

How to be a better parent (and a better partner)



When parents fight, the volume and harsh tone of voice causes children stress Corbis

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Family therapists Jean-Claude Chalmet and Caryn Nuttall say we can all improve our relationships. Here's how . . .

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Don't bully your children

Some parents put intolerable pressure on their children. Their attitudes can be very bullying: "I've given you everything, you're lazy and ungrateful, just work harder!" They want their children to follow in their high-flying footsteps or achieve what they didn't. They have rigid expectations, a fantasy of the child that they superimpose on the child's personality. They refuse to accept their child's limitations, and the children are too frightened to explain. Some make themselves ill in an effort to secure parental approval. Others escape through addiction. We see teenagers and young adults full of anxiety, depression, even on the brink of suicide. They feel guilty, inadequate and unloved.

Often, these parents think they're fulfilling their duty to their children, by pushing them to succeed, but a child can feel that love is conditional on their success. Unconditional love is essential: this is what gives children the wings to fly. We've seen an astonishing number of

adult children who say they've never been hugged by their fathers. Accept and love your children for who they are, not who you'd like them to be, and show it. Encourage them to talk; listen to and respect their needs. "I have always loved you, I love you, and I will always love you," is a very powerful phrase to put a child's mind at ease.

Trust your child

Children need basic love and basic trust. Everything else is the icing on the cake. The first time something goes wrong, many parents overreact: "I can't trust you. I allowed you to do this and you did that! From now on, that's it!"

But growing up is a continuous process of trial and error. We need to trust our children to experience life, and discover this for themselves. It's our job to let children explore, even if at times they get slightly hurt. Too often, parents give children the sense that any failure equates to not being good enough. Our response to failure is vital to their self-esteem: "OK, you failed, try again. OK, you failed, these things happen. Mum and Dad have failed many a time!"

You can argue in front of the children, but do it like this . . .

Arguing between adults — and children — is inevitable. Disagreement is how we all find our way. To argue about political issues, or what's going on in the world, is invigorating; it helps children form opinions.

Damage is done when rows turn viciously personal. Babies are afraid of loud noises and that instinctive fear remains. When parents fight, the volume and harsh tone of voice causes children stress. Beyond that basic terror lies real anxiety: that parents will divorce and their secure world will shatter. Children also tend to assume that any discord is their fault. This is partly because they are self-focused, but also because rows often start over a difference on child-rearing. In our practice, we see parents who use children to needle each other when they don't dare attack each other directly, usually over some festering tension related to lack of intimacy.

So it's essential to find positive ways to resolve your partnership conflict, and to tackle the real issue, rather than wreak general havoc around it. Even if a relationship is irrecoverable, if you behave decently, it's possible to separate without causing mental harm to your children. Be direct and respectful. If you storm or sulk, children learn from that. If adults talk through their disagreements rationally, however, kids learn to communicate their own emotions and needs in a healthy way.

Shout less

When children shout, it's because they feel they aren't being listened to, but it is inevitably a habit learnt from their parents. When an adult shouts at a child, it more often reflects the parent's lack of real power, their insecurities and anxieties. Shouting also betrays an inability to self-regulate — when you shout, you put your emotional intelligence aside. Too often, when we're tired, stressed, overwhelmed, we use our children as emotional punchbags on which to vent our anger and frustrations, because at least here we have power — they can't retaliate.

Of course, it's frustrating when children don't instantly comply, but when they don't listen, or misbehave, it's usually through a sense of injustice or hurt that you aren't being fair. Even if you're not in the mood to explain, they need to understand why. So, if your child wants to watch a programme that finishes an hour past his 8.30 bedtime, say, "The reason you're going to go to bed at 8.30 is that I want you to sleep for ten hours, or tomorrow you'll be tired". Add: "I'm the adult and I'm making this decision because I feel it's best for you. I know you might not agree, and you might be upset with me, but you have to trust me." The child will say the most horrible things because he's not getting his way, but if you maintain this line, they may eventually, grudgingly admit that you're not that wrong.

Reasoning is exhausting; it requires more energy than shouting. However, we all make mistakes, and as long as the child knows that they are loved and it's their behaviour that is being attacked, not them, the occasional roar from a fond parent can prepare children for life in the real world.

Don't micromanage

Telling a child a thousand times to do their homework, or get up, or tidy their room, eats away at the soul. So, especially as children approach their teens, a determined parent might decide they know full well what's required of them, and stop fussing. We suggest that rather than shake them awake repeatedly, you might simply hand them an alarm clock. In the absence of micromanagement, children are forced to acquire self-discipline and assume responsibility — or face the consequences. This approach requires nerves of steel, but in the long term, benefits both adult and child.

Don't make sibling rivalry worse

Sibling rivalry is inevitable. But it's exacerbated when children feel that parental love is conditional, that one child is favoured, that they are not being heard. It's up to parents to cool the heat of that relationship by adjusting their own behaviour. Make each child feel loved and special in their own right; show them that in your eyes they aren't in competition. Explain that, as a parent, you don't divide your love, you multiply it. Children are always afraid you will take your love away from them and give it to the other child, especially if one sibling is particularly talented, or good-looking. Never label children, negatively or even positively ("the arty one").

In some families, one child is labelled "difficult". This is tantamount to choosing a scapegoat. It can also become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you naturally clash with one child, have the courage to recognise that. Often, an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or godparent needs to intervene. It's essential for that child to have someone who roots for them, who understands and supports them, who they can confide in, who is their champion.

