

My Five Best Parenting Moves

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I am so *not* the perfect parent. I've made mistakes, lost my temper, and said things to my kids that I promised myself I'd never say. Oh yes, and I got divorced when my kids were six and three, so any chance I had at attaining parenting sainthood pretty much ended there. I just wanted to get that out of the way before I write an article about what I consider to be my overall best moves as a parent.

My kids are 17 and 14 as I write this, and while I've had my less-than-stellar moments as a mom, I've also been determined to do as much positive, healthy, pro-active parenting as possible. Some of the things that have worked best with my kids started out as experiments, and I was amazed at how well they turned out. Others were inspired by crisis or frustration, and evolved over time into highly effective guidelines that my kids appreciated as much as I did.

Of all the things I've done as a parent over the last 17 years, here are the five things I'm most glad I did:

1. Daily Check-in:

This has been my best parenting move, hands down. When my kids were six and three, the divorce was final, and we'd just moved into our new place, I wanted to be able to check in with them on a regular basis about how they were feeling, and how they were adjusting to the changes. I taught them a basic format of sharing high points and low points from the day, and making a feeling statement about each one. It essentially went like this: *"My low point today was _____ and I felt _____. My high point today was _____ and I felt _____."*

For instance, at age six, my daughter Elisabeth might have said: *"My low point today was that my teacher blamed me for something I didn't do, and I felt hurt and frustrated. My high point today was that my friends and I had fun at recess, and I felt happy and included."* Pretty basic stuff, but it gave me a window into her world, and let me know what was on her mind. I didn't usually try to solve anything. I just listened, and when she was finished, I validated how she felt. I also shared very basic highs and lows from my day – nothing that would overwhelm the kids, just enough to model the process and have a balance between talking and listening.

The point was to teach them to tune into what they felt, and express it in a simple, straightforward way. I talked with them one at a time, usually at bedtime, so we established a routine where I spent some 1:1 time with each child every evening that they were with me. Over time, I taught them more about feeling words, and helped them differentiate between the intensity level of feelings, such as irritated, angry, and enraged. My intent was to offer them skills and chances to express themselves, to be heard without interruption, and to listen in return.

Elisabeth took to it immediately, and enjoyed sharing the ups and downs of her days at school, what was happening with friends, and anything else that was on her mind. My son, Jeff, kept it very basic (and he still does), sharing one low point, one high point, and one feeling for each. He wasn't thrilled about it, but he was willing, and if we missed a day, he would often say the next morning, "We didn't do check-in last night. Are we going to do it now?"

For the first couple of years, I just enjoyed the connection and appreciated my kids' growing ability to express themselves clearly and talk about the ups and downs of life. Then the other positive outcomes started rolling in. I heard repeatedly from teachers how much they appreciated both kids' openness and honesty, how Jeff in particular might lose his temper, but afterwards he was able to clearly articulate what had happened, and what he needed. And both kids would come home and tell me important things during check-in, because they knew it was a safe place to talk about whatever was on their minds.

It wasn't until they were teenagers that I realized the long term positive effects of doing check-in, but they were clear. I still knew who my kids were. I still knew their friends and their enemies, and what was happening at school and around the neighborhood. While other parents were saying that their teenagers had become silent or sullen, mine were still coming to me at the end of the day, and telling me their stories, large and small. I was able to give some input here and there, but often I just listened – so they felt free to keep talking.

Now that I'm aware of the Law of Attraction, I'm happy to have encouraged them all these years to look inward and notice how they feel about things. Without having any idea what I was doing, I offered them years of practice at listening to their own internal guidance and naming those feelings. I also encouraged them repeatedly to "go with their gut feelings" when they weren't sure what to do. It hasn't been a perfect process, and it doesn't need to be. I'm happy that they'll go into adulthood knowing who they are, how they feel, how to express those feelings, and what it feels like to be true to themselves. I couldn't ask for anything better.

2. Requiring my kids to be respectful, even when they're angry:

From the time my kids were very young, I set guidelines for them about the way they talked to each other. I didn't want them to grow up bickering, arguing, and picking at each other. I wouldn't let them insult each other or call each other "stupid," or do any other name-calling, labeling, or putdowns. I wouldn't let them tell each other to "shut up." I told them it was okay to say how they felt, or to stand up to each other, but that it could be done in a respectful way.

I taught them basic I statements, such as saying, "I don't like that" instead of, "Stop being so annoying," and even, "I don't want to play right now," instead of "Get away from me." I also monitored my own behavior, and modeled what I was asking of them, so I could walk my talk and not be hypocritical. I wondered if I was going overboard, but I liked the way things went overall. Both kids did have their moments, but I redirected them, put them in time out when necessary, curbed my own tendency toward sarcasm, and stuck to the rules.

