

Chapter 1

Primary Parenting Principles



In This Chapter

- ☺ Knowing the duties and responsibilities of being a parent
- ☺ Looking at the roles smart parents must play
- ☺ Keeping your sense of humor intact

Welcome to The Parenting Game! Your goal is to raise children who turn into well-adjusted adults, but you can't play the game without knowing the primary parenting principles. That's what this chapter shows you.

Know up front that no parent is perfect, so all you can do is your level best. If your kids grow up to be happy, wholesome, and productive adults — people who are valued in the community — and you wind up having a wonderful relationship with them, then you've won the game.

First Things First: Using This Book

This book is part of a series called *The Parent's Success Guide*. Its main purpose is to help you, a busy, multitasking mom (or dad!), make some positive changes in your life as a parent — in a minimum amount of time.

Brought to you by the makers of the world-famous *For Dummies* series, this book provides straightforward advice, hands-on information, and helpful, practical tips — all of it on, about, and for being a smart parent. And this book does so with warmth, encouragement, and gentleness — as a trusted friend would do.

This book isn't meant to be read from front to back, so you don't have to read the entire book to understand what's going on. Just go to the chapter or section that interests you. And although age-specific information is included for toddlers, preschoolers, school-age children, and teenagers, this book is more of a reference for parents of children of all ages. Keep an eye out for text in *italics*, which indicates a new term and a nearby definition — no need to spend time hunting through a glossary.

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While reading this book, you'll see these icons sprinkled here and there:



This icon points out advice that saves time, requires less effort, achieves a quick result, or helps make a task easier.



This icon signifies information that's important to keep in mind.



This icon alerts you to areas of caution or danger – negative information you need to be aware of.

If you'd like more comprehensive information about a particular subject covered in this book, you may want to pick up a copy of the classic *For Dummies* book covering the same topic. This book consists primarily of text compiled from

- ✿ *Parenting For Dummies, 2nd Edition*
- ✿ *Raising Smart Kids For Dummies*
- ✿ *Single Parenting For Dummies*
- ✿ *Etiquette For Dummies*
- ✿ *Potty Training For Dummies*

The Duties and Responsibilities of a Parent

Your job as a parent consists of several duties and responsibilities to your kids:

- ✿ You communicate effectively with them – expressing your specific ideas, wants, and desires – and teach them to do the same with you.
- ✿ You set fair and reasonable rules for them, never go back on or change those rules, and practice following through (meaning you always stick to your original word).
- ✿ You manage their behavior by keeping them busy and occupied most of the time, because idle hands get into trouble. You also give them time to relax and use their imagination in play, because scheduling every second of their lives can lead to an inability to do anything on their own. And all the while, you give them plenty of praise and attention as well as find the patience to deal with them in a calm and relaxed way.

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- ✿ You keep them healthy by making sure that they get proper nutrition and sleep.
- ✿ You educate them with what you remember of your book learning and common sense.
- ✿ You guide them — physically, socially, and emotionally — through the good times as well as the tough times.
- ✿ You take care of them when they get sick, and you do your best to keep them safe and out of harm's way.
- ✿ You love them — unconditionally.

The Roles a Parent Must Play

One thing you need to understand is that, as a parent, you must take on some new and important roles — that of role model, teacher, listener, and friend who's still the parent. You can still be yourself, but parenting requires you to understand that regardless of whether you want to accept these new roles, they're yours. And it's for you and your kids' benefit that you play them well.

The positive role model

A *role model* is someone you look up to and try to be like. Maybe it's that woman down the street who raised five kids all to become doctors. Maybe it's a fictional character, like Batman. Or maybe it's your own mother or father. Whoever, it's someone you want to be like, someone who is well liked.

Being a positive role model is important because your children look to you as an example of how to behave. Your actions and behavior play a significant role as your child's personality develops. Regardless of what habits you have and actions you take, you can rest assured that your child is watching your every move and gathering that *that's* the behavior to imitate. What you do has a direct impact — positive or negative.

Know that you can be a role model in ways that you don't even realize. How you handle stress, how you communicate, and how you reassure your children are important aspects of being a positive role model.

A *good role model* isn't necessarily someone who is perfect in every way. If you can walk on water, that's great. Otherwise, try doing the things that you know are right. You'll no doubt get upset sometimes. That happens. The important part is to apologize later or explain to your kids why you got upset. It's healthy for kids to know that their parents get upset. Everyone does. *How* you handle being upset is what's important.

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On the other hand, a *bad role model* doesn't necessarily mean a bad person. Bad role models typically are workaholics, alcoholics, drug users, negative people, or people who put material things ahead of their families.

The rewards of being a good role model are great. You'll raise children who grow up to be people others want to be friends with. They'll contribute to their communities and generally be all-around great people. And that's a great gift to society.

The ever-present teacher

Everything you do and say is absorbed by your child's brain. This happens whether you want it to or not, so welcome to your second role as parent — that of *teacher*. From the time your children are born, they watch your actions and behaviors and learn from them. Your children discover things when you talk to them and do things with them. You'll teach them how to respond to spilled milk, how to react to a joke, what to do when they fall down — and all the other things we deal with in life.

