

# About Raising Children

An English translation of a Spanish publication of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas A&M University, entitled "Acerca de la Crianza de Niños ." Translated by permission.



"Based on your experiences with your own children, what is the best advice that you could give about raising children?"

This question was posed to 50 adults who had raised their own children "successfully." Their children, all grown, are considered successful since they are productive adults that apparently have adjusted well to our society. Able parents are those that have the best chance of knowing what will truly bring the best results in the family environment. The results of the survey reveal what seems to be a "parenting instinct" when it comes to raising children. Although the majority of respondents were members of traditional two-parent families, these principles can be applied in other circumstances. For example, single parents or parents in families where both work outside of the home may not have a lot of time to spend with their children but the quality of their time together--playing and talking with their children and doing things together as a family--is equally important. Similarly, although the interviewed parents emphasized the importance of good matrimonial relations and the importance of spending time with your spouse, single parents should make time to spend time alone or participate in activities with other adults.

The most frequent responses of the parents can be summarized in 10 basic principles about which there seems to be general agreement. Although they are not new, these rules of raising children can serve as a useful guide for parents, teachers, daycare workers and others that care for children.

## **Love Abundantly**

The most important job is to love and be truly interested in your children. This not only gives them a sense of security, belonging, and support, but also soothes the difficulties of childhood. The love of a mother or father should be special in two ways:

First, love should be constant and unconditional--love must always be there, even when the child is behaving terribly. Second, the parents should express and show their love openly so that the children never doubt its presence. This means that parents should hug and praise their children at every possible opportunity.

## **Discipline in a Positive Way**

Discipline means establishing and adhering to rules of behavior. After love, the parents stress the importance of giving a clear direction and making sure that the children comply with your rules of conduct. Discipline is an essential preparation for the outside world. It will make your child happier and better behaved. It is better to use positive statements and say "Do this" more often than "Don't do that." It is essential to punish the child when you say you will. Be firm saying what you will do and doing what you have said. Punish them as soon as possible after the bad behavior. Don't lay the burden on your spouse saying, "Wait till your father (or mother) gets home!" Aside from being firm and prompt with your punishment, the parents describe the following qualities of positive discipline.

**Be consistent.** Don't weaken the rules established by your spouse. Disagreements over raising the child should be settled in private— never in front of the children.

**Be clear.** Establish clear rules and explain them clearly in advance. The child should never be in doubt about the rules.

**Administer the punishment in private.** If it is possible, never punish the child in front of others. This tends to provoke enmity in the child and may make him act even worse in order to save face.

**Be reasonable and comprehensive.** Explain why instructions are being given: "The stove is hot. Please get away from it so that you don't burn yourself." Nevertheless, don't be afraid to say, "Do it because I say so." Try to understand the child's point of view and meet him halfway. This will give you better relations.

**Be flexible.** With adolescents, negotiation is a useful approach. Once in a while, it is good for the parent and child to adjust the rules a little. Also, what works with one child may not work with another. The personality of the child is a key factor.

**Discourage continuous dependence.** Try to increase the role of the child when it comes to decisions that affect his or her life. When your children reach adolescence, encourage them to be independent, knowing that you have done everything possible to teach them good morals.

**Be authoritative.** If you hesitate or are indecisive, or if you feel guilty when you discipline your children, you may be doing it badly. Remember that you have years of experience, so be firm in your decisions. Never let a child change your mind about a punishment that you feel is necessary. Have confidence in your own common sense.

The parents also discussed the most effective type of punishment. They said that when a child hurts someone else or destroys property, the child should apologize and, when necessary, make restitution with his or her own money. Sending them to their room or denying them some favorite activity was also considered a good punishment. What is more, the fathers and mothers generally agreed that spanking (a rapid slap on the butt) the child is OK when necessary. They warned that the child should never be bruised, hit in a head, or hit just to satisfy the anger of the parents. This corresponds to the majority of surveys which show that the majority of parents (approximately 85 percent) spank their children once in a while.

## Spend Time Together

"Spend a lot of time with your children" was a frequent recommendation. The parents said that this time should be spent:

**Playing**—Spend some time every day playing with your children. The only purpose of this play should be to have fun--not to influence them.

**Talking together**—Have real conversations with your children--times when both listen and respond sincerely.

**Giving instructions** —Actively give instructions to your children to do such routine activities like cooking or repairing something.

**Encouraging family activities** —Family spirit and a feeling of belonging develop by doing things together. Take a walk together regularly, eat special meals, and spend holidays together. Attend social, sports, and religious events together. One father recommended that families watch less television, playing family games or playing musical instruments together instead. Another said "you can't bribe children with things (toys and television) instead of spending time with them."

## **Attend to Personal and Matrimonial Necessities**

Some parents pointed out that personal adaptation is an important first step in raising children effectively. One noted that in order to get along well with children one had to like one's self. Another said, "You don't need to sacrifice yourself completely for the family but rather set aside a little time for personal enjoyment." About treating yourself well, this parent thought, "You avoid the sensation of being mistreated, abused and taken advantage of when something goes wrong." A good sense of humor about one's own faults as well as the misfortunes of life was also thought to be an important part of personal adaptation.

