



by Karen Stephens

Successful Parenting Isn't for the Faint of Heart

Anyone with first hand experience can tell you that parenting isn't for the faint of heart. Sure it can seem easy when kids are eager to please and are cooperative. But more days than not, raising kids is physically and emotionally draining.

When parenting gets tough, it's tempting to run for cover. But doing so means you're abandoning your child. Kids need parents who will "stay the course" for long-term child-rearing.

Children flourish when parents generously give their time and energy, even when the kids are anything but cute and cuddly. They need moms and dads who will be sensitive and responsive to a wide variety of needs. What kids DON'T need are parents that put children on the back burner until it's convenient to deal with them.

To be a responsive parent, you have to be a Jack (or Jane) of all trades. Your work never ends as you cover all bases. It requires multiple talents, abundant patience, and the ability to learn "on the job." Flexibility and the ability to think quickly on your feet is a definite advantage.

Being able to view life from a child's perspective comes in handy, too. Often it's hard to place yourself in those tiny shoes; but this ability helps you understand kids' motivations and behavior more easily.

There are some priority parenting responsibilities almost everyone agrees on. First, you've got to keep the tummies full; preferably with nutrient-filled food that won't lead to either underweight or obesity.

Of course, parents also need to keep kids covered with clothing and maintain a sturdy, reliable roof over their head. And throughout that home, there's lots of love and affection to be dispensed.

Attending to children's ongoing health needs is another job detail. Learning to watch for and recognize symptoms of oncoming illness is continual. And then there are the typical childhood injuries to navigate. Maintaining one's cool when children undergo treatment in the emergency room is a life experience few parents miss out on, but all wish they could.

Beyond those basics, there are many other "minor" aspects of parenting that aren't minor at all. In fact, they complicate parenting to no end.

Parents must become skilled in Hazard Control by anticipating (and hopefully preventing) the most unimaginable of mishaps; like those posed by the ordinary chili bean making its way into a child's adorable little nose.

Parents must be attentive to children by "listening" both to their behavior and language. This requires parents to "read" children's nonverbal cues in order to anticipate and respond to their needs. This not only reduces children's frustration, but also builds children's sense of trust — a necessary ingredient for an emotionally secure attachment.

“One of the
hardest tasks
of parenting
is coaching
children to
understand
and manage
their
emotions.”

Even when peace and quiet is all they want, a responsive parent talks with children frequently in meaningful ways, according to children's ages and ability to understand. During infancy, parents "talk" with facial expressions and gentle touch. As the infant grows, sensitive parents pair daily routines with verbal dialogue to help children understand what is happening. All that talk helps children gradually master language, grasp how the world works, and increases their ability to interact with others.

Parents must also be an enthusiastic cheerleader by reinforcing all of children's "firsts." Never let it be said that your child first walked or talked without you absolutely falling all over yourself with glee! When children successfully achieve developmental milestones, even small ones, their confidence and sense of competence grows. That self-assurance helps children handle independence throughout life.

Children flourish when parents generously give their time and energy, even when the kids are anything but cute and cuddly.

Kids aren't meant to be mere clones of mom and dad. So wise parents help children develop their own identity. They encourage them to become aware of their unique talents, strengths, and challenges.

One of the hardest tasks of parenting is coaching children to understand and manage their emotions. Being on hand to help children maintain (or regain!) self control when overloaded can be daunting — and especially embarrassing during a child's public tantrum. But it's a critical step in helping children responsibly deal with anger and frustration.

So children develop a sense of community, parents gradually ease children beyond the primary parent-child bond. They introduce kids to the world, starting first with extended family. They create opportunities that encourage children to acquire social and friendship skills such as sharing, cooperating, compromising, and being loyal.

And of course, every parent is responsible for instilling a diverse array of values in children, from ethics and moral codes to responsibility, accountability, self-discipline, and a good work ethic

You see? There's really a lot to the job of parenting! It's beyond me how anyone survives it. Despite the weight of the responsibility, take great pride in your role as parent. You're doing the most important job around: raising our next generation. It's YOUR gift to the future, especially your child's.

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*.

© Karen Stephens 2007