

A Parent's Guide to Raising Collaborative Children

September 1, 2015 | Mark Voorsanger

These are the lessons I've learned from being a father, a spouse and co-parent, and a collaborative leadership coach -- many of them I wish I'd known before beginning my journey into parenthood some 21 years ago. As you read, keep in mind that what works for one parent or family may not for another. Things will not always go smoothly, no matter how wise or well-tested your approach.

Fortunately, children are resilient. They muddle through despite more than a few "mistakes." My children and parenting partners will testify, it's only through hindsight that I'm able to assemble this list. The suggestions have come to me through experience, observation, and years of working with clients whose aim was to raise collaboratively-minded children. No matter your age or experience, I hope you find this collection inspiring, and that over time, it changes your life and your children's lives for the better.



- 1. Children behaving badly are not bad children.** They're having difficulty getting their needs met and they need help.
 - Pre-verbal children aren't trying to get under your skin. They're simply communicating as best they know how.
 - When your baby or young child is crying or acting out, they've become overwhelmed in trying to solve a problem or address a need.
- 2. A child's feelings are never wrong.** Their reasoning may be, but that will come with time.
 - Affirm their feelings. E.g. "Wow, I can tell that you're feeling really upset. What's up?"
 - When the time is right, ask them to walk you through their reasoning if they can. Affirm whatever you can agree with, and then help them to identify where their reasoning could be leading them astray.
- 3. Children need help expressing their feelings with words.**
 - What they lack in language and understanding, they'll act out behaviorally.
 - Expand their emotional vocabulary over time using more and more nuanced language.

4. Touch your child with love, but not in anger.

- When it's important for your child to know that their behavior has upset you, express your feelings and emotions using words.
- If you're too upset to use words, or if your child is too young to understand them, give yourself and your child a time-out.

5. When your child asks a question, consider responding, "I'm not sure... what do you think?"

- They might surprise you with what they already know!
- Try not to laugh or condescend (e.g., "oh, isn't that cute?") when your young child shares their naive explanations... kids come up with some of the most wonderfully creative and brilliant theories about how the world works. Their creativity should be celebrated.

6. When your child asks for help, ask in return, "what have you tried?"

- Resist doing for your children what they can do for themselves... especially when what they've tried on their own represents relatively little investment of energy or creativity. They are more capable than anyone thinks, and often, more capable than they'd like you to know.
- Find ways to express your support that won't inhibit or undermine your child's growth and learning.
- Expect a few messes. Learn to accept messiness as part of the learning process.

7. When your child is asked a question by another person and is feeling shy, resist the temptation to answer for them. Allow them to find their own words if they can.

- Avoid describing or telling stories about your children to others while they're listening in. Encourage your children to describe themselves and tell their own stories.

8. Invite your young child to help you with housework as early as they show interest.

- Establish household chores and quality-of-work expectations early on. (It becomes increasingly difficult to introduce chores as children grow older.) Even two and three year-olds can help pick up their toys and clean their room.
- Continually re-evaluate whether their chores and your quality expectations are age appropriate.
- School homework is no excuse for failing to contribute to household chores.

9. Model your values and preferred behaviors. It's more effective than talking about them.

- Of course, we need to explain to children what's important to us. But they're watching us closely, and our actions speak louder than words.

- Have patience and keep the faith. Children eventually do as their parents do, but often resist what they're told to do.

10. If you want your child to behave with integrity, then say what you mean and do what you say.

- Your child will learn to trust you, and will learn the value of integrity.
- If your child knows what's true and you tell a lie (even a "white lie") while they are listening in, they'll learn that telling lies is normal and acceptable behavior.

11. Resist the temptation to solve your child's problems. Instead, help them identify, evaluate (for safety) and experiment with their own solutions.

- Your child's problem is not necessarily your problem.

12. If you wish to maintain influence with your children, be willing to be influenced by them. Influence is a two-way street.

- Children can teach us as much as we teach them.
- Develop a willingness and ability to receive feedback from your children and others, even when it's poorly delivered.
- Learn to deliver effective feedback. (See *related post*.)

13. Allow your child to fail. Ask them what they learned? We all learn by failing.

- Allow them to feel (at least some of) the pain of failing... otherwise, they'll fail to learn, which is the only true failure.
- When they're ready, ask your child what they might do differently next time.

14. Don't try to be perfect. Perfection is a facade and that facade is often intimidating.

- When you screw up, admit your mistake. Learn to say the words, "I'm sorry."
- Consider calling attention to your mistakes with humor and a smile. "Ta da!!"
- Share what you learned and what you'll try to do differently next time.

15. Demonstrate a willingness and ability to ask for help from others.

- In the USA especially, there are social norms around being independent. Learning to ask for help, however, is an important part of developing strong leadership skills.
- Show your children how to inspire others to contribute.