It was a challenge for all of us, but a worthwhile one. Jeff went through a stage where he lied a lot, and Elisabeth loved to catch him in a lie. She liked the expression, “Liar, liar, pants on fire!” but I wouldn’t let her use it. I said, as I often did when I redirected either of them, “Find an I statement, please.” Finally one day when she was eight or nine, she knew she’d caught Jeff in a lie, and she looked at me and said, “I smell burning pants!” I had to give her credit for that one.

Because we were already doing daily check-ins, I also invited the kids to tell me, using the “I feel” format, when they were angry with me, or felt hurt by something I’d said or done. They were hesitant at first, but when they tried it and found that I would actually listen and not argue with their feelings, check-in became a time when we would work out our daily frustrations with each other as well as talking about other things in our lives. We usually just listened and acknowledged the other person’s feelings. Sometimes we apologized. It wasn’t a big deal, but a part of our daily connection.

Over the years, the payoffs of this parenting choice have become more and more obvious. My kids aren’t perfect, but even as teenagers with very distinct personalities, they get along pretty well. They’re respectful to each other, and to me, but still honest and open. They don’t tell me everything (and I think that’s normal), but they do speak up. We’ve taken some vacations together, and they travel extremely well. We get along in the car, in hotel rooms, and out seeing the sights. They aren’t each other’s best friends, but there is a definite bond. They enjoy each other’s humor, laugh together, and tell stories about times they’ve spent together.

At this point, they also work out their conflicts without needing a referee. I know there have been a couple of times that they’ve had some major drama when I wasn’t home. They’ve acknowledged yelling at each other, and even throwing a punch or two over the years. Both of them told me one night during check-in that they’d had an intense fight earlier in the day, but they settled it, both apologized, and they were over it by the time I got home from work. I can’t ask for more than that!

I think their current attitudes toward each other and toward me have been well worth the energy spent putting all those guidelines into place when they were little. My hope is that as they get older and leave home, they’ll continue to have a bond and be connected with each other, even as they go out and live their separate lives. They don’t need to have a “perfect” sibling relationship, but a continuing, durable, resilient connection would be great.

3. Acknowledging my mistakes and taking ownership:

I was a teacher before I was a parent, and it always bothered me when students lied or denied responsibility for mistakes, even when they were caught red-handed. I had a policy with my high school students that if they made a mistake and had a consequence coming, I would double the consequence if they lied. If they told the truth, they’d still get the consequence, but I would be

able to trust them to be honest, and I wouldn't question them as much in future situations.

I also modeled for them that I made mistakes too, and that it was no big deal. I would just admit it, apologize if the situation called for it, correct the mistake, try not to make the same mistake repeatedly, and move on. I was surprised at how well it worked, but it worked so consistently that I knew I was onto something. By the time I had kids, I already knew I was going to use the same guidelines with them.

I especially noticed how much impact it had with my own kids when I acknowledged my mistakes and apologized. Sometimes it was over a small issue, like leaving the house late in the morning and trying to get the kids to school or to the babysitter's house. There were various times when I'd get in the car and be stressed because we were running late. If I commented about it, I would also say, "But it's my fault that we're late today. I didn't leave enough time to get everything done."

Before long, my kids were spontaneously taking ownership for their mistakes too. Elisabeth would say, "I'm tired – but it's my own fault. I stayed up reading last night." Jeff would say, "My teacher yelled at me yesterday – but I was the one who kept dropping my stuff on the floor because I never clean out my desk." I did everything I could to reinforce that. I told them I was proud of them for being honest. I acknowledged that it was no fun to get the consequences, but I asked if they noticed how much faster things got settled when they just told the truth, and how much teachers and other adults appreciated it when they were honest. They noticed.

By middle school, it was almost funny. I got a couple of calls from school when Jeff lost his temper in 7th grade, but when the assistant principal called, he was both tickled and impressed by Jeff's honesty. He would relay the story of Jeff coming into his office and saying, "Okay, I did it! I know the rule, but I just got mad and lost it. What's my consequence?" More than once, Jeff got reduced consequences because he was so honest and he took responsibility for his mistakes. Ironically, he'll still try to lie to me every once in awhile, but he's just not very good at it. All I have to do is say, "Do I smell burning pants here?" and he'll usually admit the truth.

One of the most extreme examples of the kids taking ownership came from Elisabeth. She and Jeff were trying to settle a disagreement about something minor, like whose turn it was to watch something on TV (I think they were both in elementary school), and I was in the other room working on the computer. I could hear things escalating in the background, and I had just about decided it was time to get up and intervene, when I heard a loud smack, followed by a moment of dead silence. Then Elisabeth knocked on my door and said, "I hit Jeff. I'm going to time out." I talked with both of them briefly, but it was over and done with. She apologized to him on her own, and he apologized for yelling at her. That was the end of that.

