

Parenting for Resilience

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"I'm terrified! I've never even babysat before, and my parents were scary, when they were around at all! I don't want to raise this baby in that kind of environment, but I don't know what to do instead. Help!" Dawn had just discovered that she was pregnant. It was a planned pregnancy that she had been looking forward to, but now that a baby was on the way, she was completely panicked. She had been through a lot of trauma herself as a young one and was a little worried that she would automatically fall into the same parenting style.

I reassured Dawn that almost every parent is daunted by the big job of raising children, and most of us want to pull off more than we're able. That being said, we also are usually able to create more space for our children than our parents were able to do for us (same with our parents' parents!).

I had her reflect on the work we had been doing together to help her think for herself, trust her mind, and set and maintain boundaries. We spent much of her pregnancy adapting her new insights to her thinking as a new mom. It was sometimes hard work to move away from "I DON'T want to do it the way Mom did!" to figuring out what she DID want to do instead. Most of what she figured out boiled down to the following:

- Set and enforce reasonable limits, preferably from a relaxed place where you can remember that your child is not inherently bad for having broken the limit. This helps your child know that she can predict and count on family stability
- Let your child be in charge of some things that work for your family – cleanliness of her room, hairstyle, planning an outing, etc. – without being critical or offering unsolicited suggestions. This tactic communicates that you trust your child to be able to think and figure out what works best for her in ways that can become increasingly complex as they mature.
- Compliment effort more than achievement – "I love watching you play", or "I especially like watching how you concentrate on the music" instead of "I'm so glad your team won!" Our children won't always win, but they can always try hard and do what they can.
- Sit with them when something goes wrong or they're having a hard time. Help them talk (and maybe cry) it through, and then ASK if they want you to help or intervene. Teaching emotional resilience and problem solving is key to emotional maturity and flexible intelligence later.
- When they ask questions (as all naturally curious children do!), ask them what they think first, even if they have to make it up. Take time to notice how they thought it through before you share what you know. This way, children learn to trust their minds and their ability to think through things.
- Where possible, let your child try to develop systems that work for her or him. If the system doesn't work, co-create something different with your child, with the understanding that, if the update doesn't work, you as the parent may have to be fully in charge of the issue for a while. Sometimes young ones can manage their own homework, for example, if they can figure out the place and time they'd like to do it. Other children may need their parents to set the structure to get it done.

While her new insights didn't take away her anxiety entirely, they did help her realize that she had a choice about how she parented, and she didn't have to do it the way her parents did. Setting parenting goals for herself gave her more confidence to trust herself once her little one arrived.

So how do you set realistic goals that guide you as a parent?

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