Listen to the child who feels hard-done by

We often feel that, for the sake of fairness, we should treat all children the same. You can't. Each child has different needs. One might have a particularly sensitive nature and, in sibling disputes, be prone to falling silent or withdrawing. While his siblings might see this as a sign that he's lost, that they can ride roughshod over him, it actually indicates that he needs to be listened to. A child like this requires 5 per cent extra emotional attention from

a parent — then it is our job to intervene, try to protect him, get the others to understand what's going on, without ruffling their feathers. It's about being a diplomat; appeasing all sides, but giving a little more where necessary.

Mum and Dad should hug more

It's so important for children to learn that intimacy and affection between adults is a natural state. Some adolescents claim disgust at any show of intimacy between parents, but if your hugs and kisses are appropriately chaste, rest assured: it's wonderful for children to feel their parents are content. We often feel that it's not our job to teach our children about sex and intimacy — but our wisdom is more essential than it ever was. These days porn is easily accessible, and from it children learn that sex is strictly performance-related and feelings are redundant. In fact, if the feelings are there, everything else follows. It's crucial therefore, that we talk to our children, educate them, provide them with a more honest take on what a loving relationship is all about.

Avoid factions

If parents don't get along, they can — unwittingly or on purpose — force a child to take sides. We have seen that if a child is manipulated into defending one parent, this leads to resentment from the unfavoured parent, and a spiral of animosity. In psychology, a situation where one family member doesn't communicate directly with another, but uses a third party, is called “triangulation”. This splits families into factions, and unfairly forces a third person to be included in the dispute of the first two.

This dysfunctional triangle can also occur when a child confides a problem to one parent, which this parent parrots to the other parent. Then, the second parent talks to the child. As each parent interprets what the child has said, the given solution tends to be practical — when often the child was seeking emotional support. So the child feels betrayed, bewildered and frustrated. Far better that both parents talk to the child together. If you solve the problem as a team, less is lost in translation, and your child is more likely to feel that all his needs have been thoughtfully met.

Make your time together count

Children are always looking to connect. When they behave badly, it's often because they can't get attention in a positive way. Then children receive the attention they crave but, sadly, it's negative. But any attention is preferable to being ignored. Also when parents argue, children learn that through that negativity there's a lot of attention. People are highly focused on each other when they argue. Children who feel starved of attention want their interaction with their parents to have the same quality to it.

The solution can be as simple as taking a child for a walk, talking to them to find out why they're acting up. Underpinning challenging behaviour is hurt or fear: they feel left out or overlooked. But many of us work and time with our children is limited. So it's important for parents to dedicate an amount of time to each child exclusively. If you reach home at 6pm and the children are up till 7.30, even 10 minutes of quality time is better than 90 minutes of just being around. Each child will always demand 100 per cent of your time, effort, energy, and love, which of course is impossible. So while they might not have as

much of your time as they want, it's essential that what they do have is fulfilling.

Understand that a perfect parent would be unbearable

Very often, parents have a lot of love, but don't know how to give it. The love in their heart is suffocated under a mass of unresolved issues from their own upbringing. But parents, like children, have to accept that they will make mistakes. There's no such thing as the perfect parent — indeed, that would be unbearable for a child. We only need to be good enough. By being good enough, we can create what's known as secure attachment: the healthiest relationship dynamic between parents and children that promotes normal, well-adjusted emotional and social development.

Develop a humanistic approach to raising children: an emphasis on caring for yourself and others; being considerate; nurturing decent values; promoting love, compassion and open-mindedness. These are non-intellectual concepts — nothing to do with material achievement. If you're too strict, too demanding, your children will struggle to be themselves. Think of your family as a team; promote collaboration and equality. No one should be acting a part; they should feel safe to be their authentic selves.

Don't be a martyr parent

Mothers who martyr themselves for their family, forsaking any kind of independence, are not a good role model for their daughters — or sons. Children will absorb the message that women should have no expectations of life. There's a risk that boys will grow into tyrants. When parents take time for themselves, they not only show their children that being an adult is fun, they bring renewed energy into the home. Of course, it's fine to devote yourself to the home, as long as you are honest about your needs, and feel they are genuinely met. Problems only arise when we lack self-awareness, resist being conscious of what we want, and then act out because we have this gnawing sense of something lacking. Do what makes you happy, and trust that your children will understand that in turn they have the freedom to choose their own path.

Let children be monsters

When parents realise that their children are angelic in public, and monstrous at home, they worry they are too permissive, and are raising brats. But if your child is charm personified in public, congratulations: you've given him the tools, he knows how to behave. The flipside of this is that your child feels he doesn't have to prove it every second in the privacy of his own home.

So give your children the freedom to express themselves at home — because where else can they do it? Children used to be able to run wild for hours in the park or forest with friends. But nowadays they are so conditioned, and directed, their only outlet is at home. Children are rather like Irish setters, they need space to run — and where else are they going to be monsters but in the freedom of home? Of course, if you want to see less of this, ensure they have space to run, kick a ball, scream and shout — you will see different children.

Have a laugh

The moment there is laughter, everybody engages, everybody wants to be a part of it, everybody enjoys themselves. Some of the most beautiful moments in a family are when you all laugh your heads off at something silly that Mum or Dad did — there is such a sense of togetherness. Where there is laughter, there is love — and children respond to love like lotus flowers: they just open.