

Six Steps to Being a Better Parent

What we as parents say to our children is very important in determining the sort of person they will grow up to be. Here are six statements that we need to tell our children regularly to help them develop well.

1. "I love you"

In order to feel loved children must both hear this and see this expressed by their parents. We often say that our children should know that we love them because we provide for them. It is important to provide but it is not enough. Saying "I love you", giving them a hug, listening to them, speaking to them with respect are all ways of demonstrating our love.

Each child is unique and should be helped to feel special. Parents should avoid playing favourites.

2. "You belong to this family"

Our children should know that we are glad they belong to us. We can tell them this and we can show it in our behaviour. For example asking children for their opinion about family decisions is one way of making them feel they have a place in the family. This can be as simple as asking your five-year-old, "Would you like us to go to look for grandma or for auntie tomorrow?"

In families with a stepfather or stepmother, the stepparent also needs to let the child know that they are glad that they have a relationship with them.

3. "You are capable"

Notice what our children do well naturally and praise them for it. We also need to notice when they are trying and encourage and praise them for making the effort. Our natural tendency when we see a report card with several B's but no A's is to say "Why can't you get an A on your report card?" However the B may represent real effort from your child who is not very strong academically and he or she should be praised for their hard work.

Think how we encourage the infants as they learn to speak and walk. Doing that helps to make them feel capable and encourages perseverance to master their tasks. Bigger children need that same encouragement too.

4. "I take your feelings and needs seriously"

Parents should be aware of their children's feelings as well as their needs. Being aware of their feelings means making the time to listen to them and to observe their behaviour.

We also need to distinguish between feelings and behaviour. If our daughter says she is angry with her brother, we need to listen to what the problem is, not tell her that she is wrong to feel angry. However if she picked up the chair to hit him, that behaviour is wrong and needs to be corrected.

Disciplining our children is also a way to meet their needs. Discipline is not really about punishment, though this may be necessary at times. Discipline is about teaching the child how to deal with various situations. We discipline by instructing the child clearly. For example instead of scolding, "You are a bad boy, behave yourself" it would be much better to be specific in what we say. We could say "Marcel, you should not play with matches. Bring them to me and play with your puzzle instead".

5. "You are free to be you"

Helping our children to develop appropriate independence as they grow up is important. No child likes to be constantly controlled, though parents must provide for their safety and security. A three-year-old must eat vegetables, but can choose between tomatoes or carrots. A twelve-year-old given an allowance should be allowed to spend it on what they want within reason.

They learn logical consequences and responsibility through this process. If they have spent their money on something frivolous, they have to wait to get the item they really want. That is of course if parents learn to be firm about not "bailing them out".

Being "free to be you" also means that we do not dictate our child's choice of career. Many of us push our children to become what we wanted to be. This usually does not work well for the child, whose gifts and talents may be in another area.

6. The final statement is better lived than said. It is **"Feel free to follow my example"**.

We do not want to walk around saying to our children "Do it just like me". No child wants to hear that all the time. However they will "do it just like us" in many situations.

Being a good role model is important to our children. We cannot expect them to "do as I say, but not as I do". If you smoke, don't be surprised to find your eight-year-old experimenting. If you send your child to church but never go yourself don't be surprised if they soon refuse to go. If they see you hand back the extra change to the cashier, they learn the importance of honesty. If they see you being helpful to

someone disabled, they learn to respect others who are different. If they see you say a prayer at mealtimes, they learn the importance of being thankful to God. Children do indeed live what they learn. Let's be sure they learn the right lessons from us.

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