

Simple yet miraculous parenting tips

Allow your child to explore and try new things.

Children like to know where they stand, and constantly feel for boundaries. Whenever you communicate with your child, make sure you are listening, and then respond appropriately. Sometimes saying no (or “don’t do that”), is the right thing, but explaining why you said no helps your child to understand that you really mean it, and also helps you to make sure you said no for a good reason. If you struggle to explain why you said no, it might be that you are withholding valuable opportunities for exploration from your child. Another good way of ensuring you mean no, is that you would be willing to enforce it if your child disobeyed again. If you don’t care enough to enforce it, don’t stop them from doing it. The less you stop your child unnecessarily from doing things they are interested in, the more they will be likely to take you seriously when you really mean no.

Take time in the day to be energetic.

Your child needs plenty of physical activity to develop properly and to be able to get tired enough to sleep well. Even though you may not feel like it, plan some time into the day to do something energetic with your child. This could take the form of kicking or throwing a ball in the park, running/racing, romping in the house (clambering about on a settee, throwing your child gently onto a bed, play-fighting, tickling). Don’t expect your child to be able to do this for long on his/her own though – get in there and do it with them. If it makes them over-silly, then warn them they have five more minutes, or five more of whatever you are doing, and then read a story to calm them down.

Children are designed to have vast reserves of energy, and you cannot expect them not to use it. The more you help them to burn off this energy in constructive and fun ways, the less likely you will have to deal with hyperactivity at the times when you don’t want it. Also, children who have good high-energy activities will be more able to calm down properly at other times, such as reading and bed times.

Always carry with you healthy snacks.

Children are prone to tantrums and whining if they get hungry, and they may not be capable of realising they are hungry. If you tune into your child’s needs and timetable, you will notice that stropiness increases at certain times of day, caused by hunger or tiredness. If you anticipate the hungry moments and offer a snack at these times, you will make your own life a lot easier, and will increase your child’s ability to cope with the little stresses and disappointments that are prone to causing meltdown. By making time before you go out to prepare a healthy snack, you will save stress and money later in the day. Try carrot sticks, raisins or other dried fruit, apple, orange, bread sticks. At about the age of 2, the challenge of peeling a satsuma will keep your child occupied for a good while (start it off for them). One my son’s favourites as a toddler was peanut butter and honey sandwiches (on wholemeal bread), which have an added bonus – they will keep for a couple of days without going off. (Please note the NHS currently recommends not giving peanuts to children under 8 years old.)

Try to be in tune with your child’s needs.

Most children only whinge or cry when they have an unmet need. Early on, this will be sleep or food usually, but attention from you is also a real need. If you tune into your child’s needs from the beginning, you will tend to be more in tune for the rest of their childhood and adolescence. They will also expect you to understand them and therefore be more willing to be open and honest with you.

Children like water.

The ability to enjoy water is an important skill that enables us to quench our thirst easily and without inflicting a sugar fix on our teeth and unnecessary calories on our bodies. And our bodies love it! As soon as you start giving liquid other than milk to your baby, make sure it is water, and their natural instinct will be to drink it if they are thirsty and if it is offered (boiled and cooled water for babies). Don't fall into the trap of assuming your child doesn't like water (especially if you don't). If they reject it, they are probably not thirsty. If you don't like water, why not take the opportunity of drinking some when you offer it to your child, as an encouragement that "this is what we do" – you may even end up liking it! But don't be tempted to give them something else instead, at least until they are 1 year old. By this time they will have developed a strong liking for water, which will stay with them for life. Sugary drinks should be avoided at all costs, as they rot your child's teeth, and give them sugar rushes (and then sugar lows) that will noticeably alter their moods.

You may be concerned that your child will want to drink whatever you're drinking, but under 1 year of age, babies usually are happy to have what they need, rather than what they want, especially if they have never tasted the alternative! And why not take this opportunity to get to like water more yourself? Children love to do what their parents do, so the more you can model whatever you want them to do, the better. I drink a lot of herbal and fruit teas with no added sweetener (as I don't like normal tea), and my son has developed a liking as well, having had a diluted cooled version whenever I was drinking it. Fennel tea is recommended for babies, against colic.

Take time to dawdle.

Although it sometimes seems like there are many pressures on our time, not many of us who are full-time or part-time parents are so pressurised that we cannot take the time to be interested in what is around us – the building site down the road, the pretty flowers or the bees buzzing round them, the puddles and splashes in the rain, the figures on billboards that your baby or child might recognise. Taking time to point things out and be interested in what your child points out is invaluable stimulation for your child's brain. You will find that your child's imagination will be opened and will therefore be easier to keep entertained. If you are in the habit of pointing things out and tuning into what your child might be interested in, you will more easily be able to recognise words that your small child begins to say, as he/she notices things before you do, which will in turn encourage speech development, and give a good opportunity to praise your child's communication.

Help your child to sleep 12 hours at night.

