

Parenting Challenges as Kids Grow

When you finally got your infant to sleep through the night on a consistent basis, you felt like, “O.K., I aced Parenting 101! Piece of Cake!” Then you got that tyrant of a toddler to finally say, “Yes!” to something you wanted him to do and you felt like you conquered the Terrible Twos! Put another notch in your parenting belt! Feeling a sense of power and accomplishment, you overcame the weeks of crying, tantruming, gnashing of teeth and clinging to you for dear life when your four-year-old finally separated from you and went to preschool. So you rewarded yourself with a Vente Non-fat Peppermint Mocha Latte and the world was good!!

Now you’re a parent of an elementary- aged child and you’ve been lulled into a false sense of feeling like your job has gotten easier. Why wouldn’t you?? Your child goes to school consistently, they are doing their homework with more independence, they are engaging in social activities with peers outside of school and their diet has expanded beyond chicken nuggets, frozen waffles and Mac and Cheese! But believing that we can go on “auto-pilot” as a parent of an elementary- aged child is potentially a big mistake! It is harder to identify the road-blocks that we face as parents during this stage of development because they are more subtle than dealing with meltdowns at bedtime. One of the parenting challenges at this time is providing our children with our undivided attention. That may sound somewhat simplistic, but when I started thinking about that idea, I realized that most of my attention to my child is split between her and something else. I am trying to answer her questions while checking my email or following a recipe to make dinner. Often she will ask, “What do you mean?” when I’ve answered totally incorrectly because I really wasn’t attending to the questions! It is imperative that we increase the amount of time we spend with our children. Even though they are so much more independent now, deep down inside, kids simply want their parents’ focused attention. The mistake many of us make in an effort to “provide” for our children is to supply them with every imaginable gadget, gizmo and technological advancement they can dream of, put them in as many clubs or organized sports as are available, or get them a furry friend in the form of a dog or cat. This doesn’t address the internal emptiness that a child may develop when there isn’t enough undivided parental attention provided. Dorothy Corkille Briggs says in the book Your Child’s Self-Esteem, “How frequently we give presents rather than presence.” The sad outcome of this type of mistake is the development of teens and adults who try to fill their emotional void with food, alcohol, drugs or even shopping. When we provide our children with the precious commodity that is our undivided attention, they learn to feel valued and worthy because of who they are and not because of what they have.

So now, wanting to maintain our A+ status as parents, we attempt to spend more time with and attention on our children. As we do this, we realize there are so many things that

they are faced with in this ever-changing world; some issues that we may have faced while growing up, but many more situations that we never had to deal with when we were their age. Friendships become a high priority for children as they move through the elementary years. Talking to our children, or more importantly, listening to our children talk about their friendships is one of the most important things we can do as parents. Supplying our children with the understanding that conflicts with close friends are inevitable will encourage the development of conflict resolution skills because they treasure those relationships and will want to repair them.

Another subtle social hurdle that our elementary-aged youth face is experimentation with social power. By the time children are four or five years old, many discover that excluding or teasing someone makes them feel powerful and they find this exciting. By the time they are eight, nine, or ten years old they have become masters at this fine art and cliques or clubs are potentially created. Discussing the impact of excluding others from their group is so important, but too often, it is our actions, as parents, which perpetuate the existence of specific groups. Many times, parents feel that certain friends are better to have than others because of variables such as race, socioeconomic background or where someone lives. We must keep an open mind when our child comes home from school and wants to have a playdate with someone other than our closest friend's child. According to Lawrence Cohen, Ph.D., "From about 2nd grade through high school, being popular becomes important to many children. But friendship is the thing that endures. A friend wants you to be yourself and likes you for who you are. While not being in the "in crowd" might seem devastating, encourage your child to simply make good friends. Help him nurture those friendships and the crisis over not being in the cool group should subside."

Furthermore, by age nine or ten, boys and girls become interested in each other. Now this is nothing new, but the exposure that kids have to media depicting "boy-girl relationships" today can be quite shocking to those of us that remember the innocence of Marcia Brady's first kiss. Additionally, the lack of limits put on media viewing is at an all-time high. My first hand experience revealed that children as young as 7 and 8 are watching shows like "The Family Guy" and "The Bachelor," which don't necessarily give the most healthy view of male-female relationships. With technology allowing nearly 24-hour media access as children and teens go about their daily lives, the amount of time young people spend with entertainment media has risen dramatically, according to a study released by the Kaiser Family Foundation in January 2010. We all know of many children who have T.V.s and computers in their rooms, along with unlimited use of i-phones, which can create a bombardment of inappropriate media influence and interpersonal communication. Recognizing that our job as parents includes regulating and controlling the media influences our kids are exposed to can be just as daunting as trying to get that infant to stop crying and go to sleep. Too often, we avoid regulating the media because it is

easier to do so; but what we don't know about what they are viewing or texting each other can hurt us and them. Very young, computer savvy kids can Youtube anything and often something incredibly inappropriate can come up with their innocent search. It's been said before, but it is worth repeating, computer use should be done in full view of a supervising adult. It's also worth our while to become more computer savvy ourselves so that we can check the history of the sites our youngsters have been accessing while on the computer. Helping our children understand that what they see on T.V. or the computer isn't necessarily the right way to behave or interact is critical. Providing a reality check for some "Reality T.V." like The Jersey Shore, is necessary if we don't want our children modeling that type of behavior.

Although we may think we can cruise along with our increasingly independent elementary-aged child, I hope this piece has provided us all with some things to contemplate in order to maintain our successful parenting record.