

Seven Don'ts Every Parent Should Do

All three kids were in the back seat, buckled into big plastic car seats: the twins, who were three years old; our first-born, who was five and in kindergarten. His earnest review of a burping contest at school--Jimmy got sent to the principal!--was giving way to a more general discussion of the cool noises that various classmates could make.

"*Do NOT listen to your children!*" my husband solemnly pronounced. And that's how we began--fifteen years ago--to deconstruct the commonplace advice we had embraced as card-carrying baby boomers and fully-fledged yuppies, as Lake Shore Liberals and Enlightened Thinkers now migrant back to the suburbs from which we had come, vowing never to return. We dubbed these rules the "antinomies" of parenthood, in deference to Kant's famous and infamously arcane critique of scholastic theology. Like Kant, most contemporary childcare "experts" seemed to us to expend more energy upon the arcane details of their own theories than upon the practical problems we faced every day.

The categorical imperative of parenthood, we decided, was to survive our children as we wished to insure their survival. Herewith The Rules, the real rules, honed step by step by our efforts to survive not only all three kids in diapers but then all three kids in orthodontia, then all three learning to drive, and now all three in college.

Rule #1: Do Not Listen To Your Children. Let them be in their own worlds, undisturbed. It is not healthy for persons the age of parents to get involved in arguments about what kind of birthday cake the Care Bears should make for He-Man, nor what a Beanie Baby might have in common with a Mighty Morphin Power Ranger of the same color. Nor do parents need to know all the epithets that have been devised for the sixth-grade math teacher, nor what insults were traded in the boy's locker room after track practice at the high school. Listen earnestly to anything they want to tell you, no matter what. If you don't listen eagerly to the little stuff when they are little, they won't tell you the big stuff when they are big, because to them all of it has always been big stuff. But unless they are talking to you, *stay out of it*. Indiscriminate eavesdropping is a threat to parental sanity.

Rule #2: Do Not Be Consistent. As Emerson said, "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." In this job, you are supposed to think. Don't give in to consistency until the world gets more predictable, or your Know-It-All Eyeglasses And Secret Decoder Ring arrive in the mail. Learn to keep a straight face as you say, "I thought about it some more, and I changed my mind." Figure it this way: you are setting a good example of intelligent accommodation to late-arriving insights. It can be a chance to demonstrate the subtleties of ethical discernment (or your own lack of omniscience) when you need to revoke or to qualify a previously-granted permission.

But it works in the other direction too, when we realize that we are being more strict than is strictly necessary. At one point we voluntarily extended curfew, affirming the maturity and judgment our children had demonstrated to that point. And the "points" we gained thereby, in that magic black book teens keep on their parents, was eminently worth whatever grey hairs or

sleepless hours might be demanded. One way or the other, a wise inconsistency shows them that we are thinking and paying attention.

Trying too hard to be consistent also leaves us liable to all their skill at finding our personal psychic hot buttons. "Pick your fights," parents are always told. And that's good advice. But if we are too proud or too stubborn to back down, to change our minds, to give up, or to give in, then the kids set the agenda far more often than is wise. I will never forget the night that two of the three were bickering and sniping at one another over dinner, aiming of course not at each other but at how effectively this drives me crazy. The third child set his silverware vertically into his closed fists and commenced pounding lightly on the table.

"Harass Our Mother," he began chanting, "Harass Our Mother, Harass Our Mother . . ." The other two chimed in, until they were laughing too hard to continue. And so was I. A most holy tradition was born that night, I suspect: that refrain has been repeated over and over again, in many variations ("harass our sister...") when we need compassion and compromise and disengagement far more than principle and logic.

Rule #3: Do Not Be Reasonable. Have your own emotional needs and the wits to name them. "I'm tired and I'm cranky and if you keep pestering me I'm going to get really mad," I said one day in a fit of honesty. To my amazement, the kid backed down.