Children can survive on less very easily, but their ability to learn, rationalise and be patient and good-tempered will be seriously impaired. Try to get them into a routine as babies of going to bed at about 7pm, having eaten between 4 and 5pm, had a bath and read some stories. Talking about the day can also help, especially if they have been away from you with grandparents, the childminder, at nursery or school. Try to ask about what they did, how they felt, what they learned, and even what they would do differently next time, and offer consolation or suggestions if they need it. This will help things to stop going round in their heads all night. Say a prayer with them if that is your sort of thing. Give them water that they can help themselves to if they need it – in a non-spill cup in the cot, or in a beaker on the bedside table. Do not under any circumstances give them sugary drinks at night, or you will be in for a difficult time. The sugar will give them energy, which will wake them up more, they will be more likely to wet the bed and the sugar will stay on their teeth for the rest of the night, eating away at their teeth.

Don't assume your child doesn't like things.

Because your child is only just getting used to the idea of food, he/she will have some responses that would be easy to mistake for dislike. Try to offer your child a wide range of healthy foods, even if you don't like them yourself. Your child may reject a certain food for many reasons: it wasn't the taste they were expecting, they want to eat one thing at a time, rather than mixing flavours, they don't feel like it today, they don't like the look of it. Try not to force them, as this could only cause a bigger problem. An older toddler/child may be mature enough to negotiate with. If they refuse point-blank, ask them to have one mouthful, so they can make sure they don't like it before rejecting it. My son has refused point-blank many times, and after finally getting him to eat one mouthful, he has gone on to eat the lot. They will probably also go in phases – love something for a while and then not want it anymore. If you suspect your child may not want something, offer it when you know they are really hungry or even start eating it yourself without offering it to them, which will make them interested. I often give my son some cut up tomato (quick and easy) while I am preparing the rest of the lunch. This has two great advantages – he'll eat it without any fuss because he's starving, and he won't be moaning about being hungry while I am making the lunch. Don't let your child have fun/more enjoyable snacks later if they didn't eat their food at mealtime – this will only teach them not to eat their food at mealtime. When they don't eat their meal, put it in the fridge, and when they say they are hungry, bring the same stuff out again. They will soon learn to eat it at mealtime.

Children don't like being fobbed off.

I have seen so many children on interminable shopping trips with parents, sitting in their buggies bored out of their brains, and when they complain, they get given a bottle of squash or pop to shut them up, or a bag of sweets. There are two basic problems with this approach: a) they will carry on whingeing as soon as they have finished, because the problem they had before will still be there, and b) they will grow up to respond to stress, unhappiness, anxiety, etc by eating, because this is what they have learnt to do, and may end up obese because of it. Children respond much better if the parents respect their needs by programming in time for them to play during the shopping trip, and the child is then much more likely to respect the parents' need to shop the rest of the time. Also if you help your child to be reasonable and obedient by respecting his or her needs, then letting them out of the buggy in shops becomes a viable option, and your child will be able to play at shopping with you, and become an enjoyable companion to you rather than a ball and chain around your ankle. If being strapped into a buggy is the only way of controlling them, you may have a real problem when they are too big for a buggy. Helping them to enjoy themselves early on saves a lot of stress later.

Give your child warning when you are going to do anything different.

Whether it is going out, going home, stopping playing, getting dressed or going to bed, if your child is not expecting it, there will understandably be resistance. You will help your child to feel like he/she has more control over what goes on, so they won't need to be rebellious. Even though they don't exactly know what 5 minutes means, they will get used to roughly that amount of time. You can also say things like five more slides down the slide, ten more pushes on the swing, ten more kicks of the ball, etc and that way you can count down with them. Once you have given them their timescale, stick to it, otherwise they will learn they manipulate you into staying longer. If you know what you are going to be doing later, let them know that as well (although avoid this if you are unsure, so as not to get their hopes up). If you think there will be particular resistance to doing something, try to think of a creative way, or trade-off. If they hate shopping, tell them they can stop at the park on the way back. Make sure you stick to what you have negotiated, and give them a fair amount of time in exchange, rather than making them rush away. They will trust you and be willing to bargain with you next time.

Give your child plenty of positive attention.

The more attention you give your child early on, the less they will need. Don't make the mistake of thinking that when they try to get your attention they are trying to "manipulate" you. Children who get adequate attention thrive, and are happy, which, in turn, makes your life easier. Children who don't get enough attention, end up doing anything to get it, causing you more difficulties in the process, and usually end up getting negative attention in the form of being told off, which takes precious time and still doesn't give them what they need, so the cycle continues.

Do not lie to your child to make them do as they are told.

"There's a monster coming." This is one of the most tragic lies I have heard a mother telling her daughter for her own convenience – because she wanted her to hurry up. This kind of thing teaches a child many awful things: not to trust his/her parent, irrational fears, inability to rationalise what's going on, etc. Be truthful with your child at all costs. Even if a lie seems harmless, your child will learn not to trust you – I have seen parents tell their child that the fruit puree they are offering is the same as the chocolate mousse being eaten by someone else, and even putting the puree back in the fridge and bringing out the "chocolate mousse" (aka, the fruit puree), which just made the child even more upset. Give your child some credit. They are a lot cleverer than you think, and treating them like this is teaching them that you cannot be trusted. Let your "yes" be yes and your "no" really mean no.

Be willing to admit you're wrong and say sorry.

It could be because you said you would do something and didn't, or because you told them off too harshly, or because you misunderstood something they said to you. If you are able to say you're wrong and sorry, you are setting them a great example – both of these skills are essential to maintain emotional well-being throughout life. Also remember to tell them you forgive them when they say sorry to you, and they will learn not to harbour bitterness in their hearts as well.