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Tips on how to approach all those day-to-day parenting issues

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Special to the Star-Telegram

The old joke about children not being delivered with instruction manuals is fitfully funny and painfully true. As a result, we rely on instinct and acquired wisdom when it comes to raising our kids, and, thankfully, very often we get it right.

But it never hurts to have reminders, and it's often helpful to see what other parents do that works. To that end, we've come up with a few things that either you didn't know or that will confirm what you did. Here, some simple things you can do to become a better parent.

1Have dinner together. With homework, practice schedules and parental overtime at the office, it's not always possible to have a sit-down, home-cooked meal together every night. But the benefits of making the effort are extraordinary. Studies show that families who regularly have relaxed dinners together have kids with better grades, fewer behavioral problems (including smoking and drinking alcohol) and fewer eating disorders, says Michele Borba, author of *The Big Book of Parenting Solutions*.

2Raise a happy volunteer. It's not that kids are lazy, it's just that helping around the house isn't a priority. Dr. Peter Stavinocha, a pediatric child psychologist, director of neuropsychology at Children's Medical Center of Dallas and a frequent contributor to *Good Morning Texas*, has these suggestions: "First plan what chores are expected based on realistic expectations. Begin by having the child help with just one chore — the more regularly scheduled the better. Begin by doing the chore with your child — expecting a child to perform something unpleasant or uninteresting by himself may be asking for failure. Afterward, the parent must be sure to reinforce the child — with praise, hugs, tickles, tokens, stickers. Be consistent and find a chore to complete while your child completes hers — none of us like to work alone!"

3Teach your child how to read labels. Too many kids are taken in by claims of health benefits in products that have been enhanced by chemical additives, including fiber, calcium, omega-3 fatty acids and vitamins. The industry calls these "functional foods," and they sell to the tune of \$27 billion a year. "It's really a junk food dressed up to look prettier than it is," David Schardt, senior nutritionist for the consumer group Center for Science in the Public Interest, told The Associated Press. Dr. Ayala Laufer-Cahana, founder of the family-friendly blog www.herbalwater.typepad.com, includes teaching kids how to cook, insisting on having breakfast and finding out what's served in the school cafeteria as other ways to look out for your kids' nutrition.

4Have clear expectations of your children, and be sure to communicate them. "Research from my new book, *The Secrets of Happy Families*, shows that individuals in families who described themselves as believing that children should follow strict rules of conduct were actually happier than those who said children should not be held to rules and guidelines," says Dr. Scott Haltzman, clinical assistant professor at Brown University's Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior. In other words, kids crave discipline. Give it to them.

5Don't pay the ransom in emotional blackmail. Dr. David Swanson, author of *Help — My Kid Is Driving Me Crazy: The 17 Ways Kids Manipulate Their Parents and What You Can Do About It*, says emotional blackmail is when a child "deliberately demonstrates an emotion that she knows will cause you discomfort." Often, this is characterized by the sentence, "You just don't care about me!" His answer to the blackmail: "Acknowledge her feelings so she knows you care, but stick with your demand. Emotions are a part of life."

6But, Dad, everyone I know swears, I swear. Just because everyone else drops F-bombs when their parents aren't around doesn't mean it's OK. Jim O'Connor, author of *Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cursing*, tells kids, "Why not sound a bit more refined than everyone else? Besides, maybe everyone swears, but no one swears everywhere, and it isn't appropriate in many situations."

7Test your parenting skills. The Epstein Parenting Competencies Inventory at myparentingskills.com was created by Dr. Robert Epstein, a psychologist, former editor in chief of *Psychology Today* and host of *Psyched!* on Sirius XM Radio. The 100-question multiple-choice quiz is far from clinical or comprehensive, but the questions — and how you answer them — can get you thinking about how you relate to your children and what you might do to improve those relationships. By the way, we got a 92 percent. (It's not bragging if it's true, we always tell our kids.)

8Be the "POS." In case you don't know, that's texting shorthand warning that there is a "parent over shoulder," which is why your child suddenly stops typing when you walk into the room. Respect privacy, but don't let that stop you from asking questions and peering into e-mail inboxes. And learn the lingo.

9Be absurd and subversive. Say what? Sure, it sounds bad, but what's more boring than a parent who plays by the rules all the time? Be the parent who breaks the rules — within reason — to expand your kids' imagination. Shock your child by putting stuffed animals on the ceiling fan and turning it on. Turn the TV sound off and make up your own zany dialog. Have a frenzied backyard food fight with cupcakes. Climb a tree. In other words, think "out of the box" and have fun with your kids.

10Let them fall down. "Studies on resiliency show that if a child has had to deal with difficult — but not tragic — life circumstances as a child, he or she actually develops better coping styles as an adult," says Brown's Haltzman. "Kids have to make errors. Parents should be there for support, but not necessarily

to break their fall."