I so appreciate my kids' overall stance of taking responsibility and cleaning up their mistakes. In a world where there are plenty of people, both kids and adults, who have a tendency to deny, deflect, and defend, it's very refreshing.

4. Having my son tell me the rules instead of lecturing him:

Jeff hasn't always had the best memory in the world, particularly when it comes to social rules and guidelines. He's also energetic and rambunctious, which has created some problems over the years. I learned quickly that waiting until he made a mistake and then consequencing him for it wasn't the happiest route for either of us, so I wanted to be pro-active with him, but still not lecture him about rules, guidelines, or anything else. He didn't like being lectured, and I didn't like lecturing! When he was five or six, I decided to try out the idea of having him tell me the rules ahead of time, instead of me telling him.

For example, when we were headed into the grocery store, I would stop just outside the door and say, "Okay Jeff, what are the rules for being in Safeway?" It wasn't long before he could recite them for me: "Walk, don't run. Don't twirl around in the aisles with a basket in my hand. Talking is okay, but don't yell. Watch where I'm going. Don't whine for toys or candy. Stop asking if you say 'no' once." He wasn't thrilled by having to repeat those things, but he liked it better than me repeating them to him. And when he said them out loud to me, he actually seemed to remember them better.

He told me from time to time that he didn't need to recite the rules anymore, but often if he didn't do it, he forgot and would come barreling out of the produce aisle at a run, dodging other shoppers, or something else along those lines. Ultimately, he got used to reciting the rules before we went in, and it was no big deal. We did similar things before going into the library, school programs, birthday parties, church functions, or anywhere else he went that he wanted to be allowed to come back to again. It's made a significant difference over the years.

Now that he's 14, he's mostly outgrown the need for this process. The benefit for me is that we've both been spared years of lectures, arguments, frustration, eye-rolling, sighing, sarcasm, "I know, Mom!" or anything of the sort. I also once heard another kid ask him, "Does your mom lecture you all the time like my mom does?" and he said, "Nope. She doesn't like to lecture, and she doesn't have to, because I already know the rules." Nice to know he was paying attention!

5. Teaching my kids about responsibilities and privileges:

When Elisabeth finished elementary school and was heading into 7th grade, she talked with me about looking forward to school dances and other social opportunities that middle school and high school had to offer. I don't remember exactly how the conversation started, but somewhere along the way, she asked me if she was going to have to do anything in particular to be allowed to go to those activities.

I thought about it and talked with her dad about it, and in the end I told her how glad I was that she'd asked the question. I was happy to be able to say, "I want you to be able to do those things, and as long as you keep doing what you've been doing – which means all of your basic

responsibilities like doing your homework and chores without being reminded, keeping your grades up, being honest and open about what's going on in your life, making good choices for yourself, and being respectful in general, I don't see any reason why you can't go to those events. You'll still need to ask permission before you say yes, but for the most part, you'll be able to go."

I also told her, "I don't expect this to happen, but if you were to give into teenage peer pressure (and there will be lots of opportunities for that!) and you started doing things like lying, sneaking, cheating, not doing your homework, making poor choices, or being rude, then you'd lose those privileges. But I really don't see that happening. You've shown how responsible and trustworthy you are for all these years, so just keep doing what you've been doing, and you'll have all kinds of freedom."

I don't know if I would have thought to tell her those things if she hadn't asked. But it worked out well, because she went into middle school with that mind set, and kept on being open, honest, and responsible, even as a teenager.

One afternoon when she was in 8th grade, a friend asked her to come over for awhile after school, and Elisabeth said she couldn't do that without asking, that she had to go home and check in first. The other girl said something sarcastic like, "Why? Are you afraid your mommy will be mad at you?" and my daughter said, "No. I've worked hard for all the freedom I have, and I'm not going to risk it to go to somebody's house after school. If I ask her, she'll say yes – but I'm not going to do it without asking." Then she came home and told me about it. I validated her for that as much as I could, thanked her for doing what she did, and told her how much I appreciated being able to trust her. She's done the same kind of thing ever since.

When Jeff was headed into 7th grade, I was ready with the same pro-active conversation. I told him what it would take for him to have the freedom and privileges he wanted, and encouraged him to keep being open and honest, and that as long as he kept up with his responsibilities, he could do the fun things he wanted to do. So far so good!

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As I've said, I'm far from being the perfect parent. I could have used that mythical instruction book that so many parents talk about for raising kids. Until that shows up, I guess we'll just keep making it up as we go along, doing the best we can, and sharing what works along the way.

All the best to you on the parenting path!

*Susan Hansen* :)