

## Positive Parenting for Kids From Hard Places

Who doesn't want to be the best parent they can be? But let's face it, it can be hard. If you sometimes find yourself using the phrases your parents used that you swore you'd never say, you're not alone. We learn most of our parenting from how we were parented. That becomes our default when we're challenged. However, we understand now more than ever that parenting children and youth who have histories of toxic stress, trauma, abuse, and/or neglect may mean using new or different approaches. The good news is that our parenting skills can grow and change—just as our kids do. You can create a happier, more peaceful household with practice and consistency.

### Get Curious

We know that all behavior is communication, but sometimes it can feel impossible to understand what's being communicated. Here are some suggestions for decoding:

- Keep a journal—Sometimes, kids don't have the words or insights to tell us what set them off or what they need now. By keeping a journal, we can recognize patterns (e.g., time of day, who is present, what they were doing) and identify precipitating events.
- Strategize—Once we've identified the patterns, we can address issues. Do they need some downtime after school before

starting homework? Will a healthy snack before dinner curb crabbiness? Do they need one-on-one time with Dad?

### Look for the Positive

As humans, we tend to see what we are looking for based on past experience.

Unfortunately, it's sometimes easier to see the mistakes of a struggling child or youth. You can break this habit by intentionally looking for everything your child is doing right. Did they make the bed without being asked? Did they help their little sister tie her shoes or hold the door for someone?

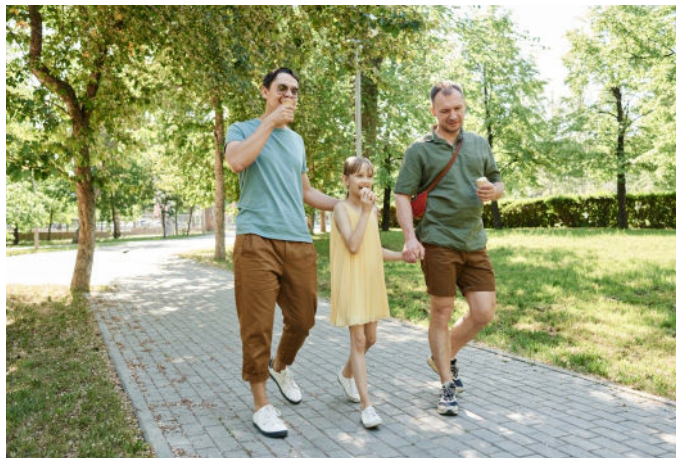
Recognize these accomplishments with the same intensity you call out the mistakes. You'll find that the more you look for great behavior, the more you'll find it.

It's also important to recognize the small steps, especially if they take a big effort.

"Thank you for cleaning your room with only one reminder." The more we recognize when a child is trying, the more motivated they will be to try.

### Define Them by Their Best

One of the challenges of parenting a child who has experienced trauma is that we can fall into the habit of defining them by the worst of what has happened to them and the challenges they have because of it. Between therapy appointments, IEP meetings, and medication management ... we can become



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so focused on what needs healing or repair that talents, strengths, and interests can become secondary. Worse yet, we can lose sight of who the child is at their core.

Want to see more of your child's best qualities? Make it a daily practice to focus on the things you love best about them. When talking about them to others, share what the child excels at, whether drawing, reading, how hard they try, or how they make people laugh.

### **Show Interest & Spend Time**

One of the best ways of connecting with a child or youth is to show interest in their interests. Showing up for the child's orchestra recital or being in the stands for their soccer games is a start. But don't let the interest end with things you're not as interested in. Although seeing a Marvel movie or attending an Olivia Rodrigo concert may not be at the top of your wish list, doing something the child loves helps strengthen your bond and creates lifetime memories. By learning what's important to them, you open the doors to discovering ways to connect.

### **Make Them Feel Seen**

One of the most potent ways to make the child feel connected is also one of the easiest—setting down the phone, tablet, or TV remote. Acknowledge when they walk into the room and be truly present when they talk to you. Make eye contact. Smile. Even five minutes of undivided attention can promote a deeper relationship with the child.

