

Positive parenting checklist: 17 ways to parent more consciously

By Marianna S. Klebanov

As parents, most of us have the right intentions, but in the hustle and bustle of daily life, it's difficult to parent positively. As a result, a lot of our interactions with our kids are reactive. According to Marianna S. Klebanov, JD, it's important to become more aware of our parenting behaviors.

"Just like professional development and getting your finances in order, becoming a more conscious parent involves identifying areas in which you need to improve and keeping those goals at the front of your mind," says Klebanov, coauthor along with Adam D. Travis of *The Critical Role of Parenting in Human Development* (Routledge, 2014, ISBN: 978-1-138-02513-4, \$46.95, www.anewconversationonparenting.com). "It's never too late for us to become more intentional about how we do and don't want to be when we're with our children."

Here, she shares a list of 17 things you can do to parent more consciously. ("Remember, no parent is perfect, and we all make mistakes," she reminds. "These items are meant to be gentle reminders, not indictments! You might even find it helpful to print this list out and post it on the fridge or bathroom mirror as a daily tickler.")

- **Stop spanking.** Many of us grew up being spanked, and it's an easy response when a child is misbehaving. "While spanking can get the desired results in the short term, the truth is, there are no long-term benefits, and it can lead to quite a few issues down the road, including adversely impacting cognitive development and behavior," Klebanov comments.

- **Stop fighting in front of the kids.** To be clear, Klebanov isn't referring to basic constructive arguing, which can serve as a good lesson to youngsters, but to arguments that involve put-downs, name-calling, insults, or threats. "This is a negative, destructive communication pattern you don't want to model to your children," Klebanov comments. "Seeing parents fight is incredibly stressful to kids and can spark feelings of fear and anxiety that last long after Mom and Dad have made up."

- **Model kindness and compassion.** We all say we want to raise kids who are kind and compassionate—but be honest: How often do you demonstrate those values in action? "Kids notice things like whether you're nice or rude to the cashier, whether you help or ignore others who are less fortunate, and how you

respond when someone makes a mistake,” Klebanov notes. “The values that stick will be the ones you live, not the ones you preach about.”

- **Back away from teasing, yelling, and threatening.** To your child, these behaviors are demeaning and sometimes frightening. And long-term, they negatively affect kids’ self-esteem, social skills, and even academic skills. “It’s important to limit your expressions of anger toward your kids, especially for behaviors that are developmentally appropriate—even if they make you feel frustrated or angry,” Klebanov says. “Go to therapy if necessary.”

- **Promptly and lovingly respond to my baby’s cries.** Science has shown that a caregiver’s signals and availability are critical in infancy because they directly impact the child’s healthy emotional and psychological development. “Even if you’re tired, busy, or frustrated, it’s very important to promptly respond to your baby’s distress in a positive, supportive, understanding, and compassionate way. Don’t leave infants to cry.”

- **Criticize less.** Parental criticism comes from a good place. We want our children to learn, improve, develop good habits, avoid mistakes, and generally be the best they can be. But we don’t always stop to consider the impact our criticism has on their self-image and confidence. “Strive to be more sensitive of what you’re criticizing, how often you’re criticizing, and whether or not it’s constructive or destructive,” Klebanov advises.

- **Hug and kiss more.** When parents are affectionate and loving, it positively affects children’s mental health, as well as their social and emotional development. “So hug and kiss your children as much as possible, as long as they’ll let you,” comments Klebanov.

- **Give them the responsibilities and freedoms they’ve earned.** You may want your kids to stay little forever, but they’re growing physically, emotionally, and psychologically every day. Even if it’s bittersweet for you, give them privileges and responsibilities that are appropriate for their ages and maturity levels.

- **Spend more time with family members—even those I don’t particularly like.** Children deserve positive and meaningful relationships with their family members—even those you’d rather not spend time with. (For instance, if you’re divorced, allow your children to spend time with your ex and your ex’s family, if your kids so desire.)

- **To improve behavior, use rewards more and punishments less.** Rewards create positive connections in a child’s mind because they link good behavior with happiness, unlike punishment-based discipline, which instead trains them to behave out of fear. “Remember that parental praise is an important reward, too,” Klebanov says.

- **Spend more positive time with my kids on their terms.** Don’t

forget that your kids are unique human beings with their own interests, abilities, and strengths—many of which may differ from yours! “Help your kids develop their interests and compliment them frequently for their efforts and successes,” Klebanov recommends. “Care about and support your kids’ friendships, too, and their happiness in general.”

- **Think about my own childhood more.** Take a mental journey back in time. What was happening during your childhood when you were the age your child is now? Are you acting or sounding just like your parent in a way you aren’t proud of? Are proud of? Are you projecting your childhood experiences onto your own child? “Address your own childhood problems and traumas in therapy,” Klebanov instructs.

- **Be more aware of the example I’m setting.** “Pay closer attention to the example you’re setting when you’re actively parenting and when your attention is on other things,” Klebanov notes. “Be the best role model possible. Always look in the mirror before judging your kids’ behaviors.”

- **Read, read, and read some more.** “Read to your kids often when they are young and model reading as they get older,” Klebanov recommends. “Share your favorite stories with them and allow them to explore their reading interests. Reading together will boost their brain development and strengthen your bond.”

- **Parent with a better understanding of my child’s stage in life.** Children’s behavior can sometimes be baffling and frustrating to their parents. That’s why it’s important to have a basic understanding of each of your kids’ developmental stages and to be understanding. “Be grateful for their curiosity, not impatient with it,” Klebanov advises. “Understand the significance of their learning and brain development. Encourage and support their efforts to talk, walk, learn, and develop—yes, even after the 500th question of the day!”

- **Spoil them more.** Within the structure of appropriate limits, give your kids a sense of plenty. “Don’t be afraid of spoiling your kids,” Klebanov says. “Love begets love.”

- **Share my interests with my children.** If you love tennis, take your kids to the court and teach them how to play. If you enjoy painting, create a masterpiece with your little ones. “Teaching your kids about things in a positive manner and exposing them to your interests is a very important and positive part of being a parent. And who knows? You may spark a lifelong passion or hobby in them!”

“Always remember that the goal of parenting is to create happy, healthy, moral, successful, positively contributing adults—not to have a convenient child for you in the present,” Klebanov concludes. “If you keep this principle in mind as you parent, you’ll find that the best path to take becomes much clearer.”

Klebanov, JD, is the coauthor of The Critical Role of Parenting in Human Development. She works as an attorney with a specialty in matters relating to child welfare and family violence. She writes a column for Examiner.com on issues relating to parenting, child abuse prevention, and brain development. In addition, she serves on the Board of Directors and on the Executive Committee of Family and Children Services, a large nonprofit organization focusing on mental health services. Klebanov chairs the organization's Program Committee, overseeing the board's relationship with the organization's mental health and counseling programs. She is the legislative liaison to the Board of Supervisors for the Juvenile Justice Commission and serves on the Child Abuse Prevention Council. Klebanov graduated with honors from Berkeley with a bachelor's degree in linguistics and earned her JD from the University of California at Hastings, where she served as a journal editor. To learn more, visit www.anewconversationonparenting.com.

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