

What Children Need by Barbara Ashcroft B.A. M.ED.

Being a parent is one of the most rewarding experiences in life. It can, however, also be frustrating, and exhausting. None of us is ever truly prepared for the every day encounters that we will have with our children. Some parents may lose confidence in their ability to parent. If we keep in mind what children really need, we will develop parenting skills that meet these needs and know that we are on the right track.

It's About Their Needs as Children

Some parents focus too much on trying to be their child's friend. We must remember that children are not adults. They are not our peers. They have young vulnerable minds that look to us for love and direction. They are not here to meet our needs. We must understand what their specific needs are, **be the parent**, and take charge.

Children need a stable and supportive environment with lots of encouragement and hugs. At the same time they need ongoing discipline and consistent daily routines and bedtimes.

Building Self Esteem

Teach your children how to find joy in their small accomplishments. It is not external things or material goods that bring self satisfaction or contribute to a child's self image. It is the actual completion of a task, activity or goal. We all know how good we feel when we have successfully accomplished something. The more tasks or activities that children successfully complete, whether they be academic or extracurricular, the better they will feel about themselves, and it is this sense of self-confidence that they will take with them into adulthood. Recognize each child's special gift or talent and support them in its development. This does not mean enrolling them in several activities at once. Avoid over pressuring them. Children also need free creative play time where they can develop their sense of imagination. Give honest encouragement and praise, but only where it is due. Make sure that any activity or task is age-appropriate and reasonably within their capability. Support them with encouragement, but teach them persistence and follow through. Give them an example of a task that you have worked through and successfully completed. Make sure you tell them about your setbacks and trials and errors. They need to know that making mistakes is just part of the learning process. Quality tasks take time and effort. Children especially need to understand this in our instant-on rush, rush culture. Start a record of all their ongoing successes. When they feel insecure or start to doubt their ability, bring out the success book. We all need to review our accomplishments once in a while.

Setting Limits and Behavioral Expectations

Even though they may protest, children need and want clear and consistent behavioral guidelines and routines. Knowing these behavioral expectations gives them a sense of security. It is crucial that both parents are in sync with the agreed upon house rules, that the expectation is stated clearly to the child as well as the consequence for non-compliance. Now here's the most important point. Once the expectation for behavior has been established, follow through and consistency on a daily basis by both parents is a must. Children know when they can divide and conquer, and they will immediately test both of you to see if you really mean what you say.

Don't take this personally. This is just what children do. They have a way of making you feel that you're the meanest folks in town. Stop trying to be your child's friend. He isn't going to like you at the moment he has to follow a rule. You don't need to win approval from your children. If parents waver, and constantly give in changing the expectation, the children will eventually run the household. Believe it or not, although children may balk at parental rules, they indeed expect them, look for them and need them. Be the parent and stay the course. It's your job to set the limits and kids know this. Don't feel bad about it. Give them lots of hugs while you discipline. In the long run children will love and respect you more when they see you care enough about them to set limits for their own good. You just won't see it at the moment!

Strategies that Help

- Speak in an authoritative, but calm quiet manner when giving children commands. Yelling and screaming at children only invites a yelling back response from them. Shy children will withdraw and cower in a home where shouting is the norm.
- Keep your words to a minimum and use vocabulary that is geared to a child's age. Keep it simple. Over repeating and lengthy explanations are often the cause of children tuning out. If this becomes a habit, as soon as they hear a parental voice they will shut down.
- Don't play the lawyer game by engaging in arguing with your child. This is the biggest trap that parents fall into. When the rules are clear, the child knows what the expectation is. There is no need to debate it, apologize for it or justify it. Kids will try to side track you and draw you into an argument. As soon as you partake in this dance, you are saying that the rule is up for discussion. Children know that this tactic will buy them time and get you to start doubting yourself. Wearing you down is their goal. The worst thing you can do is back down and change your mind after you have stated a request. This is also confusing for the child. Hold firm. Just keep repeating your original request calmly in simple quiet terms over and over. Stick to the plan and don't show frustration. This takes self control, but it works if you are consistent in its use. Once you follow this for the first ten times the child will learn that you can't be swayed and manipulated. Life gets easier.
- Think about this. Children are very wise at an early age. They know exactly in what classroom they can misbehave and which ones they wouldn't dare. They can turn their behavior on and off depending upon a particular teacher's consistent expectations. That's exactly what they do at home. Keep your expectations high. It's the parents who set the tone.
- Avoid the words "I need you to" Many parents preface a request or command with this phrase. As long as you use this phrase, the responsibility and onus for the task is on you, not on the child. If a child's toys are all over the floor, it is her responsibility to pick them up, so the language is, "**You** need to pick up your toys." If it truly is a task that is yours, a better phrase would be, "I need some help with the....today."
- Set aside some quiet individual talking/listening time for each child, perhaps a special activity or an outdoor walk. When a child does not feel rushed, he will feel more like opening up and sharing his stories with you. This may be the time to renegotiate a certain rule or expectation or to at least allow the child to express his concerns. Children need to know that their input is important, but that your job as parents is to

have the final say in matters of protecting their health and safety until they reach a certain age of maturity.

- Children more readily accept discipline when they feel a sense of love and security in the home. It is important to discipline in a loving caring manner. Maintaining a sense of humor, giving lots of hugs, offering encouragement and telling a child that you love him at least on a weekly basis is a must.
- Insist on respect. Expect your child to acknowledge what you do for them with expressions of "thank you" and to add a "please" on to their request from you. Too often today's parents say "please" to the child and the child just demands and expects the parent to wait and dote on him without even a "thank you".
- Give children the script for social behavior. Model for them exactly what they should say when greeting people and have them practice it. Make sure they know appropriate ways of excusing themselves when it is necessary for them to interrupt your conversation.

Consider the Future

If you are unsure about what guidelines to follow when setting up your behavioral expectations, try to look ahead and imagine what kind of skills, attitudes and values your child will need to be successful in her adult life. Most parents hope that eventually their children will become independent and responsible citizens and that they will have the skills and attitudes they will need to be successful in the world of work. Do some thinking about what your hopes are for your children and what their future dreams are for themselves. Then build your behavioral expectations around these goals. Ask yourself, "How am I helping my child to become an accountable and responsible person?" What attitudes and values am I modeling for my children? Remember that even though your children may occasionally rebel and resist your requests, when they know they are loved, they will never forget what you've taught them formally and informally. They just won't let you know it until they are older!

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