### **Acknowledge Their Feelings**

So maybe you don't understand why they're upset over Sam sitting next to someone else on the school bus—but does it matter? Acknowledging that they are hurting, says, "I see you, and I care how you're feeling." This can create a sense of security and belonging for a child—yes, teens, too.

### **Allow for Mistakes & Teaching Moments**

When we assume our kids are doing their best, we nurture their growth and tap down our frustration. So, they missed several spots mowing the lawn. At this moment, you can either be critical and make them feel incompetent, or you can patiently share the trick you were taught for not missing clumps of grass. Nobody's perfect, but sometimes, it's easy to unknowingly expect our kids to be. By having realistic expectations and seeing missteps as opportunities, we can set our kids up for success.

### **Be Patient & Flexible**

A patient and flexible mindset allows room for grace and creative problem-solving. Life (and parenting) can be unpredictable. When we can pause and consider alternate ways of seeing a situation, we offer opportunities for change and growth. So things didn't go as planned. Maybe there's a better plan.

### **Allow for Processing & Transition Time**

You ask the child to stop an activity to wash their hands for dinner. No response. You ask a second time. By the third time, you're irritated and ask louder than you intended. The child looks up at you, startled and confused. Several psychological and neurodevelopmental conditions, such as ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, anxiety, chronic stress, executive function deficits, or depression, can impact a child's processing time. As one adoptive mom put it, "Coming to understand he wasn't ignoring me changed our relationship. Allowing time for him to process and giving him forewarning of transitions has eliminated the frustration for both of us."

### **Find Ways to Say "Yes" (and still have good boundaries)**

As busy parents, we're often being pulled in several directions at once, and it can feel like one additional task can bring everything toppling down. Then the child says, "Can I

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(fill in the blank)?” and before you know it, you say, “No.” The conversation often lasts for what feels like days and eventually ends with the exasperated phrase you promised you’d never use, “Because I said so!”

Saying “yes” isn’t always easy or convenient—but think of some of the big “yes” moments from when you were a kid. “Yes, we can get a dog.” “Yes, you can borrow the car.” Chances are some of your fondest memories were unexpected “yeses.”

Best of all, finding opportunities to say “yes” helps build relationships. Consider if an automatic “no” could be a “yes” with minimal effort, like, “Can we read one more book?” or “Can I stay up a half hour later?” Is there room for compromise? “Yes, if it’s a short book.” “Yes, you can stay up 15 minutes more.” Letting the child know what they can do, rather than what they can’t, goes a long way in building a cooperative relationship.

### Hugs & Affection

Study after study tells us that hugs have an overwhelming number of benefits to both the hugger and huggee—both physiologically and emotionally. Hugs build trust and a sense of safety and security. Hugs boost self-esteem and reduce feelings of loneliness. Hugs help brains grow and develop. Hugs help with emotional regulation and boost “feel-good” hormones.

However, some kids may not like touch for various reasons—from sensory issues to a history of unsafe touch. There are still a variety of ways you can show affection that contributes to well-being. This can include giving genuine praise, encouragement, your full attention, notes in a lunch box, or even saying kind things about the child in front of others. Just smiling when a child enters the room can be more powerful than you know.

### Love Unconditionally

It’s not unusual for youth in foster care or those who were adopted to worry that they are not with family because of something they’ve done wrong. Imagine carrying the weight and fear of thinking their relationship with you is conditional on not making the same mistakes—except they don’t know what they did wrong in the first place. Perhaps the greatest gift you can give a child in your care is repeatedly and consistently letting them know they are loved unconditionally. One of the best times to remind them is when they behave in their least lovable way. This can provide reassurance that you love them no matter what.

### Conclusion

Regardless of the parenting challenges you may face in your home, building a deeper relationship with the children you care for can only improve things. With some practice and extra effort, you’ll grow from “Don’t make me turn this car around” to “I’m listening; let’s work this out together” in no time.



### Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control*, by Heather T. Forbes, LCSW & B. Bryan Post, PhD, LCSW
- *Positive Discipline*, by Jane Nelson, Ed.D.

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Creating Felt Safety](#)

Additional Resources

- [What Mindfulness Can Do For You](#)
- [Tips to Bond with Your Teen](#)
- [Nurturing Resilience](#)