

Family Matters: Five Principles of Effective Parenting

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January 8, 1997. BOZEMAN - - Parenting provides some of the greatest joys and most intense challenges of life. All parents struggle to find ways to effectively reach and teach their children. As both an Extension professional and father of five, I constantly seek principles to apply in parenting. By principles, I mean not merely good ideas but statements with considerable support from research and confirmed in the lab of life. What principles, if effectively and consistently practiced, are most likely to result in the most positive outcomes for children? Here are five of them.

Principle 1: Take care of yourself. Taking care of ourselves as parents is intentionally listed number one. If we neglect ourselves, our ability to apply the other four will be limited. We simply cannot fill the lives of our children from an empty bucket.

Parents who practice this principle will be working hard to manage the stress in their lives. They will have their own identities and be using their gifts apart from the family as well as within it. They will work to surround themselves with family and friends who give them emotional and practical support. They will strive to model those attributes and activities in their own lives that they want their children to emulate now and later when they become adults.

Principle 2: Nurture your children. In research, nurturance is called a "superfactor." This is because it is the single most important principle of parenting. If children do not feel cherished and loved, little else that parents do will have its maximum influence. Children need to feel loved and nurtured in ways they recognize as loving.

When a friend of mine was teaching math in a Utah high school, he was approached by a young fellow after class. The young man asked my friend to come with him Saturday at 6 a.m. to a reservoir, crawl through the mud and cattails to the water's edge, and watch the ducks take off. Now my friend thought of other things he'd rather be doing ("sawing logs," for instance), but since he liked to take pictures he agreed to go. It was a good experience. He took lots of great photos. About two weeks later, this same young man told my friend that his dad was taking him to Montana to hunt big game. My friend responded, "Wow, you must be pretty excited!" The young man thought a moment and said, "Not really. I'd really like my Dad to come to the reservoir with me some mornings and watch the ducks take off." Doing what our kids want to do with us sends a powerful message of love.

Principle 3: Guide your children. Children need values, guidelines and standards by which to govern their own lives. Guidance is better than punishment. A guiding parent teaches that positive or negative consequences follow certain attitudes and behaviors. Guidance helps children get what they want in ways parents feel good about. Guiding parents teach by example, set limits within their values, and involve their children in limit-setting and other processes to the extent they can for the age of their child. This means having a knowledge of what is appropriate at various stages of child development.

Principle 4: Be your child's advocate. Urie Bronfenbrenner, world-renown child researcher, said children need an "irrational relationship" with parents: parents who are crazy about them, who think they are better than other kids. This "irrational" basis shows in being a strong advocate for your child, even if you are your child's sole cheerleader.

My children tend to have a difficult first year in public school. One of my children's kindergarten terrorism was legendary. Barbara and I were concerned, but were also confident that the child would outgrow the trait. Once at school, a teacher was talking quite negatively with me about the child's misbehavior. I asked the teacher to be patient, saying I was confident the child would outgrow it. The next year at back-to-school night, the same teacher approached and said I was right, that the child was "wonderful." I gave a sigh of relief!

Principle 5: Motivate your child. A child's first teachers are parents. Motivate your child to learn by creating a "learning laboratory" at home, no matter how humble it may be. Have books, encyclopedias (even old, out of date ones), almanacs and sourcebooks there. Encourage learning by reading yourself and continuing to learn.

Keep the words "care of self, nurture, guide, advocate and motivate" posted on the bulletin board of your mind.

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