If you're calm, relaxed, and don't overreact to broken dishes and other such events, your children are likely to be calm and relaxed. On the other hand, if you're nervous and tense, your children are likely to be nervous and tense.

As a parent/teacher, you have two general areas in which you need to spend time teaching your children:

- ✿ **Relationships:** You want to enable your children to be their own people, have their own ideas, and recognize and respect the fact that your and their ideas can be different. In addition, the strongest relationships that parents and children can have with other people are those in which both can come together, accepting and respecting that they are different and have different thoughts and ideas. Achieving this balance takes a considerable amount of work on a parent's part, because kids instinctively consider their way of thinking right and think that everyone else must think that way, too.
- ✿ **Education:** Whether your kids attend public or private schools or are schooled in your home, you need to help them with their homework and other educational needs. Take the time to explain how things work and let your children help you cook, clean, and grow some flowers. This is all part of education.

The good listener

Listening is probably one of the weakest and most underused skills that people have. Listening to, paying close attention to, and focusing on your children are the greatest gifts you can give to them.

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A technique known as *mirroring* — in which you repeat back what your child (or partner, for that matter) says or summarize those same thoughts — is great to use when you and your child are talking. For example, when your child comes home from losing a soccer game and tells you how much she hates soccer, you might mirror back a response such as “So you hate soccer” and then follow up with “Tell me more about that” or “It sounds like you’re really upset that you lost the game.” Then be quiet and let your child talk. Mirroring not only clarifies what’s being said but also keeps you on track with the conversation and serves as an acknowledgement for your child that you’re actually paying attention. In addition, it helps teach your child to express her feelings in healthy ways. It’s also a wonderful skill to use in conversations with your friends and other family members.

The friend who’s still the parent

How can parents *befriend* their children and still function as parents? This question is tough to answer and a difficult issue to approach. You want to be friends with your children, spending time together, doing things together, paying attention to each other, and helping them grow up to be healthy, strong, independent people. Wanting to be your children’s friend can be very tempting. But you don’t want to cross the line and forget about being a parent. Granted, it’s not always fun. Parents have to make rules and enforce them, which often makes kids very upset. Friends, on the other hand, get to do fun things and usually make each other happy.

When you feel tempted to be more of a friend than a parent, remember that, during the course of their lives, your kids will have lots of *different* friends, but *no one* can replace your role as a parent. So don’t lose that role while trying to be your children’s friend.

An excellent book for parents is *The Emotional Incest Syndrome, What to Do When a Parent’s Love Rules Your Life*, by Dr. Patricia Love. The title may be a tad scary. But this book shows you what to avoid. “Too much of a friend” can be defined as a parent who shares confidential information with a child or makes the child think of himself and that parent as “best friends.” Becoming too much of a friend leads a child to believe that he must help you take care of your needs instead of you enabling him to grow and take care of his own needs.

The friend-versus-parent conflict isn’t all doom and gloom; good parents can and do make things fun, the way that a good friend does. But beware of bad but not-so-obvious habits that you don’t want to develop, such as *invalidating* a child with a problem, which you probably learned from your parents. Examples include telling a child to stop whining because nothing really is wrong with him or telling him to get up because he isn’t really hurt.

Being a good parent to your children also means accepting them for who they are, which typically is what a friend does. It isn’t harping on or

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pointing out their weaknesses but rather helping them build up the things they're good at. By encouraging them, you not only prove that you're a good friend but also help them develop their self-confidence.

Think about your best friend. How did this person become your best friend? You probably just spent a lot of time together and had fun, and the next thing you knew, you were friends. The same thing can happen with your children. Raising kids isn't the time to be selfish with your time or energy. It's the time when you *make time* to be with and do things with your kids.

If your children are your friends, they're more likely to open up to you with their problems and concerns about school, peer pressure, or other things that bother them. Likewise, you'll be more approachable when your kids look to you not only as a parent but also a friend.

The Importance of Keeping Your Sense of Humor

If you're like many parents, you probably can't think of anything or anyone more entertaining than your children. They're funny. They're goofy. Perhaps that's why so many good books, movies, and even comic strips are based on children and the things they do.

Without being evil, children have an uncanny ability to push all your buttons. You really need to be able to laugh at the things that ordinarily would drive you up the wall. In other words, relax.

Anger is usually a parent's first reaction because what kids do is unexpected, and it's also usually the parent who has to clean it up. So what? Stop, take several deep breaths, look at that sweet face, and smile. Anger is wasted energy, and you want to spend that energy somewhere else.

Let your kids be kids. They goof up. They make messes. Accept that fact and never assume they're doing something "just to get you." Part of the joy of being a parent is sitting back and watching your kids do all the goofy things your parents accused you of doing when you were a kid.

Concern for your children is good. But don't be so protective of your children that you forget how fun kids can be. Laughing is great. It makes you feel good, it relieves stress, and it makes life a lot more fun.