

When Parenting Makes Your Head Spin!

Before I got married, I had six theories about bringing up children. Now I have six children, and no theories. —Anonymous

Most parents agree: It doesn't take much to occasionally feel overwhelmed as a parent. Your child can easily throw you off-kilter by raising issues you're unprepared to tackle or acting in ways you weren't expecting.

A 2002 Search Institute-YMCA parent survey, *Building Strong Families*, reveals that three out of four parents felt they were doing "less than great" as parents, and one in five said they were either doing "poorly" or "just okay." All parents find themselves stymied by parenting at one time or another. Here's how to keep a cool head when those times hit:

Try it...

For all parents

- Know that you're not alone: Even though parenting can be quite rewarding, many also say that it's downright tough at times.
- Resolve to develop (or deepen) your sense of humor. Kids come up with the craziest ideas. Instead of losing your temper when their ideas go awry, take a break, deal with the situation, and try to find a bit of humor in it. As one parent says, "At least my son didn't burn down the garage!"
- Get to know other parents. Make an effort to introduce yourself and learn new names when you're present at your child's activities. Strike up conversations about common parenting topics. Not all parents will be interested in sharing what their kids are doing, but you'll find some who are willing to commiserate and problem-solve with you while creating a supportive network of like-minded parents.
- It's vital to network with other parents when you're a single parent. Some get together regularly to discuss creative ways to make life easier. One solution might involve setting up a childcare co-op. For example, a group of single parents may take turns trading childcare responsibilities one Saturday afternoon a month, giving the others a "parenting break." Parents rotate homes so that each single parent cares for the children once a month in their home and gets a break the other three Saturday afternoons a month.
- Be clear that you're not your children's "dumping ground." Kids are notorious for saying, "I need to be at such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time" a few minutes before the event begins (even when you were never told about the event to begin with), or for needing certain supplies that you don't own. Sometimes you'll find yourself scrambling to comply, but it's ultimately helpful (and appropriate) to teach kids to be respectful of your time and ask them to give you proper notice—without expecting you to do everything for them. They can do their part.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Pace yourself. This is an extremely intense time for most parents. It's easy to lose yourself in the physical and emotional demands of this phase, but it's also crucial that you raise infants well by meeting their needs, and monitoring young children closely while giving them stimulating activities. Take naps when your kids nap. Cut back on other activities if you need more time to yourself. Get lots of ideas on how to care for yourself from the asset-building book [Parenting Preschoolers with a Purpose](#).
- Find other caring, responsible adults who can spend time with your kids and give you a much-needed break from time to time. Grandparents often enjoy spending time with your kids. So do aunts, uncles, and babysitters that you trust.
- Enjoy this time with your young children. Even though it's aggravating to have toys strewn all over the house, spit-up on your clothes, and dirty dishes in the sink, try to let go of your internal resistance and discover some of the joys of this age group. Preschoolers hold an incredible view of the world, and they often make funny and insightful connections that adults don't.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Parenting can become overwhelming at this stage because there's so much to keep track of with your growing child's physical needs and homework and school demands. Try to keep on top of it all, because it's important for your child to do the best he or she can in school. At times, it may feel as though you're more of a student than your child is. However, your child will learn important study habits when you sit side-by-side during homework time. You can gradually pull back as your child takes on more of the responsibility of schoolwork.
- Sometimes feel like a cab driver or transportation president? This feeling is common when you're driving your child from activity to activity (particularly when you multiply that feeling by the number of kids you have). Figure out ways to make the "getting there" and "getting back" times more fun for you both. Sing songs aloud together. Listen in on your kids' conversations. Pack a bag with magazines, a novel, or handwork that you can do while you're waiting for them.
- Do something to recharge yourself. Occasionally leave your kids with a responsible adult, and visit a place that excites or calms you. Is there a botanical garden nearby? A museum? A park with a walking path? A library? A coffeehouse where you can meet a friend?

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Remember the early childhood years and how they made your head spin? Welcome to Part Two! (Some parents contend that the most intense parenting years are from the ages 0 to 5 and 10 to 15.) Although your kids are pulling away from you and becoming more independent, it's important to monitor and remain involved in what they're doing, who they're with, and where they're going. Stay engaged, even when your kids may signal you to stay out of their lives.
- Kids at this age can be impulsive, and may pressure you to let them do things—fast. Slow down the process. Ask questions. Help young teenagers think through actions and consequences. For example, if your child wants to go to a music concert, don't just automatically agree (or say no) without exploring the request further. Find out if other adults are going. Ask about the price of a concert ticket. Learn how your child plans to get to and from the concert. Find out whether the concert is truly acceptable for this age group. Model and discuss together these other aspects so that your

child can learn to plan, consider the bigger picture, and not be so quick to jump into new experiences.

- Know that most kids are going to experiment in some way with risk-taking behaviors, such as getting into trouble at school or even trying alcohol. When these difficult behaviors happen, work with your child to limit the risk-taking to a one-shot experience (if at all). Set limits and consequences, and be firm while also reminding your child how much you love him or her.
- The teen years are often described as a period of “storm and stress.” And while you may find yourself in far more contentious situations with your emerging teenager, remember to love, support, and listen to your teenager, too. One of the more interesting Search Institute findings is that while 70 percent of young people feel they have Asset 1, Family Support, only about 30 percent report they have Asset 2, Positive Family Communication. So talk with your child, and also listen to him or her.
- As long as you’re aware of what’s happening in your children’s lives, you can relax and enjoy some of the funny, crazy things they do. For example, at a sleepover, one of the girls called each of the other girls’ dads to say how much their daughters loved them (while the daughter screamed in the background), before giggling and hanging up. Some of the playful behavior at this age is harmless and worth laughing about.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Although teenagers at this age tend to be less impulsive than in earlier teen years, they can still be overly spontaneous at times and may need guidance in thinking things through. Give teenagers room to make their own decisions, but continue to ask them questions to help them see the broader picture.
 - Talk and listen to your teenager to understand how much involvement he or she wants from you when making decisions involving school schedules, projects, part-time jobs, financial decisions, college shopping, relationship decisions, and so on. Your perspective often can be very helpful to teenagers. Make sure, though, that they “own” the process and make the final decision themselves.
 - Remember to take time for yourself. Relax with [*A Moment's Peace for Parents of Teens*](#).
 - Find out about the creative things teenagers do to make life interesting. For example, at some high schools teenagers compete with each other to ask a date to a dance in the most original way possible. Enjoy these acts, even if your teenager does goofy things that make you shake your head, such as wearing tennis shoes with a tuxedo.
 - Let some things go. Even when teenagers are older, they can still make your head spin. As long as your teen isn’t in danger or creating trouble, sometimes it’s best to just sit down and take a deep breath before trying to figure out what you’ll say or do next.
-