16. Help your child distinguish between blame and accountability.

- Finding who's at fault and blaming reinforces a *victim mindset*, which is ultimately dis-empowering for everyone.
- Instead, model the practice of being accountable for your part, and encourage your child to acknowledge theirs.
- Learn, practice, and ultimately teach your child what it means to create *psychological safety* for others. Safety makes it possible to take responsibility.
- Resist the temptation to blame others. Blame is highly contagious.

17. Avoid using labels to describe people, especially your children. Acknowledge effort and learning, not *fixed attributes*.

- E.g. Acknowledge them for working hard, thinking creatively, or dressing attractively, but not for being smart, talented, or beautiful.

18. Do not judge your children based upon their height, weight, attractiveness, or any aspect of their physical body. Their value is within.

19. Celebrate your child's successes in proportion to the effort they invested. They'll learn to value hard work, and that whatever they value in life is worth working for.

20. Avoid or minimize the use of money, gifts and sweet treats as expressions of love and approval.

- There is great power in the words, "I'm proud of you" and "I love you."
- Affirmation and approval are also expressed through moments of undivided positive attention.
- Remember: There is nothing sweeter than the gift of a genuine hug and a smile.

21. Healthy parent-child relationships must involve conflict. If you're not experiencing some conflict with your child, either you're not spending enough time together, or you're not setting clear expectations and boundaries.

- Teens and tweens need to “individuate”, which means to craft their own identity. Often, the only way they know how is to push against your values and your worldview.
- When this happens, consider saying, “Maybe I’m not seeing the whole picture... what’s your thinking?”

22. Conflict is the natural byproduct of people having of unmet expectations.

- Learn to see conflict as a sign that a new agreement might be needed, or an old agreement might need revisiting.
- Remain open to forming new agreements and amending old ones as your children grow older and more mature.

23. When your teenager says, “I hate you,” internally translate that into “I love you.”

24. When your teenager says, “leave me alone,” it sometimes means just that. More often, however, it means, “I’m conflicted and don’t know how to ask for what I want or need.”

- Give them a little space. Consider offering something to show you care -- a warm blanket, a foot massage or some tea.
- Let them know that you’re open to talking when they’re ready.

25. Take solace in knowing that homework is a common source of friction and conflict between parents and children.

- Every child struggles to learn effective homework strategies, and experiences periods of overwhelm or procrastination. Help your child recognize these challenges as normal, and invite them to experiment with their own strategies for overcoming them. Offer advice when they ask for it, but be ready for your advice to be dismissed or rejected.
- For your overachiever, remind them that getting a good night’s sleep is often more important than finishing their homework.
- College is not the end game. Resist encouraging your child to sacrifice their well-balanced development for grades and other college-oriented appearances.
- Avoid the use of rewards and punishment as a means to motivate your child to do their homework.
- Do not do your children’s homework for them... ever.

26. Help your child understand and appreciate diversity.

- School is only partially about learning to read, write and reason. School is just as much about developing emotional intelligence, learning to collaborate inter-dependently, and developing empathy for people outside of family so that our kids can eventually participate successfully in community and society.
- Every child recognizes differences between themselves and others. Affirm them in what they observe. Help your child distinguish between the existence of differences, and the judgments they may have (good/bad, right/wrong) about those differences.
- Help your child recognize that we share way more in common with others than we are different, but that our brains are wired to identify and mistrust differences. That old wiring used to be more helpful than it is in modern times.
- Acknowledge that learning to navigate through and negotiate our differences is challenging even for adults, and that the rewards for people who learn such skills are significant. Ask your child to consider what the world would be like if people were unable to live and work with each other despite having differences.

27. Competitive sports can teach valuable lessons in teamwork and leadership, but if they're not framed and supported properly by parents and coaches, an "us vs. them" mindset can result in aggressive, non-sportsmanlike behavior.

- Help your child see members of opposing teams as allies in the common pursuit of athletic skill and excellence.
- Encourage them to recognize competitive sports as a great privilege and responsibility toward everyone's personal and collective learning and fun.
- Refrain from unsolicited "coaching" from the sidelines. Respect the coach's role, and handle any disagreements you have with the coach "off the field" and away from the team.

28. Making healthy choices about what we consume (whether it's food, alcohol, drugs, or various forms of media and entertainment) is a lifelong challenge for most of us. Initially, young children will be unable to govern their own intake. You can help them by:

- Modeling healthy choices -- most important in the long term.
- Limiting the availability and quantity of unhealthy options in your home.
- Giving your children opportunities to practice delayed gratification, an essential discipline for success in life.
- Learning to read nutrition labels and helping your child understand them too.

