

## The Golden Rules of Parenting

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Above and beyond all the psychobabble and developmental theory, far more important than the latest gadget and more critical to good parenting than any dozen books or lectures or classes, is one basic principle. Caregivers who genuinely grasp this principle tend to raise healthy kids and find pleasure in the process. Others who don't get it, who go through the motions without the meaning, tend to raise angry, needy and resentful children. Call it the golden rule of parenting:

**Do unto your children as you would have others do unto you.**

Our kids are not possessions. They're not pets. They're not servants. True, they're immature, dependent, needy and often completely irrational, but they're not robots awaiting your command. From the moment of birth (if not before), each child is a unique person with distinct tastes and opinions, preferences and needs. Each and every child, regardless of intellect or skin color or size or shape, strength or weakness, deserves our respect as much as they need the love and limits and food and clothing and shelter that you provide.

Perhaps you've met other adults who seem entirely self-centered. They can only talk about themselves, never asking about your thoughts or feelings. These people make most of us uncomfortable. Adults like to be noticed, valued and validated. Your kids do too.

**Have you taken the time to meet your son (or daughter)?** Do you know what he thinks and feels and values? Have you asked what his favorite music is and why? Can you put aside your adult priorities long enough to enter his world of play? To crawl around on the floor? To drive a toy car or dress a doll or build with blocks? More than buying the latest video games and supervising homework, more than paying the rent and driving him to lessons, your time and genuine interest expresses your caring. When your kids know that you genuinely value them, that you want to know what they think and feel, they can begin to value themselves.

**Leave the teaching to the teachers.** Most (but not all) of the time, it's less important for you to tell your kids how to do something, than to ask them how they think it should be done.

Does this mean that your family should become a democracy? Should parents and kids alike each get one vote in every decision? Of course not. Caregivers must always collaborate in the process of making important decisions for children. Your kids may not like your decision, but they are reassured when they know that you are in charge. Kids often say that they want to make important decisions (when to visit an absent parent, for example), but rarely have the emotional maturity and experience necessary to do so.

**Whenever possible, go ahead and ask your kids what they think.** "How would you feel if ...?" is a good way to start. Let them know that you will always take their opinions into consideration, even if you don't agree.

### **Do unto your children as you would have them do to you?**

Yes. Expect that your kids will do as you do and not necessarily as you say. The best guarantee that your kids will treat you with respect, will learn to control their emotions and consider others' thoughts and feelings is your example of the same.

How do you expect a spanking to correct a child's violence? Why would you think that yelling will help a child control his temper? That swearing will teach a child not to be profane? That insults will teach a child to be respectful?

### **Do unto your children as has been done to you?**

Are you a healthy, happy person? Will you be proud to have raised your kids the same ways your parents raised you? If so, the answer is easy.

If not, day-to-day parenting decisions can feel like a mine field.

Many adults who experienced serious trauma and loss as children find that they have no perspective in these same matters as parents. Without a healthy baseline, its easy to become extreme, to overcompensate in one direction or another.

Adults who were neglected by their caregivers, for example, often discover that they are emotionally suffocating their children for fear of recreating their own experience of neglect, only then to swing to the other extreme, apparently unable to find a healthy balance between the two. Others who experienced extreme discipline and even abuse, often become too lenient for fear that they will themselves become too strict or violent, only then to become frustrated that their kids are disrespectful or out of control.

If this is your experience, you likely need the support of trusted others who can help you find a healthy perspective on how you grew up as opposed to how you might raise your children. Co-parents, clergy, neighbors, support groups, pediatrician s and mental health professionals can all offer this kind of perspective, each in differing ways.

### **-----Parenting Pointer -----**

Take time every day to live inside your child's head, to see the world from his (or her) eyes. Once you can put aside your grown-up stresses, turn off the phone and the computer and let supper wait an extra fifteen minutes, the rest is easy. Let him lead the way. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. Within the limits of safety, there are no rules except his. Join him in his play, in his way, and you'll be a better parent for it.

Can you find a half hour of "special" play time each day? Can you make a point to ask about school and friends, opinions and interests? Avoid many of the frustrating "I don't know" answers by being specific. Instead of asking, "How was school?" try, "What

happened in gym class today?" or "Did you finish the art project we talked about yesterday?"

At the least, talk about feelings: "What made you happy (sad? mad? scared?) today?" Listen to the answers without being pushy or judgmental. Respond to them just as you would like others to respond to your feelings. Go ahead and share your feelings, too, always recognizing that some parts of your adult life should only be shared with other adults. Do these things every day, and watch the quality of your relationship grow.