



Parenting: Am I the Problem?

By Eric Herschman, PsyD

Sometimes, I can help parents with their troubled child's behavior without seeing their child. No one knows inherently how to be a good enough parent. Our own parents can be good role models, but sometimes they may not. The dance of effective parenting can be very complicated with many variables to consider. There's lots of trial and error. I have never met a parent who says to him or herself, "How can I be a bad parent?" I will address some examples of what I have found to be helpful to parents in making positive changes for a less stressful family life.

Remember, that while children learn from observation and watching you, genes and biology influence their behavior as well. When possible, a powerful tactic is to ignore negative behavior and praise and acknowledge desired behaviors. Carefully pick and choose the battles you want to engage in.

The power of distraction is an effective approach, but often not utilized when parenting a child. For example, when your child is having a tantrum, ask them about a new Lego toy or TV show. That question can deflect and derail their meltdown. Depending on the child and situation, you can say, "Is that the best tantrum you can do?" Maybe add, "Try laying down on the floor and flailing your arms more or stamp your feet, like this." Your child will be taken aback by this comment and likely stop the tantrum because they're so perplexed by you joining with them in their fit.

Parents should stop giving chances. It only frustrates you and increases the likelihood you will eventually react and discipline in anger, which is not effective. Your child knows what is expected after the first chance. Giving more chances only encourages this unproductive dance to continue, and you do not want to get on this ride. It's a battle you will lose, so don't engage.

Do not ask your child if they want a time out or if they want a consequence! The answer will always be NO, and it puts you in a passive parenting position. Make "If – Then" statements and use presuppositions. For example, *If* you do that, *Then* this will happen, or *After* you clean up your toys, *Then* you can watch TV, or *After* you do your homework, *Then* you can go to your friend's house. The carefully crafted use of language in parenting can be powerful. Presupposing can be a subtle technique whereby you can get your child to do something they never intended to do.

I also do not think it is helpful when children say you (the parent) did this or that in terms of issuing consequences for their behavior. I prefer having the child take ownership by realizing their choice of this consequence as a result of choosing to engage in the undesirable behavior.

When buying a house, you hear “Location, Location, Location;” with parenting, it’s about “Consistency, Consistency, Consistency.” If you’re not sure about giving a consequence and that you will follow through with it, hold your tongue. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Make sure your significant other will support you. If you are not sure about what type of consequence to mete out for an infraction, it is okay to let your child know there will be a consequence, and you will let your child know soon what it will be. You may want to consult with your spouse, parent, friend, or a professional. If you threaten to give a consequence to your child and then you don’t follow through with it, they won’t take you seriously. Giving empty threats are some of the worst things a parent can do. Try to never say something you do not plan on carrying out or enforcing. I tell parents it would be healthier to say nothing if they are not going to follow through with a consequence.

In light of my clinical observations and experience, I have concluded that sometimes parents are part of the problem when it comes to effective parenting; however, this is not always the case. Good parenting can be exhausting and daunting, to say the least. However, from my perspective, it is the most important ‘job’ someone can have. Good-enough parenting is extremely gratifying and the positive influence you can have on your child is beyond rewarding. Try to keep some of these tips in mind when relating to and interacting with your children.