

No Matter What

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Watch her sleep.

That's all it really takes. Put away your day. Shelve your worries about the bills, forget the supper time struggle about eating her beans or going to the dance or borrowing the car. Take a long, slow deep breath and remember what's really important. How really important she is to you, no matter the struggles. No matter how mad she can make you. Watch her sleep. Watch her eyelids flutter in dream. Regain your perspective.

This job that you're doing, raising a child, is certainly the most emotionally demanding, physically exhausting and critically important job anyone could ever do. Of course it grinds you down. Of course your confidence sags. Of course you make mistakes. We all do. Learn from them. Grow with her. But never lose perspective on what matters. Whether she ties her shoes or brushes her teeth or does her homework or breaks her curfew is important. These may even be limits worth setting and battles worth fighting but in the end they're not really what matters.

Wearing a seat belt, a bike helmet or a life vest. Eating well and exercising and managing media wisely. Working hard at school, getting good grades, participating in extra-curriculars. Choosing friends carefully, knowing when and how to say "no," finding words to talk through feelings. These things are critically important. They must never be neglected. But they're not what really matters.

What matters is the constancy of you're your caring. The genuine, unconditional, ever-present warm-and-fuzzy love that you give her always. All ways.

You are her emotional anchor. Your love and acceptance is the foundation upon which she is slowly building her self, one story at a time, like a skyscraper approaching maturity. Your constancy steadies her and allows her to build higher.

We're all human. We all have emotions and, in fact, you must have emotions if you want her to discover how to have her own. The challenge is to paint your emotions against the constant background of your love and acceptance, to never allow her limit-testing and button-pushing and name-calling rage and terror and grief to shake your foundation of caring. Both your words and your actions must express that your caring is unconditional no matter how her behavior might shock and anger and embarrass and terrify you.

How can you do this?

The first step is to realize that this is a goal that every parent must always work toward, even if none of us ever succeeds all of the time. Of course she gets under your skin. Certainly she enrages you now and again. So you find some healthy outlet for the anger. You talk it through with your co-parent, you run it off at the gym, you write it out in your journal until you're calm enough to stand there in the dark, soaking in the quiet and watch her sleep.

She's just a child, you realize. She's still learning. She feels safe with you so she shows you her feelings. Sometimes she lashes out. Sometimes she's even cruel. Part of growing up is about pushing you away. It has to be. But you're strong. You're the adult. You can stand firm and steady to give her permission to discover who she is and how to cope. When she's ready, you can teach her how to let out those feelings that must seem so scary and overwhelming to her without hurting herself or other people. Until then, you'll be constant.

Does this mean ignoring unacceptable behavior? Letting foul language or destructive actions or forbidden choices slide? Never. Part of your job as that steady, constant foundation is to enforce the rules, but always calmly and consistently. She may never thank you for those rules. She certainly won't be grateful when you enforce them. But knowing that there are rules and that you follow through consistently and calmly is part of what makes you her foundation. Loud as she screams, bitterly as she complains, hard as she thrashes, you are steadying her. Helping her to feel safe and secure. The second step is to take care of you.

How do you get refueled? How do you replenish your own emotional gas tank so that you have the calm, mature resources immediately available when next she pushes your buttons?

You must have your own adult resources. The guys at the gym. The group at the church. Your best book buddy or neighbor or therapist or Rabbi or tennis partner or your own mother or father or sister or brother. Do you talk to your dog? To yourself in the car? Do you keep a journal or diary? Write in an online chatroom? E-mail your best friend from college? Anything that nurtures you, that helps to decrease your blood pressure, slow down your breathing and gives you a moment's relief from the stress, just enough so that you regain your perspective and remember what really matters so that you can tiptoe into her room, listen to her slow, steady breathing and watch her sleep.

Beware of those choices that may seem to refuel you when, in fact, they're only draining away your last healthy energies. Alcohol and drugs. Gambling. Thrill-seeking. Hurtful relationships. Escapes that run up unmanageable bills or put off things that really can't wait. These choices may feel good for a moment, may seem to recharge you but often leave you emptier afterwards than when you started. You're not alone if you've made these unhealthy choices in the past. There are groups and professionals that can help. Start with your own primary care physician. Ask for help so that next time you have

healthier choices to consider because its not just you that you're hurting any more. Its that precious child asleep in her bed, no matter how old, no matter what troubles have come before and no matter what challenges may lay ahead. Watch her sleep. Wish her sweet dreams. Promise her that you'll always do your best to give her the unwavering caring and acceptance that every person needs, that you know she deserves no matter what.

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

"Yeah, right!" You're thinking. Easier said than done.

"Calm? How am I supposed to stay calm when she's screaming 'I hate you in my face?'"

Which of these choices might work best for you?

1. **What's the message in your head?** Many parents lose their cool not because of what the child is saying or doing, but because of how they are interpreting those words and behaviors. "I'm a bad parent!" "What will the neighbors think?" "She never does this to my husband. What am I doing wrong?" Once you realize that the message in your head is undermining your calm, change it. Talk it through with someone you trust: "Honey, am I really a bad parent?" When you're more confident in yourself and your own parenting choices you'll be calmer and firmer and so will your kids.

2. **Walk away.** Start with, "I won't allow you to mistreat me. I'm going in the [kitchen]. When you're able to talk to me respectfully we can try this again."

3. **Tag a parenting partner in.** Start with, "I'm too [mad] to deal with this calmly. I'm going to ask your [dad] to talk this through to you while I think this through. I'll be back in [5] minutes to try again."

4. **Close your eyes, take one deep breath and imagine her sleeping.** How fragile and vulnerable she seemed. How much you love her. Open your eyes in this perspective and deal with the crisis calmly. Be matter-of-fact and constructive and firm and always, all ways loving.