

30 OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS THAT PARENTS CAN DO

1. Remember you are their first teacher

The quality of our parenting and the quality of our relationship with our children will always be one of the biggest determinants of their future outcomes. Our children learn basic skills from us as well as how to respond to the challenges that life throws at us. Simply being conscious of how crucial we are to our children is important, as is modelling the behaviour and attitudes that we wish to see.

2. Put your own mask on first

Parental mental health is highly correlated with children's mental health and parental anxiety can contribute to children's anxiety. It's important for us to take our own feelings and needs seriously. The fact is, if we feel good about ourselves and our lives, the chances are that our children will feel the same. By investing in your own mental health, you are investing in your children's.

3. Be the person you want them to be

Our children absorb our life approaches, coping strategies, aspirations, gestures and mannerisms. What are we modelling? Model the attitude, behaviour and approach that you wish to see and watch them flourish!

4. Celebrate family resilience and teach them to seek out silver linings

You have all come a long way. You have been through lots of mini and major challenges, coped, thrived and survived. Your family unit has managed to adaptively cope during the pandemic and may even have learned new skills and adopted new habits. Retrospection breeds resilience, so always look back before you look forward. Talk to your children about lessons learned from past experiences and how we can take that learning into the future. Part of being a resilient person is being able to reframe some of the challenges that we face. We can gently nudge our children towards finding the positives that we might extract from challenging times. Focusing on three things that have gone well each day can be an effective strategy.

5. Make 'family talk' the norm

The quality of family dialogue in your home is one of the largest determinants for your child's future academic attainment. Family conversation gives children a safe place to explore their ideas, views and listen to others' perspectives. It helps to boost their self-esteem, confidence and resilience, whilst also allowing them to better understand their own emotions. Family talk enables our children to listen to what is going on in our lives, hear stories of resilience and instils a strong sense of family values, approaches and coping strategies.

6. Talk about the news in age-appropriate ways

It is great for our children to learn about the world around them, but it needs to be in age-appropriate ways that are not frightening. A digital diet of graphic news content designed for an adult audience can be difficult for children to digest. Age-appropriate news helps children to understand some of the bigger issues going on in the world, but will also contain 'fun' news detail and lots of ideas for how they can influence or contribute to things going on in their communities.

7. Watch how you argue

Research suggests that the *manner* in which parents argue in front of their children can negatively impact children's outcomes in the long term. Witnessing hostility that results in shouting, seething resentment and /or physical altercations can be hugely impactful on children, making them feel anxious, upset and confused by what they see and hear. Try to focus on the context of family argument, create constructive methods for discussing issues and agree rules for arguing (for example, we will never raise our voices in front of the children).

8. Educate them about their family history

Giving children a strong sense of where they come from and their family story can provide them with a bedrock for a strong sense of self and identity. This can help children psychologically as they move into adolescence and early adulthood. Your family will have its own heroes and heroines within it, its own mantras and mottoes and its own stories of overcoming challenge. Make sure that your children know about these.

9. Be authoritative about sleep

This is the big one! Many early signs of psychological distress can be linked to sleep deprivation in children. In the teen years, almost three quarters of 15 year olds are too sleep deprived to concentrate at school. Parents need to understand the importance of good sleep hygiene and ensure that children's bedrooms are conducive to sleep. Having no digital technology in a child's bedroom is a good starting point, as well as ensuring they have a set

bedtime, which you insist that they adhere to. Sleep matters, and it needs to be a major focus within family life at all ages of a child's development.

10. Charge them up with breakfast

Giving your child a hearty breakfast will impact directly on their performance in school. Children who eat a good breakfast go to school in a better mood, find it easier to concentrate, work harder at school and are able to learn more effectively. *What's not to like?*

11. Value books, words and reading

It is hard to overestimate the importance of a strong reading culture in the family home. We all want our children to do well at school and instilling a love of words, books and reading provides them with the greatest bedrock for academic success and an appetite for learning. We know that children who have access to books and reading material do much better than peers later on in life. We know that children who come from homes where reading is valued do much better across the board at school. Model a love of reading, a love of learning new words, writing or telling stories and watch the magic happen!

12. Hold the line

At some point, our children will ask why they can't do or have something when everyone else's parents have said yes. Hold the line and stick to your own timeline for what your child can and can't do. Explain to your child that no one loves them more than you do and you will always do what is best for them. They will be able to do or get certain things when they reach a certain age and in time.

13. Teach them to recognise their emotions

We need our children to grow up to be emotionally literate; able to recognise and name emotions as and when they experience them. We want them to understand that life isn't about being happy all of the time, but is made up of a rainbow of all sorts of emotions. In much the same way that a little bit of wind, rain and sun can make for a very robust plant, children need to experience and recognise the full range of emotions that life has to offer and understand that it's perfectly normal and healthy to experience many of them in a single day.

14. Teach them to be kind to themselves

Model being kind to yourself when you look in the mirror. Model being kind to yourself when you make a mistake. In doing so, our children will follow our lead. Everyone deserves our understanding and compassion (us included!).