"Mom's *cranky*," I heard him caution the others, astonishment in his voice. "We better leave her alone." And they did. I drank some iced tea and felt quite a bit better, in fact. Straightforward irrational honesty also works when a bright kid has me absolutely bested in some argument.

"OK," I say, "I understand your point--now go away and let me think." They do go away. And that makes it easier for me to think. Either I find the courage to be unreasonable, or I find the flaw in their thinking, or I find the grace to give in gracefully. At least I avoid making decisions under fire.

Years later, I found all three kids laughing wildly over the high school course-selection booklet with its listing of advanced courses like A.P. Physics and A.P. History. For our three, I discovered, "A.P." had long been code for *avoid parent*. The physics and the history of that! They had no idea that anybody else even understood! And that may be how all five of us survived to the point where A.P. Physics is even a possibility. I decided to leave them alone to enjoy their amusement. Maybe that's A.K.--Avoid Kids--but it's a course all parents need to take at some point.

Rule #4: Do Not Be Available. This is an especially important rule for at-home parents and for those of us who work out of our homes. If you are endlessly accessible, you will go crazy in no time. Look at it this way: if you cannot say "no" without terrible guilt, they will never learn to say "no" themselves. You are not just refusing, you are teaching about psychic boundaries. As in, "Volunteer me to drive one more time without asking first, and you are in very deep spaghetti." (See rule #3, above).

Rule #5: Do Not See The World From a Child's Perspective. Children are passionately, innocently, relentlessly self-centered. "Self" and "now" are the matrices of the only world to which they have certain access. But civilizing them into history and culture and communal realities is among our central moral duties. We are the best and the kindest guide they will ever have to civilization and its discontents. They have to learn the rudiments of courtesy and respect and responsibility at some point, somehow, somewhere--and if the lessons are delayed, they will be even more painful, rather like childhood diseases that are much worse when they occur in adults.

Philosophers may agree, for instance, that objectivity is actually derivative and consensual and that there is no one Real World out there. But every philosopher I know and most of the Ph.D.s nonetheless brush teeth, and chew with lips closed, and say "thank you" at appropriate moments. I bet some of them even make their beds; I'm sure all of them did their homework. Even the great and famous skeptic David Hume acknowledged that philosophic uncertainty should not keep an intelligent person from eating his oatmeal in the morning.

Nor does this rule stop being relevant as they get older. "Right and wrong is just an opinion," one of mine argued one day, just as the stoplight turned green, eight seconds away from the school driveway. We were the first car in line. Any parent of teenagers recognizes the ploy. "Jewish kids won't eat pork, Hindus and Buddhist kids won't eat meat, Catholic kids won't use birth control, Muslim kids don't eat lunch during Ramadan--it's all just opinion, all this right and wrong stuff."

"That's an opinion too, then," I pointed out, in my mildest, most professorial tones. "The claim that right and wrong is just an opinion is just an opinion too." He glowered. "I bet Jacob would say that eating pork is one kind of wrong but the Holocaust is another kind of wrong." He got out of the car and slammed the door a bit harder than necessary, then opened the back seat to get out the project he was bringing for his English class.

"Good luck with your presentation," I offered, as innocently as possible.

"Yup. Thanks. Thanks for the ride," he replied, with all the studied blandness of a bested sophomore. Fight deconstruction with deconstruction, I figure. Any kid who is taller than his mother desperately needs to be listened to seriously enough to be disagreed with seriously, with all the courtesy we extend to other adults. We are the most loving and responsible versions of the Reality Principle that they will ever encounter.

Rule #6: Do Not Adapt To Their Needs. Create a family life you can live in too, because their fundamental need is for noncrazy parents. When the family room TV is driving me nuts, I turn it off. I insist on proper table manners and polite topics of conversation, because my digestion demands a certain civility. Kids undoubtedly enjoy pushing us up to the brink, but that's because they suppose we have the strength and the wits to tie the lines that will keep everyone safe.

