

# Good Parenting

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## INTRODUCTION

Doctors need to realize that when one of their patients becomes a parent all of a sudden, everyone around them becomes an expert on parenting. They will start getting plenty of advice which will not always be the right one. That is where we, as doctors need to be vigilant.

Parenthood can be very difficult. There is no right or wrong way of bringing up a child. This article is intended to give you the tools so you can give your patients the best advice based on the latest scientific evidence. Keep in mind that the evidence suggests that parents are happier than non-parents regardless of how tired they might feel at the end of the day. As Nelson et al. (2013) suggested, parents feel most fulfilled when they raise their children, as compared to the fulfilment they obtain from doing other things.

Ashton-James et al. (2013) also stated that the more parents put their children at the centre of their life, the more fulfilled they will feel. There is a thin line between caring deeply for the child and being obsessed with the child, which can lead to the child becoming frustrated.

A study done by Rizzo et al. (2013) found that mothers of children 5 years or younger, who “adored” their children and who went out of their way to be a better parent than the father was, had a higher chance of developing depression and feel less satisfied with their life. It is important that doctors advise these parents to cherish their child, but not at the expense of their mental and physical wellbeing.

We doctors need to tell our patients that being caring and loving does not mean that they are not disciplining their child. When it comes to discipline we have to remind our patients that it is important for them to keep in mind that certain actions and words can make the situation worse and it can backfire in the future even if the parent/s have a strong bond with the child. Wang et al. (2013) found that severe verbal discipline, such as offending the child or using swear words at the child, can result in a worse attitude in the following year. No good comes out of this type of discipline.

## EASY WAY OUT

Doctors need to be practical when giving advice on parenting. Television can be an easy substitute for a babysitter. Every parent needs a break. Placing the child in front of the television can be a welcoming break. Although it can be understandable that children are encouraged to watch television we as doctors need to tell our patients that this is not ideal for a child.

According to the American Academy of Paediatrics, children less than 2 years of age should not watch television and this should be limited to 2 hours per day after 2 years of age.

The less television the child will watch, the more active he/she can be. This can lead to a less sedentary lifestyle and therefore there is less chance that the child will be obese. As concluded by Booth et al. (2014) exercise is also linked with better intellectual performance in academic subjects.

## PARENTS' BEHAVIOUR WITH THE CHILD

There are many ways of disciplining/guiding a child to have the best character possible to be able to succeed in life, handle disappointments and keep away from trouble.

According to Kopko (2007) the best way to bring up a child is to use the “Authoritative style” (not “Authoritarian style”). Kopko (2007) continues by stating that the authoritative style makes the child feel welcome and loved, but at the same time the child knows that the parent is unyielding when it comes to certain issues which the parent feels are important for the child’s upbringing. It is important to encourage your patients to let their children be children as they need to play and have fun, but do remind these parents that they still need to make their children aware that they need to have limitations and a degree of control. This degree can vary as the child grows older. It is important that the parent listens to the child and makes sure that the child is aware that the parent is listening. From as early as 3 years of age we can encourage the parents to start to engage in negotiations and discussions with the child.

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Obviously the final decision needs to be taken by the parent. With this kind of parenting, the child feels important that his/her opinion is valued, thereby leading to a more responsible and independent child.

Always tell your patients to keep in mind that they have to present a united front when it comes to disciplining their child, and they always need to be consistent.

## **PARENTING DURING DIFFICULT TIMES**

Although the above recommendations might be seen as obvious by your patients, they are not necessarily easy to implement effectively. It is important to tell your patients to work on memorizing the advice that you give them so they can become familiar with them to the extent that they become second nature when they are correcting their child. It is important to stress on the point of not to shout and humiliate their child. Also tell your patients to never support incorrect conduct and never physically or mentally abuse their child for example by hitting him/her or by threatening him/her with physical abuse.

As highlighted in the Journal of the American Family Physicians 1999 it is important to advise your patients that if they feel constantly furious at their child or cannot control the anger, they should seek help. The parent can come to speak to you as his family doctor or you can suggest an agency that specializes in family support.

It is important that parents give their child a good role model to follow. Encourage these parents to show their child consistency, fairness, love, and decisiveness. Try to make your patients aware that the environment where the child lives needs to be safe, quiet and clean and to always reward good behaviour and highlight their child's strong points. Tell your patients to communicate with their child to help him/her understand and appropriately deal with the emotions he/she is feeling, for example anger if the child didn't get his/her way. Always remind your patients that they are no bad children, but only children with bad behaviour.

## **DISCIPLINE**

As Howe (2010) wrote, evidence suggests that childhood can influence people in their adulthood. Therefore, it is important to encourage our patients to use the right kind of discipline.

Discipline is used to educate a child. We as doctors need to make our patients aware that no one is perfect and that everyone, including a child, can make mistakes. What is being suggested in this article is the use of

positive discipline. It is important that we as educators need to encourage constructive behaviour by advising the parents to pay compliments and reward their child. It is important to stress to your patients to never give in during a tantrum or when the child is whining. Tell the parents to ignore whatever he/she is asking for during this phase. This will make the child realize that whining is not getting him/her anywhere so eventually he/she will stop this behaviour. This also applies to any requests that the child makes during improper behaviour. It is important that the parents make the child realize that he/she has responsibilities and that he/she must act on them. Cleaning up after him/her, collecting his/her toys and picking up things that he/she threw on the floor are all examples of tips that you can give to the parents for the child to do. This action can also make the child feel useful.

We have to tell our patients that punishment is something that cannot be avoided. However, we can advise the parents to change the punishment into something more meaningful by converting it into a consequence for the child. The best way to help your patients understand this is by giving examples. If the child fights with another child, the consequence can be that the child plays by him/herself. If a child does not clean up after himself/herself, their favourite toy can be taken away for some time. For a child above the age of 5 years, not watching television or not playing video games can also be a consequence that we as doctors can advise the parents to do. Always tell your patients that they need to be firm and consistent, that they need to clearly explain the consequence to the child before it is implemented, and that once the consequence is issued it cannot be revoked. Also remind your patients that a young child has not yet grasped the concept of time, and therefore a consequence needs to be implemented immediately after the child's action and that it has to be relevant to the action the child did.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is important to make parents aware, especially if they have more than one child, that every child is different and that every child has his/her unique character. Therefore every parent needs to address every child accordingly. We need to make parents realize that they need to adapt to the child's needs, keeping the suggestions mentioned above just as a guideline.

It is also important to make parents realize that there is nothing wrong in seeking advice from a professional

such as the family doctor or paediatrician. We doctors need to be aware which governmental agencies and even private agencies we can refer our patients to if they need more specialized help in dealing with a child that has a behavioural issue. This might mean sharing information about a specific patient or his or her child. As mentioned by Wilson and Mullin (2010) giving private information about your patients to governmental or private agencies which might not be related to your practice can cause a number of challenges. These however need to be overcome for the benefit of the child. Since a family doctor is in close contact with the families of his/her practice he/she needs to be able to recognize when a child is being abused. Ideally a doctor needs to prevent child abuse by educating parents. The impact of child abuse can be devastating to a child. As Bethea (1999) wrote, children that suffer physically and mentally due to abuse can end up having repercussions in the future, such as delays in developmental milestones and anxiety syndromes.

A very important advice that we take for granted is to make your patients realize that they need to enjoy the time with their child and spend as much time with him/her as possible. The love that a parent can give to his/her child cannot be replaced by anything or anyone.

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