15. Nurture empathy

Whilst being kind to ourselves is crucially important, so is being kind to others. Nurturing the skill of putting themselves in someone else's shoes will help children to build happier and healthier relationships with others, gain perspective on their own emotions, regulate their own behaviour and move them towards greater understanding of situations. Make the most of everyday opportunities, like reading books or watching films, to cultivate empathy. Discuss how certain actions could make characters feel and what could help them. Ask them how they think a friend was feeling when something upsetting happened to them at school. What do they think that person needs them to do to help? Make sure that you model empathy in your everyday interactions.

16. Ask more questions that you answer

Questions open up children's thinking, so don't be afraid to ask them. *What do you think? How can we do this better? What might happen if you tried that? What do you think will happen next? What might help? How can I help?* Children often have astonishingly good ideas if only we ask them!

17. Enable them

As a loving parent, it is tempting to want to do every single thing for your child, but in doing so, we may deny them the chance to find out how competent and capable they are. Have a think about which household chores or tasks your child might like to do and consider how they might feel after they have. Do they feel more confident in their own abilities? More grown-up? More able than they thought?

18. Normalise mistakes

Everybody makes mistakes, but sometimes parents can overreact when children mess up. This can make children feel worried about owning up to any future 'oops' moments. Instead, we need to ensure that our children see mistakes as part and parcel of learning, innovation and effort. We need to praise them for noticing mistakes and for learning from them!

19. Spend quality time with them and feed their interests

When you spend time with your child, really tuning in to what they love to do, you directly boost their self-esteem. Don't be too directive and let them take the lead. It can sometimes be hard to spot what our children are really 'into'. It might be that they are always drawn to the same toy, request the same theme in a story or want to talk over and over again about one particular activity or interest. Leaning into what makes our children tick and facilitating their

interests will give them a big confidence boost. Make sure they know that you love spending time with them.

20. Take them aback with your praise

Everybody needs feedback to know that they are making progress, doing a great job or being valued for who they are. Children bask in parental praise when it is given sincerely and really targets something specific. Perhaps you have noticed the productive way in which they got on with their homework or the nice way they spoke to their friend on the phone. Take them aback with your praise so that they feel hugely motivated to repeat their good behaviour.

21. Create a courage culture at home

Be a family that loves challenge, adventure and discovering what you are capable of. Adventures might be intellectual ones (doing a puzzle or a junior sudoku) or outdoor challenges that help us appreciate what our bodies are truly capable of.

22. Teach them to be proactive

Children need to believe that the world is truly their oyster. Being proactive about shaping their future is an attitude that we can really instil in the primary years. If they care about a particular issue, what can they do to change it? Who can they write to? Who can they approach? How can they find out the information that they need? Maybe they can ring and find out (with your assistance).

23. Talk about tricky situations ahead of time

Life is full of ups and downs and challenging scenarios and many of these can be discussed ahead of time. Create social scripts for particular scenarios (for example, if someone says something unkind, how will we respond?).

24. Spot mental distress early

50% of all diagnosable psychiatric conditions are diagnosed before the age of 14. If you spot, identify or suspect that your child is in any form of mental distress, speak to your family doctor.

25. Encourage a 'no comparison' rule

Comparison is the thief of joy, and can damage self-esteem and self-worth. Teach your children that you are a family who focuses on yourselves, works with what you have and is media literate. They need to know that not everything they see on social media or in movies is real or authentic!

26. Praise them for asking for help

Help-seeking will become increasingly important as children move from the primary years into young adulthood. We need children to be adept at asking for help and finding support when they do reach out. Model how asking for help when we are struggling is always a good idea and is never something to be ashamed of. Sometimes, everybody needs a helping hand!

27. Coach rather than soothe

When a child is feeling anxious or upset, we can tend to simply reassure and cuddle them. When parenting anxious children, this approach may not be as effective as we might hope. Instead, listen carefully and kindly to their concerns, ask open questions, stay curious in the conversation and help to co-create actions or steps which could lessen the worry or help them move towards overcoming their fear.

28. Don't keep repeating things that don't work

There's nothing more frustrating than repeatedly hitting a brick wall. If something doesn't work for you, stop doing it! Identify the ruts in your family life and seek new solutions and strategies that will be more productive.

29. Pay attention to the sibling relationship

The quality of the sibling relationship can shape and impact long term mental health. Pay attention when siblings get along well and comment on it. Give them opportunities to do things cooperatively and work together. When they argue, don't take sides, rather listen to both parties and help them to reach a consensus constructively.

30. Set high expectations for an exciting future

Keep aspirations high for your children. Set the expectation they work hard for their teachers and always try their best. Talk excitedly about your own goals. Model how you strive to achieve in your life, how you manage setbacks and how you are kind to yourself when you make a mistake! Despite the lockdowns and drudgery, it's still a beautiful world. If we exude confidence and excitement about the future, the chances are that they will too.

