



by Karen Stephens

Family Life: Kids Need Parent Generalists, Not Specialists

Parenting is a BIG job. In business lingo, it's labor intensive. It requires multiple talents, abundant patience, the ability to learn on the job, and inordinate flexibility.

Skilled parenting over the long haul can be especially challenging to specialist-parents. What do I mean by a specialist-parent? This is a parent who strongly prefers one type of child, stage of development, or parenting role over others.

The key word is *strongly* prefers. While it is normal for all of us to feel more comfortable with one age group or one parenting job over another, good parenting doesn't afford us the luxury of attending to children only when we prefer to do so.

For instance, there are people who really enjoy parenting infants, but find pre-adolescents boring (or worse, disgusting). This is good news for babies, but not so good for kids who develop beyond infancy. (And most have a habit of doing just that.)

There are parents who respond well to a quiet and tidy child. But they half-heartedly parent a more rambunctious, adventurous child. Once again, that's good news for one child, but bad for the other.

Specialist-parents want to live with children on their own terms. As long as kids are easy, they bask in the parenting role. But the minute the kids exhibit unpleasant or defiant behavior, these same parents run for cover. They quickly hand the job of discipline to someone else, be it spouse, grandparent, or child care provider.

Specialist-parents may conspicuously celebrate children's achievements and successes. Unfortunately, when the same children confront tough experiences such as failure or exclusion from peers, their parents become emotionally unavailable.

I believe children need "generalist" parents. These are adults who will stay the course with children, regardless of their age, temperament, or developmental challenges. Generalist parents generously give time and energy to their children, even when the kids are anything but cute and cuddly. They may enjoy one stage of child development a little more than another, but they never cease to enjoy and appreciate this person their child gradually blossoms into.

Generalists are sensitive and responsive to a wide variety of children's specific needs. They don't put kids on the back burner until it is convenient to deal with them.

To be a responsive parent, you have to be a Jack (or Jane) of all trades. The number of roles a parent assumes is large. The job description just never ends. Parenting is a non-stop juggling act of multiple responsibilities.

First, there's the basic parenting role almost everyone acknowledges. You've got to keep the tummies full and covered with clothing. To keep the wolves at bay, you have to keep a family roof over your head.

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There's love and affection to be dispensed. And you better give in equal measure to all siblings or you'll end up being accused of favoritism.

Beyond those basics, there are many other "minor" aspects of parenting that complicate the job. These job requirements are what demand that we become generalists — otherwise we won't be the effective parents we aspire to being.

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Let me list some "beyond the basics" parenting tasks. First you must be a good cheerleader, reinforcing all those "firsts." Never let it be said that your child first walked or talked without you absolutely falling all over yourself with glee!

Next, while providing the basics, and while maintaining your cheerleader enthusiasm, you must be a therapist. Your mission: To help your child develop a secure and unique identity. You'll also have to ease your youngster beyond the parent-child bond. Yes, it will be time for your little one to learn to cope with separation and make friends with peers.

Paving the way for friendships entails teaching children to communicate, share, cooperate, negotiate, compromise, establish intimacy, and all those other dynamics of getting along with others. (Warning: This part of parenting is particularly daunting when neither parent has mastered those skills themselves!)

And there's yet another ball for parents to juggle! Good parents must become skilled in: Hazard Control. Parents must anticipate (and hopefully prevent) the most unimaginable of hazards; like those posed by the ordinary chili bean. If not watched continuously, this bean will sneak off the counter and onto the kitchen floor. It will ultimately find its way into your child's itty-bitty, adorable nose. But once lodged securely in your child's nasal passage, there is no such thing as an ordinary chili bean. No, that bean will be extraordinarily expensive.

Parents, you see what I mean about the importance of being a generalist? You never know what you'll run up against from one day to another. Parenting is a never-ending string of spontaneous, unpredictable events, which at best take you by surprise, and at worst give you nightmares. It means parenting is rarely boring, but it's not often relaxing either.

It's beyond me how any parent survives without developing a whopping case of fatigue! Oh, you do have it? Well, my sympathies . . .

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.