- Saying no to aggressive diets. Quick weight loss programs are unhealthy and don't result in sustained weight loss. Aggressive dieting can lead to eating disorders like anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder. Teenage girls are, especially at risk.
- Maintaining clear boundaries regarding your child's use of drugs, alcohol, and their consumption of media/entertainment. But remember, your example will speak louder than words.

29. Create opportunities where open dialogue can happen: "Sacred" spaces and times where technology -- smart phones, video games, computers and televisions -- are turned off and stowed away.

- The dinner table is one place to create a tech-free zone.
- Vacations (or a walk) in nature can provide another.
- With teens, resist the temptation to ask questions simply to fill the silence. Trust that your children will find a way to engage when they're ready.

30. If intellectual debate is part of your family culture, strive to maintain a level playing field:

- Show curiosity. Be willing to learn something.
- Use language and examples that your child can understand.
- Look for genuine opportunities to agree with, and to affirm your child's reasoning.
- Listen and watch for signs of distress, and develop ending strategies, e.g., "Well it seems as though this is a big topic... I'll have to think about it more. Thanks for telling me what you think and feel. It's had a big impact on me."
- Remember, avoid using labels (e.g., "you're smart") to describe your child... they are always becoming a newer version of themselves.

31. Don't take responsibility for your child's happiness.

- A parent's job is to raise a healthy, self-assured and capable human being. As it turns out, those things tend to support a happy disposition.
- As a goal, happiness can be elusive. Think of happiness as the byproduct of setting and pursuing more tangible and personally meaningful goals.
- All parents want their children to be happy, but it's a mistake to take responsibility for another person's state of mind, even your own child's.

32. Have fun with your child.

- Play games you both enjoy.
- Sing and make music together.
- Stomp in rain puddles, wallow in mud puddles.
- Help them to have fun in nature... digging in the dirt, hiking in mountains and forests, swimming in the ocean. It need not require expensive equipment or fees.

33. Dare to show passion and enthusiasm for what you love.

- The ability and willingness to show passion and enthusiasm can feel vulnerable, but is also a powerful leadership quality.
- Don't force your passions upon your children. Have faith. They'll eventually learn to value what you value as long as they're not pushed.

34. Limit or manage your passion concerning your child's interests.

- Resist demonstrating greater passion or interest than they show.
- Allow them to lead and build ownership of their direction in life.
- Too much parental interest soon becomes burdensome expectation.

35. Try not to "infect" your children with your own limiting beliefs.

- As parents, it can be difficult to know whether we're just being "realistic" or unnecessarily thwarting our child's aspirations.
- Believe in your children, and express your genuine enthusiasm for their dreams, but allow them to receive unvarnished feedback from the real world.
- Help your child safely find and talk with people who have "made it", and others who have had less success.

36. If you want your child to have a happy marriage some day -- or any form of committed relationship -- then work on maintaining good relationships with your partner / spouse, and ex-spouses (collectively significant others, or SO's)

- Seek public opportunities to acknowledge and express gratitude for your SO. As is true for all feedback, the more behaviorally specific the better.

- Don't complain or speak poorly of an SO within earshot of your children, and ideally to anyone other than your therapist.
- Deal with interpersonal conflict early and directly. When things get heated, seek opportunities to de-escalate and repair.
- During moments of conflict with an SO, avoid the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness and Stonewalling.
- Preserve and protect one-on-one time with your SO. Invest in a babysitter.
- Remain open to your SO's influence.

37. Resist the temptation to undermine your SO's authority in the eyes of your children.

- Do not unilaterally "overrule" a decision made by your SO. If you disagree with their "ruling", defer sharing your opinion with a child until after speaking with your SO. Whenever possible, present a unified stance to your child.
- Never place your child in the middle, for example, by asking them to choose which parent is "right".
- There is nothing inherently wrong with allowing children to witness healthy conflict between parents and adults. They will learn from your good example.

38. If you want a lifelong relationship with your kids, work on building and maintaining strong relationships with your parents or other elders.

- Treat your relationship with your parents with all the respect you show for your other valued relationships.
- Model for your children what it means to have a grownup relationship with parents.
- Encourage and help your parents to form their own one-on-one relationships with your kids.
- Continually acknowledge the value of having grandparents. Affirm and show gratitude for their wisdom and experience, and that of elders in general.

39. When they're old enough and before they're too old, tell your child to "get lost" with a friend.

- Children need to practice their independence.
- They'll become resourceful without adults watching their every move.

40. Don't sweat the small stuff... and choose your battles.

- If your child's troublesome behavior is likely to improve over time without your direct involvement, consider the option of letting life be their teacher.
- If a given behavior is getting under your skin, and you can tell that your reactions will only escalate over time, perhaps it's best not to consider it "the small stuff."

41. Look for the humor in life... and laugh as much as possible.

42. Give... and forgive even more.

If this list prompted any questions or reactions, I'd love to hear from you.
Send your feedback to mark@skywardcoaching.com