Parents also commented that love, respect and fidelity between spouses added necessary security in a family. Two comments made during the survey are especially useful:

"A house where love is expressed openly is a house where the children flourish. Expressing your love for your children with words is not enough. Parents should make an effort to let the children see passion and tenderness in the matrimonial relationship. Parents should not underestimate the importance of showing delight each time their spouse enters the house. A greeting in the morning and a good-night kiss help to create an environment which encourages a similiar tenderness in the children."

"A husband and wife will probably be successful parents if they give the highest priority to their marriage. It may seem that such closeness would put the children on a lower level but this is rarely the case. Happy mothers and fathers have the greatest chance of having happy children when the role of the child is clearly and carefully defined. Households where the children are central do not produce happy parents nor children."

These observations put in relief what many parents do not admit to themselves but what experts are finding: children tend to diminish rather than strengthen the intimacy between husband and wife. Recent studies reveal that the satisfaction that couples feel tends to diminish after the birth of the first child. With minor variations, the said satisfaction remains at the lower level while the children are growing up and improves only when the youngest child has left the house. So, one parent pointed out that it is necessary to maintain the intimacy with your spouse by means of free week nights, weekends without the children, tender greetings and considerate surprises.

## **Teach Them Right From Wrong**

Many of the responses pointed out the importance of actively teaching values and basic morals so the children can comport themselves well in society. Parents found the following methods of socializing their children useful: assigning household tasks and responsibilities; religious affiliation; insistence that the children treat others with kindness; respect and honesty; emphasis on table manners and social graces in the house; part-time jobs outside of the house when the children are old enough and setting examples of integrity and honor. The successful parents also emphasized that they thought that parents should state their morals clearly and discuss them with their children.

Specific commentaries include:

“Make the children conscious of correct values: conduct, financial responsibility and so on. When they misbehave, parents should communicate in a way that encourages them to listen — don’t be rigid or permissive but firm, so that the children know your exact position.”

“Teach your children to respect other people, be honest and treat others as they themselves would want to be treated.”

“All children should be taught the difference between right and wrong, respect for others and their property, and respect for their elders.”

“Teach them the value of truth. I remember telling the children many times that if they tell us the truth, we will do everything possible to help them, that by knowing the real facts, we will be able to deal with erroneous statements on the part of others. However, if they lie to us, we will be of little help because we will not be able to count on them.”

## **Develop Mutual Respect**

The parents emphasized the necessity of insisting that all the members of the family treat each other with respect. This means that parents should behave respectfully towards their children. Parents should say “thank you” and “excuse me” when necessary, apologizing to the children when they are wrong, show an active interest in the activities and TV programs of the children, always be honest and sincere with the children, not favor one child in the family, fulfill their promises and show faith in the character and judgment of the children. Parents should also insist on being treated with respect by the children. If parents treat each other with respect and love and teach the children to respect them, a solid base will be established.

## **Truly Listen**

Parents should truly listen to their children from their earliest years. This means giving their

entire attention, putting aside their own thoughts and beliefs and trying to see the child's point of view. As one parent said: "Without worrying about how busy you are, listen to your child as a person. Listening means understanding and communicating and not only the physical act of hearing." It also means talking in the child's language encouraging the expression of feelings — good and bad and letting the child show anger or disgust without the fear of losing your love.

## **Give Direction**

While giving direction to your children when they have problems, the parents recommended being brief and stating your ideas in a few sentences instead of presenting a long discourse. They also felt that it is useful to make the child understand that although you are always willing to discuss problems, before you offer solutions you hope that they have given it some thought and tried to find the answer themselves.

Other suggestions about advising children were:

"Don't impose your opinions, likes or dislikes, offer them strictly as your opinion not as a law."

"Forbidden fruit is always tempting, so it is better to step lightly when talking about undesirable activities, TV programs, etc. Children will usually respect your opinion if it is honest and will tend to follow your direction instead of simply "finding out for themselves."

## **Encourage Independence**

Recognizing how hard it is to let go of your children, the parents advised gradually permitting them more and more freedom and control over their own lives. Fostering independence, you will gain the love and respect of your children. Initially, children should be given the liberty of deciding minor issues; later the range of issues can be increased little by little.

The parents also observed that children need the support and encouragement of their parents during their adolescence and young adulthood. One parent said:

"Once your children reach adulthood, stay out of their affairs. But always be ready when they need you."

## **Be a Realist**

Developing realistic expectations about raising children was also mentioned. It was advised that one should expect mistakes and recognize that external influences — such as peer pressure — will increase as the children mature. They felt that raising children was a series of "hard times and tender moments."

Being a parent is not an easy job and it is easy to feel insecure and confused at times. The traditional approach to raising children, using common sense, seems sensible and stable compared to passing theories and fads.

---

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and other related acts, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) offers educational programs, materials, and equal opportunity employment to all people, without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status or disability.