

Common Parenting Missteps and some Better Alternatives

1. *Poor self care.* You can't be a good parent if you are running on empty. This is especially true if you are parenting a temperamentally challenging child. Parents need to identify a variety of things which refuel them. This also includes time to process feelings about parenting a temperamentally challenging child which may include grief, anger and feeling that it isn't fair that daily life is so hard.
2. *Trying to fix a bad mood.* Parents often feel bad when their child is unhappy or are simply tired of a cranky mood. However spending a lot of time trying to convince a child that things aren't so bad or jumping through hoops to try and cheer up a child who is in a bad mood is unlikely to work. It's more likely to foster a power struggle between parent and child about whether or not things are bad. The child remains unconvinced and parents often end up feeling put out that their child is unresponsive and unappreciative of their efforts. A better alternative is to be sympathetic to a child's bad mood in a neutral fashion with one or two sentences, "I'm sorry you're having a bad day", and perhaps an offer of a hug, or, "Is there anything I can do to help?" and leave it at that.
3. *Too big of a response.* No TV for a month for talking back, all toys removed from room after a tantrum, etc. You'll run out of options quickly this way. The goal should be an effective response rather than a bigger and bigger response.
4. *Being inconsistent by changing styles or thinking on one's feet and deciding how to respond on the spur of the moment.* Parents tend to be inconsistent if they let their mood and energy level dictate their responses. And when parents feel pressured to come up with an immediate response it's not thought out and often not the best choice. Most situations are not an emergency. Better to tell your child you'll need to talk about it later than to say or do something you'll regret.
5. *Not following through.* Consequences never come about. Sometimes this is because parents are threatening too many consequences and it's hard to follow through with all of them. Sometimes the consequences are unreasonable to begin with such as threatening to call the police for a young child's misbehavior or threatening to leave a child at home who isn't ready to go or to leave them at the park or store. Better to go in the next room and scream and breathe and come back with some composure and confidence.
6. *Being too serious.* It's easy for everyone to get worn out if everything is serious. Use of humor can help deescalate and de-stress everyone. If you catch a situation early enough use of humor can help to turn it around. It's also good modeling for children.
7. *Not prioritizing concerns.* When parents respond to too much both parents and children get worn out. Children think that table manners are as important as safety issues when parents don't prioritize. And when children feel like they are in trouble all the time it's not worth trying to behave well. It's also a set up for parents to be inconsistent. It's hard to remember and have the energy to follow through on with too many plans. When parents get sloppy about their follow through children don't take them

seriously and parents start to say that the situation is hopeless. They feel like they tried everything and nothing works.

8. *Asking children directly how they feel.* I think asking children direct questions is overrated. It tends not to work very well. Adults often hate to hear a child say, "I don't know" in response to being asked how she or he feels. Most likely they aren't being evasive, they truly don't know. And a lot of children feel really uncomfortable being put on the spot and may squirm, start to act out or try to figure out the answer they think the adult is looking for. Better to take a back door approach. Wonder out loud. "I bet you must have been really angry when I was late to pick you up". Sometimes children will join in to agree, add to or modify what is being said but the trick is to look at the air and the wall and the ceiling without requiring a response. The object is to help the child become aware of their feelings, let them know that a range of feelings is normal and that the adult is trying to be in their ball park and can be approached about these feelings if the child wishes. If the child's behavior changes parents can be sure they were on the right track and in any case they have opened a door rather than closed one.
9. *Not planning for predictable difficult times.* Crossing one's fingers and hoping tomorrow will be better tends not to be very effective. Parents are often afraid of talking about difficult times when things have calmed down. They don't want to go there or rock the boat. Sometimes they are simply running on empty and haven't noticed patterns. They simply deal with things anew as they come up.
10. *Reacting and parenting from a judgmental place. Assuming child is "unappreciative" of parents or siblings, "mean", etc.* If behavior is temperament related child is probably coping as best he or she can. Be sympathetic and respond using techniques to fit child's needs and abilities.