11Make time for spirituality. "Parents should diligently set aside daily time for family prayer and for reading and discussing positive literature such as devotionals or words of encouragement," says Anthony Jerrod, Christian columnist and author of the new poetry collection *Carnal Striving Spiritual*. "Parents will ultimately discover that this cherished time of love and cohesion will help foster relationships with their children and assist in preventing pedestrian discipline problems. It will provide their kids with the inner strength and fortitude to deal with the complex dynamics of growing up." Amen.

12Be suddenly and unreasonably enthusiastic. About anything. The laundry, making the bed, emptying the dishwasher. Bring surprising energy and joy — even if you have to fake it — to mundane moments. It makes your kids look at the activity in a different light. They may think you're crazy, but they also may get caught up in the enthusiasm.

13Timeout doesn't work. Banishing a tantrum-throwing toddler might make the room quieter, but the child stays in a fit, says Vickie Falcone Holland, speaker and author of *Parenting That Works!: How to Create More Cooperation and Peace at Home*. A more effective method is "self-calming," which teaches children to calm themselves and "choose behaviors that are more appropriate and respectful." When inappropriate behavior happens, get down on the child's level; calmly inform the child that he needs a break until he can come back and behave properly; direct him to the place you both have agreed on as his place. If he won't go or if the power struggle escalates, "You take the self-calming break," Holland says. This will model self-calming for the child and make things quieter for you.

14Catch your child being good! "Researchers know that shaping positive behavior is efficiently done through rewarding positive behavior rather than punishing bad behavior," says Brown's Haltzman.

15Lower your voice to lower the boom. If you want to get a youngster's attention, drop your voice to almost a whisper to make your request. Works on grown-ups, too, says Michele Borba.

Make siblings sing their arguments. Brothers and sisters get into the biggest fights over the smallest things. Defuse the situation by insisting they sing what they are going to say instead of shouting it. More often than not, the fight ends up in fits of laughter.

16Enforce a bedtime. Get into a routine and stick with it. Kids need rest no matter how old they are.

17Be persistent with a picky eater. Keep putting lima beans and cooked carrots on their plates, even if they don't eat them. Make it a small portion, but continue to serve it. Eventually they'll eat it. Really. How else to explain the popularity of salad bars on college campuses? And don't hide or disguise vegetables — it only reinforces their suspicion.

18Ask about "cyberbullying." Talk with your young Internet user "about stories you've read or seen on the news about nasty e-mails, embarrassing photos, personal information that was shared or sent around to other kids," says Marian Merritt, Internet safety advocate for Symantec and author of the company's *Family Online Safety Guide*. "Ask about fake MySpace postings. Find out if your child has ever heard of this stuff going on. Make sure your child knows cyberbullying is incredibly common, and if they haven't seen any yet, it's a matter of time until they do. Make sure they know how to react when it does — don't respond, but save it, block it and report it to a parent or other adult." For more tips, go to www.symantec.com.

19Help your child face her fears. To help a young child with fears — doctors, school buses, bullies, new places — Charlotte Reznick, child educational psychologist and former UCLA Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology, says to employ the child's imagination. "Teach her to close her eyes and take deep breaths that come from her belly," Reznick says in *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*. "Have her imagine a special place that's safe. When there, have her seek advice from a strong Animal Friend — someone who will protect her when you're not around. She can draw the Animal Friend, give it a name and talk to it. Next time she's afraid, the Animal Friend will be there to help her be brave."

20Get specific about negatives. Research shows that kids who generalize about situations and think in absolutes are more prone to depression, says child psychologist Tamar Chansky, author of three books including *Freeing Your Child From Anxiety*. "Negative thinking supersedes small problems and makes them seem monumental, permanent and unchangeable," she says. "Help your child narrow and identify the one thing that was the straw that broke the camel's back. Ask questions to find out exactly the *one thing* that made that bad feeling start. Then you have a much more solvable problem. By helping your child to throw out the 'all or none' thinking and instead pinpoint the problem, not only will you be helping them in the moment, you may be safeguarding them from depression in the future."

21Supervise the cell phones. The average age for a first cell phone is 12; two-thirds of kids 10 to 19 have them. Not only do you have to keep tabs on their minutes, you also have to assure they're not "sexting" — transmitting inappropriate words and images via cell phone or computer. Which brings us to . . .

22Supervise their Internet use. You can block Web sites with inappropriate content on your home computer, but it seems to be a never-ending battle against a rising tide. SafeEyes is a \$50 program that automatically controls how much time your child spends on the Internet, records and lists the Web sites, sends alerts when someone attempts to break the rules, and records and limits chats. See www.internetsafety.com. While you are at it, Google your kid's name to see what pops up. You may be surprised.

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