At one point I declared that Wednesday is "Mommy Goes To the Library Day," and they were visibly delighted--hoping, I suspect, the I would cease this pretense of writing and reading on other days. "My Mom can't drive on Wednesday," I heard one of them explaining on the phone.

"She spends the whole day at the *library* . . . Yeah, I know it's weird. But she was a professor once and they do things like that. It's OK: we get Burger King for dinner."

I tell myself it's OK that they think I'm strange: I'm giving them permission to be different. Given what's going on at their schools, I think that modeling a certain nonconformity is probably wise. Mostly, however, I was doing what I had to do to protect what shards of sanity I had left after fifteen years at home full-time.

Rule #7: Do Not Parent Them. Kids do not need "parenting"-they need both mothering and fathering. Kids need both Moms and Dads, as social scientists are starting to document. Our three kids set out to teach us this from the very beginning. Mommyness is all about comfort and consolation; Daddyness is all about challenge and competence. Kids don't seem to notice that Mom is also one tough and capable babe, or that Dad is in touch with his vulnerable inner child. Nah. They are too busy with their own development to notice ours: they don't want persons for parents, they want archetypes. They want to locate us within those absolute categories of munchkinland, The Boys and The Girls.

And that's OK. Like everything else, sexual identity begins with primary colors and stick figures. Nuances and shadings come many years later, and only after the fundamental outlines have been drawn recognizably. The sane parent--that ideal figure --simply has to rustle up enough sexual self-confidence to acknowledge the portraits that our kids need to draw. Mommy is, primarily, womb and breast; Daddy is, primarily, the biggest bestest strongest hero the world has ever known.

Kids use parents to set up for themselves and within themselves the crucial psychic continuum from confidence to competence, from knowing what you feel to knowing how to fend for yourself, from compassion to judgment. And that roughly translates, in the politically incorrect world of little kids, into the continuum from Mommy to Daddy. It's OK to be vulnerable and needy because Daddy will make sure the womb won't swallow you up again; it's OK to be daring and to try again after failure because Mommy is always there to kiss it and make it better. Although Moms are besieged by the psychic demands of parental nurture when the kids are small, Dads are the primary psychic parent of adolescence. (I admit to gloating, I do admit it, when one evening one kid after another besieged my husband non-stop until eleven p.m.) It's a wild process, but it works--if we work together at it. But only if we work together, only if we rise above jealousy and competition, and only if the psychic continuum holds solid. That crucial continuum holds solid when both parents are themselves both competent and caring, both shrewd and compassionate, both thinking and feeling. If both parents are not fully-equipped, mature adults, kids can remain trapped forever in simple-minded gender oppositions.

In short, parents come in pairs for a reason. When part of the pair is lost, for whatever reason, or on a business trip, or down with the flu, the survivor will compensate more creatively and more successfully if the lineaments of the challenge are plainly seen and clearly acknowledged. At a soccer game recently, one of the women was bellowing something competitive, no more loudly than plenty of the men were. The play stopped briefly, leaving her son on the side of the field near the stands. He looked up at her firmly.

"Ma, shuddup," he said-and half a dozen men around me chuckled almost silently, exchanging knowing glances.

"What was that?" I whispered to my husband.

"He told his mother to shut up," my husband replied, as if that explained it.

Soccer Moms are supposed to know the rules for off-sides, it seems, or to appreciate the skill of an offensive cross and shot to corner; but we are not to raise our soprano voices beyond a certain decibel. Well okay, I thought, I can manage that. I'm not a shouter anyhow. And by now I'm used to this, whether or not I exactly understand: mothers and fathers are not interchangeable clones of some proto-parent.

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How to survive all three in college remains an open question. But money is cheaper than wisdom, and patience more costly than tuition. Last week a woman with three very small children very close in age erupted into my pew just as the Mass began: it was nonstop pandemonium. At the "peace" she offered her hand tentatively, apologetically. I just smiled.

"Yeah," she said, relaxing, "Yeah. Thanks."

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