

Skills for Good Parenting: Elementary Ages – Focus on the Child

Focus on the child. As parents, we need to keep our child's developmental level in mind in everything we do. At this age, your child is beginning to become self-sufficient and to be independent from your family. Friendships are very important to her. It is important for your child to develop and maintain a positive self-image, since this will help them make good choices and resist negative peer pressure and bullying.

We want to separate the behavior from the child. The Center for Parenting Education's "Consequences Made Easy" puts it nicely:

Parents use consequences as a result of their children's behaviors. But while concerning yourself with your children's actions, you need to discipline in a way that keeps your child's self-esteem intact. You can do this by not ridiculing or shaming them as you discipline them.

Aside from not tearing them down, you can actually build their self-esteem by holding them accountable and having expectations for their behavior – the message given is: "You are capable of doing better. I expect more of you."

Such expectations tell children that they possess the ability to behave, tolerate disappointment and frustration, delay gratification, grow, and do better – all of which builds their self-esteem.

Self-sufficiency and self-confidence emerge and begin to develop in elementary age children. Help your child develop her sense of right and wrong, both through conversation and action. Find ways to talk about respecting others, and what to do when others are not kind or respectful to her. Remember that often your own actions speak more powerfully than your words.

Discipline should be used to guide and protect, not make your child feel bad about himself. It should help your child develop a sense of responsibility for his actions. Establish clear rules, provide the reasons for the rules, and then stick to them. If you and your son have already discussed what you expect him to do when goaded or dared to engage in a risky behavior, he will be clear on how he should respond, which will increase his self-confidence.

Label a specific behavior as problematic, don't label your child. Use "I" statements when expressing displeasure with their behavior or actions, and be clear on why you are displeased. "It is not smart to ride your bike when you aren't wearing your helmet. I am worried that you will get hurt. That is why we have a rule that you must wear your helmet when riding bikes." The more direct and specific you are, the greater the impact you will have on your child, and the more likely it is that she will remember what you have told her and act appropriately.

As a parent, you will spend a great deal of time on instant replay, helping your child to walk through what he did, what happened, and to discuss what he should have done. This replaying gives him a roadmap for making better choices. In the same way that you spent endless hours

helping him learn to walk, now you need to spend time helping him to establish healthy patterns of behavior.

Keep in mind the child's temperament (see resources for information about different temperaments) and their fit within the environment. Perhaps you're a very calm, casual, laid-back parent, and your child is highly anxious. This is a difference in temperament and fit. You may need to adjust your parenting style to match your child's temperament.

You need to continue to encourage your child to be who they are, not fall into gender stereotypes. Your son or daughter is dealing with so much pressure to conform, do everything you can to help them be true to who they are. It's too early to cut off possibilities, especially as children this age are becoming more independent and defining who they are for themselves. We want to think about what examples we're setting for our children and what assumptions we're making. How might we challenge those and provide more varied opportunities?

While your child is beginning to become independent from the family, you are still her model, and your reaction to a situation is where she will begin as she figures out how to approach the world. She is seeing you in many different situations throughout the day, including your reaction to that driver who cut you off in traffic, to your spouse who came home late from work, or to the glass of water you knocked over on the dinner table. She is watching all these things and learning from you. If you stop and think about how you want your daughter to act in a given situation, you may want to adjust your own behavior accordingly.

You are not the only role model for your child, but you are probably still the most important one. Be the adult you want your daughter to grow up to be.

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