical attributes.**

The stress to conform to physical standards puts children in jeopardy of self-doubt.

Focus comments on inner traits, such as kindness, caring, effort, and a sense of humor.

- **Monitor words that reveal attitudes.** Children are sensitive to our ideas. If they hear you demean someone else, they know you have the capability to feel the same way about them. If they hear you put them down, the labels stick like glue and are difficult to pull out of their memories. If you had critical parents, this tendency is something you need to monitor. Remember the old adage, “If you can’t say something kind, don’t say anything at all.”
- **Focus on what matters.** Compliment for what went well instead of focusing on what went wrong. Rather than focusing on your child’s mistake, say, “You are making so much progress!” “You worked so hard,” “You were such a big help,” or “You are learning how to do it.”
- **Don’t cry over spilled milk.** When mishaps occur, be reassuring, even if there’s a mess. It’s okay to say, “I know you’ll be more careful next time.” It also is important to acknowledge the child’s feelings. “I am so sorry the milk spilled. I know you feel bad. It’s okay. We can clean it up together.” Not only will this reassure your child, but it will help you stay calm, as well.
- **Nurture the spirit.** Words of encouragement will foster the traits you hope for in yourself and in your children: “You handled that upset so well. I am so thankful for all the ways you are growing.” Give a blessing to yourself and to your child. Children long for our reassurance. Cheerful words can turn around a gloomy moment, and a spirit of thankfulness can soften a child’s heart.

Freedom from perfection and fear will come when you ignore the pressures and images of the perfect mother or father and become the person of your own heart—fully present and growing in love with patience for yourself and others. Once you know how good this acceptance feels, you can pass on it to your children. Once they know how good this feels, they can give this gift to their own children one day—and to others in their lives. They will become caring and thoughtful teens, because the roots of empathy and respect will have grown strong and deep during their childhood years.

## Embracing Your Personal Style

*What works for your family is best for your family. I've talked to other women who have recently had babies, and they do things differently than I do. They may not cosleep, or they may schedule feedings instead of being on demand. In the end, it's not about what other people think is right or wrong. It's what helps your family bond and adapt the best—and get the most sleep!*

Every child needs to be able to trust that the adult will be consistent.

What comes next?  
Does the routine feel familiar? Children will relax and gain confidence when they can trust what is happening.

The key to getting it right as a parent is to take into account our own needs and lifestyle. If you are a night owl, your child may go to bed later than if you were an early-to-bed type. If you are a creative spirit instead of an organizer, those toys strewn on the carpet may not seem like an issue. If you like things in a line, put away, or tidy, then you will keep a greater sense of order. It is not the minor details that matter to your child's sense of security but the consistency of your approach and routine.

You are the center of your child's sense of security. When baby is hungry, he will learn to count on what happens next. If he knows you will come quickly when you hear him,

he will cry less and be easier to soothe. Instead of becoming anxious, he gets to know your sounds and regular patterns. He understands when he is changed, tucked in his jacket, and buckled in the car seat that he is going to Grandma's house or to the store. When he finds you are consistent, he chills out and happily goes along with your plans.

Older children also become accustomed to your way of doing things. We each have a special manner of relating and specific habits of living. You may be a take-along kind of parent and feel comfortable bringing your child with you when you are running errands. Or you may prefer to leave your child with someone when you go out. The way you laugh, the conversations you enjoy, and even the way you move and talk are unique.

Embracing your own personal style can help you keep a sense of balance and joy. What matters most is the warm, centered responsiveness you bring to your interactions that respects and honors your child's needs in each moment.

Becoming mindful of the effects of routines and activities can help you become more aware of what is happening as children respond. It will pay off to consider what works best for you and then aim to establish and keep a regular pattern. Your goal is to better understand how your consistency can positively influence your children's reactions.

- **Keep a spiral notebook or a calendar system.** This easy-to-find resource can help you manage your appointments, keep track of needed items, and update your to-do list.
- **Plan a daily schedule in blocks of time.** Note what works well and what needs to be adjusted. Over a few weeks, you will arrive at a basic schedule that best suits your child and your needs.
- **Write down sweet and funny moments.** You will want to record new words or something funny that was said. Keep track of growth, milestones, first steps, and first days of school. You are keeping a record of memories for your family and for your child.
- **Record items for attention.** Perhaps you notice something that is not working well. Jot it down as a reminder to consider alternative approaches or solutions. Your goal is to find out what works.
- **Make habits stick.** Put your keys in the same place every time. At the end of a phone conversation, return the phone to a specific place in the room. When mail comes, take out the bills immediately and put them in a ziplock bag or a basket that contains nothing else. When you want to save a receipt, put it immediately into a container marked for that purpose. According to the 2004 article "Clean Freaks" published by *Newsweek*, the average American spends between fifteen minutes to an hour or more a day looking for what we cannot find. How much better to avoid frustration and spend that time with the ones we love.
- **Create special memories.** Your family traditions may be waffles for breakfast on Sundays or a particular dish for New Year's Eve dinner. You may sing a special song at a meal or make a silly rhyme for getting in the car. Choose activities that make you truly happy. Enjoy these moments as they occur.



Children love to remember and to look forward to things they can count on. It gives them a sense of stability, predictability, and belonging to talk about the day's events. Even before children can talk, the sound of your voice talking about what you did together reassures them. Sharing what you plan to do tomorrow when children go to bed can help them sleep happily with anticipation for what will come. When you establish these kinds of connections through routines and traditions, you make parenting work for you.

Each day brings a fresh opportunity to create the kinds of relationships with your children that will prepare them for the teen years ahead—and that will nurture a life of trust and lasting connections with others. These relationships are the heart of parenting and form the center of a meaningful and fulfilling journey of love. Children inspire us to become our best selves. As you aim for the future, you can parent with confidence, knowing you are building a strong foundation that will last.

*As author Elizabeth Stone says, "Making the decision to have a child—it's momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking outside your body." You anticipate the love, but you don't really know until your baby gazes at you with absolute trust. Then you know you will do anything at all to live up to his belief in you.*

Parenting can inspire you with a fresh vision and give you the opportunity to renew empathy and kindness toward yourself and others.

- **Be positive.** Children are watching all of the time. They will do what they see. They catch your tone of voice and expressions. What you give to them in positive energy and sensitive words will come back to you in your children's voice and behavior. They will adopt your behavior, values, and attitudes.
- **Be responsive.** Mirror children's body language. Make conversation reciprocal as you talk about your day. Keep getting to know your child. Ask yourself, "What can I do to comfort, encourage, and build my child's security and confidence?" "What does my child need from me right now?"
- **Plan realistic time expectations.** Add five minutes to your timetable for each additional person when you need to go somewhere or get something done. If you

are not sure how long you need, use a timer to find out. That will give you a true picture, so that you can make adjustments next time.

- **Respond later.** When someone invites you to do something, say, “Thanks for asking. Let me have some time to think about it, and I will get back to you.” Take time to weigh your options.
- **Take mini-breaks to fuel your mind, body, and spirit.** Enjoy a few deep breaths. Stretch. Pray. Look outside your window and take in the changing seasons or beautiful day to keep yourself centered.
- **Don't compare.** All of us have different temperaments, different ways of living, and different needs. It may look like someone else has it all together, but every parent is working hard to make things happen. Push away inner doubts and focus only on the people and things that inspire you to feel and be positive about all you are doing. Borrow creative ideas from others—only if those work for you.

