

The Nine Elements That Power Positive Parenting



When you have bits of cereal in your hair or you're listening to the wails of a tiny person who refuses to get in the car, the term "positive parenting" may make you grit your teeth and roll your eyes. But positive parenting isn't about being perfect, always being cheerful, or having the most photogenic Instagram. Positive parenting gives words to what parents do every day—challenges included—and keeps the big picture in mind.

Here are nine key elements that power a positive approach to parenting:

1. Imagine your child's point of view, especially during tough moments. We all want to keep our cool! Sometimes it helps to remember that your child's perspective is very different from yours. She really is devastated that she can't wear sandals when it's snowing. Say to yourself, "She is small and still learning," or "She's only 2."

2. Notice and celebrate your child's strengths, abilities, and capacity to learn and develop. Each child is unique, growing and learning at his own pace. Maybe your daughter is a bold explorer who gets into everything, or your son hangs back until he gets to know someone. Make a conscious effort to really see your child. The number one thing every child needs is someone who is crazy about him.

3. Delight in moments of connection with your child. It's easy to get distracted by the day-to-day grind of parenting: dishes, laundry, naps, and transitions from one activity to the next. Remember to pause and make eye contact while buckling him into his car seat. Offer big smiles when he wants to show you something and offer close cuddles while you read a book. This is the magic we can find when we make a little space in the everyday grind for love and connection.

4. Respond with interest and sensitivity to your child's cues. Every child communicates her needs differently. Taking the time to watch and learn your child's cues and communications teaches her that she's important and cherished. Your baby may let you know he needs a break by turning away. Your toddler may let you know the

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mall has too much stimulation by having a tantrum in the food court. Responding as sensitively as you possibly can in these moments ensures your little one gets what he needs from you.

5. Provide consistent, age-based guidelines, limits, and boundaries. Parenting is a combination of nurture and structure. All children need guidance on how to behave. Maintaining predictable routines and setting kind, firm limits really helps. Your child is more likely to cooperate with your guidance if you crouch down at her level, make eye contact, and put your hand on her shoulder before telling her it's time for a diaper change.

6. Recognize and regulate your own feelings and behaviors before responding to your child. This sounds like common sense, but it is way harder to pull off than many of us thought. Young children are naturally driven by their strong emotions. We do better as parents (and role models!) when we take deep breaths and calm ourselves first before responding to their behavior.

7. Know that parenting can be stressful and missteps are part of raising a child. We can't be calm, cool, and collected all the time. There will always be moments when we lose our tempers. Apologizing when you're wrong and setting things right is part of building a relationship, and helps children learn how to do this as they grow older.

8. Work toward balancing your needs and your child's needs. Don't forget about you! It's so easy to get wrapped up in the demands of parenting that you can forget to take care of yourself. Plan for breaks throughout the day; even two minutes of deep breathing can help. Pay attention to your needs for socializing, sleep, exercise, and nutrition, too.

9. Seek help, support, or additional information on parenting when you need it. Every parent eventually runs into a challenging child-rearing issue. Children need a lot from their adults and parents are pulled in many different directions. Don't shy away from asking for help from friends, family, or professionals. All parents need—and deserve—support.

Taking the long view generally helps as well. Parenting is a marathon, not a sprint. There will always be mistakes and missteps, but part of being a great parent is recognizing when things haven't gone right and responding with love to repair the relationship. That's positive parenting in action.

This article was written by staff in ZERO TO THREE's Parenting Resources department. The definition of positive parenting referenced above was developed by a ZERO TO THREE committee of staff, Board Members, and Fellows. Copyright ZERO TO THREE 2018.