

Mother Nurture

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What To Do So Your Kids Don't Stress You Out

We've got a 2-year-old and a 4-year-old and I love them to pieces, but they're always getting into things or having tantrums or squabbling with each other or getting sick or throwing a ruckus when my husband and I are trying to talk to each other. Or all the above! It's probably normal, but it's a chaotic swirl day to day that I can't seem to see a clear way out of. . . .

Well, you're not alone!

Like you and millions of other parents, we got caught in the same swirl when our kids were little, and it's hard to figure out which parts are normal kid stuff, or discipline issues, or child temperament, or parental stress overload, or couple's issues – or something else!

We learned that it really helps to have a simple plan you can keep returning to – like having a lighthouse to guide your family out of life's whirlpools and riptides and fog. Obviously, the plan changes depending on the age of the child, so adjust it to your situation, but here are the ten headlines:

Prevent Misbehavior in the First Place

1. Give tons of nurturance to your children. In the press of daily life, it's all too easy to get caught up in moving kids along from place to place and task to task. It's worth asking: How many minutes a day do my children get my undivided and nurturing attention – or my mate's? By giving our kids a little extra, that often settles them down, defuses sibling rivalries, and makes them more cooperative. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!
2. Encourage your kids to let the good feelings sink in. Even with a toddler, you can help a child slow down, take a breath, and let a sweet moment sink in. That will help build up resources inside that the child can draw on in the future to soothe or calm herself, exercise age-appropriate self-control, and tolerate better reasonable separations from her parents. And it will help balance the brain's tendency to over-emphasize negative experiences and skim over positive ones.
3. Teach positive values. In age-appropriate ways, model and talk about good character with your kids. For example, comment on what other people do (in real life or

on TV or in stories), read books that support various virtues, expose children to spiritual or moral teachings, or explain the *reasons* why you're giving a child a consequence.

4. Optimize your child's physiology. Most kids' mood and ability to control themselves – and mind their mother! – is quite affected by their *physical* well-being. Make sure they get lots of sleep and protein with every meal. We've seen behavior problems diminish or even go away entirely after a child started taking vitamin/mineral supplements. All kids benefit from reasonable amounts of essential fatty acids – typically in fish oil (get a good brand that is “molecularly distilled” for purity) – but especially those children who tend to be inflexible, resist transitions, etc. Keep an eye out for potential allergies or food sensitivities: the signs often include a chronic runny nose, dark circles under the eyes, or digestive problems (like frequent tummyaches or diarrhea).

If your child has an anxious/rigid or spirited temperament, these guidelines are especially important. Sometimes it helps to work with a licensed health care practitioner (in addition to your pediatrician) who is knowledgeable about complementary medicine with children. (See www.nurturemom.com for several articles about helping kids with anxious or spirited temperaments.)

5. Have a reasonably structured home life. Lots of child misbehaviors are the result of too much “wigginess” from day to day. Consistent routines – with some room for variation and occasionally declaring the day Wacky Wednesday! – help kids feel secure and less stressed.

Discipline When Appropriate

6. Remember that you're the boss. Parents have to be the ultimate authority in the home, and comfortable in a *vertical* relationship with children in which the adult is definitely the one on top. This needs to be Rule #1 in your home.

7. Have clear expectations for your kids' behavior, and consistent consequences – both rewards and penalties – for their behavior. If there is any question what the “house rules” for your home are, write them out. They're usually pretty obvious, like do what mom and dad say, no hitting, no screaming, no put-downs, pick up your stuff, and help out when we ask you.

Think ahead about the consequences for both good behavior and bad. Ideally, they should be given to a child both consistently and as soon as possible after the behavior.

As a general principle, it's best to emphasize rewards (like smiles, praise, extra hugs or stories, stickers that convert to little toys, etc.). Reasonable negative consequences include frowns, glares, scolding, brief time outs (if a child will accept them), and the loss of rewards (like no dessert at dinner). Our personal opinion is that it's best to avoid corporal punishment, since there's always an alternative punishment, and hitting kids is especially frightening and upsetting to them (and often, their parents . . .).

If a child past the age of 20 months or so keeps doing a particular misbehavior, you've got to do more than correct it and direct the child toward better behavior. You have to give a reasonable consequence for the misbehavior in the first place. Otherwise, for the child it's like pulling a slot machine handle: sometimes there's a payoff and there's never any cost to pulling, so why not just keep yanking on it?!

And don't let a child punish you for trying to punish him. Go back to Rule #1 just above!

8. Be on the same page with your partner. Minor differences in parental style are actually good for kids because they prepare them for the different teachers, coaches, and ultimately, bosses, they will encounter in life. But big disagreements – whether it's how long to let a baby cry before you pick her up or how polite a 6-year-old should be – confuse kids and create conflicts between their parents.

If this is an issue for you and your partner, try to talk about the underlying values or family experiences you had yourselves as children that lead to strong feelings about childrearing practices; this will help you understand each other better and take things less personally. Try to pin down your differences to concrete details – like “You want to send him to his room for half an hour but I think ten minutes is enough” – and then negotiate compromises with each other about those details.

Take Care of Your Own Well-Being and Stress Relief

9. Do the basics to improve your own health and well-being. Of all the factors that help children turn out to be happy and productive members of society, the one that usually has the most influence of all is their parents' well-being and level of personal functioning. For example, it's a lot harder to stay patient if you're getting mentally frazzled or physically depleted. Plus, everyday hassles with children will wear on you a lot harder.

So take an inventory of where you stand with these basic wellness practices: Are you eating three healthy meals a day, each with a solid serving of protein, and minimizing sugar, white flour, artificial ingredients, and unhealthy fats? Are you taking a good vitamin supplement, plus additional calcium and essential fatty acids? Are you exercising 3 – 4 times a week? Are you getting any time to yourself? Do you routinely engage in some sort of personal practice that feeds your inner being, like playing music, doing a craft, meditating, reading inspirational literature, dancing, or yoga? Do you spend time each week with supportive friends? If you have any significant issues with your physical or mental health, are you addressing them successfully?

Based on your answers, write down a little plan for yourself for what you commit to doing differently from now on. Putting it in writing will give it more impact! (For more on your own health and well-being, see our book, *Mother Nurture*.)

10. When you're with the kids, keep the needle of your personal stress meter out of the red zone. Do little things throughout your day to de-frazzle yourself, like taking a big

breath, washing your face, making a cup of tea, or just looking at the play of sunlight outside. Remember that your child is just trying to get what she wants, she's too young to have the mental capacity to deliberately manipulate you, and that she's not trying to do it to you personally. Remember that she's suffering, too, when she's misbehaving.

Think about the big picture, and relax as much as you can. Remember that time is on your side, that most kids behave better as they get older – and that when they finally leave home, you'll miss even the hard parts of raising children!

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