

How to Manage Your Kids



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How child raising has always been the most important activity of the human animal, male or female.
The importance of hands-on fathering.
Why the American culture needs more parents, not more babies.
What parents cannot expect from their children.
The Ten Commandments of parenting
21 tricks for taming children.
21 tricks for taming adolescents.

The end product of child raising is not the child but the parent. If what you are doing is not changing your life, don't expect it to change theirs. Whatever else, be sure to praise their efforts.

"Children are life renewing itself, Captain Buffer.
And when life does that, danger seems very unimportant."
Melanie Wilkes in Gone with the Wind

"Babies, war, and taxes! There's never a convenient time for any of them."
Scarlett O'Hara in Gone with the Wind

Last week Justin Wesley Wagers, the first of what I hope will be many grandchildren, was born. My wife Betsy and I went out to Boulder to bond with him. I spent a week holding him and licking him and understanding that people have children to get grandchildren. In due time we turned Justin over to the alternate shift of grandparents, and came back to earth. We had been transposed. We glowed in the dark. We had been declared gods and turned into constellations. We were now immortal--maybe, a little.

When people have children, there is this hope for some little piece of immortality. Parents and grandparents don't actually become immortal, but if they are paying attention, they do become part of everything that has gone on before or that will go on after them. That is wonderful, but it is even more wonderful if they fully realize that their children and grandchildren (even those as perfect as my beloved grandson Justin) are no different, no more special, than everyone else's children and grandchildren, and that every other parent and grandparent is going through the same thing with them.

THE MAGIC OF CHILD RAISING

Of course, having children has limited benefits at best, and can even be an expression of greediness and narcissism, an imposition upon one's neighbors and upon the planet itself. The magical experience, rather, is raising children. People who want the pride, the potential glory, and the self-expansion of parenthood without the humbling, enlightening turmoil of hands-on parenting are not just missing the magic but are cheating. Unless they are supplying much-needed children for people who cannot create their own, people who create babies they expect others to raise are like F. Scott Fitzgerald's spoiled-rotten rich kids in *The Great Gatsby*: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy--they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness. . .and let other people clean up the mess they had made."

Naive scientists trying to make sense out of human sexuality would have us believe that childbearing is a biological imperative that stops at the delivery-room door. They tell us that the human animal has an overriding instinctive investment in the survival of its sperm and egg cells, and is drawn to behaviors that will spawn the largest numbers of fertilized eggs. But the human animal could not have survived, no matter how many of our ignorant, immobile, dependent offspring were deposited on the ground, if there were not parents around to raise them.

Human babies require parents not just for their physical survival but for their humanity. Feral children, raised in the woods by wolves or on the streets by peers, are not likely to be fully human--in large part because they lack the experience of parents investing love in an organism who is not yet able to give anything back.

The human species survived against all probability in a hostile environment because there were people who valued us enough to join forces and take care of us. Not just to feed and shelter us, but to teach us the increasingly complex things we soft, slow, unarmed beings need to survive and to serve our biological function of creating others--taking care of them, teaching them what they need to know, and loving them enough to make them yearn to love others and pass it on.

Child raising has always been the most important activity of the human animal, male or female. But since the Industrial Revolution, the outrageous idea has taken hold that child raising is women's work--that men have something vastly more important to do than the care, feeding, education, and emotional training of the next generation. (I can't imagine what would be more important--war? business? government? sports on TV? reassuring themselves of their masculinity by seducing other women?)

The man who cannot be servant to a child, who expects his children or those of other people to exist for his own glory or comfort, is the center of his own universe and is unlikely to be capable of loving anything outside himself. He may be stuck in the wrong generation.

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WE NEED MORE PARENTS

If you need a baby, we already have all you could ever need. (They may not come in your choice of colors, but that is your problem.) The rest of us certainly don't need you to have babies unless you are willing to dedicate your life to raising them, and to letting others share in the process. If you are too selfish, childish, ill-tempered, or out of control to share your life with a grown-up partner or a community of other adults, please don't inflict yourself on a helpless child.

You don't have to be perfect to be a parent, but you do have to be pleasant and accommodating enough to others so that they don't isolate you and your child. After all, child raising is not just about sheltering, feeding, watering, and educating children, but about making kids part of the world around them. If you embark upon this most excellent adventure, be aware that all a child needs from you is you--completely.

Hodding Garter gave me my favorite quote about parents and children. He said, "There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings." I would add to that. Roots and wings are exactly the two lasting bequests that children give parents, connecting you with your familial, biological, and personal origins, and enabling you to live many lives other than your own.

Never forget: the end product of child raising is not the child, who still must go forth in the world to raise him- or herself, but the parent. For the parent, raising children is magic.

WHAT PARENTS CANNOT EXPECT

With all the emotional exercise and the character building that goes into parenting, there are still things children cannot do for their parents, things parents cannot expect from their children.

1.

You can't expect to get the benefits of parenthood from sperm donation or other forms of surrogate parenthood. Supporting your own children is no more gratifying or character enhancing than paying taxes to support other people's children. You'll just get angry because the people you support don't perform better or produce more. Even if you get your picture taken with the child on ceremonial occasions, or come home at night to a house filled with the child's artifacts, or hear the child's bloodcurdling music coming from a locked bedroom, or see the child perform at athletic or artistic displays, the experience will have little impact on you if you are not totally involved in the experience of the child's life, and the corresponding revelations of your own life, your relationship to the world, and the human condition you both share.

2.

You can't expect to run out on your family, or destroy it, or ignore it, without terrible repercussions on your children. I don't know who came up with the notion of "quality time," the idea that parenting could be done efficiently. Parenting is what happens when people of different generations hang out together and compare their experience of the world. It affects one just about as much as it affects the other. If what you are doing with your child is not changing your life, then don't expect it to change the child's.

I also don't know who came up with the idea that parents "shouldn't stay together for the children's sake." That's absurd, though I would certainly agree that staying together while turning family life into a war zone and blaming it on the kids is not good for anybody's mental health, even the neighbors'. Children do not require perfect love or brilliant innovative parenting techniques, or a life that is made free of germs or disappointments or traumas, but they do require the security of knowing that their parents will put up with one another's mild to moderate obnoxiousness and repulsiveness for the sake of the family.

And it's not sufficient for parents to stay married for the children's sake; they must stay happily married for the children's sake. A happy marriage is a derision that comes when people decide that this is their real life, their real world, their real marriage--and that stomping their foot and holding their breath because it is not the-life, world, and marriage of their dreams is not going to get them a better deal, so they might as well grin and bear it. No marriage is easy to stay in. Yet as couples measure the pros and cons of such drastic action as divorce, they must tally in the costs to their children. Parents may learn the hard way that running out on parenting for a while, to recapture some piece of their own lost youth, breaks a parent-child bond that may never be reforged.

There are limits, of course. It is hard to be married to someone who is not married to you, and it is foolhardy to be married to someone who is driving drunk, beating you up, or exposing you to deadly viruses. People sometimes must choose between suicide, homicide, and divorce--and that's a no-brainer. And if you-are married to someone who expects you to be a single parent, you may have fantasies of cutting loose and finding someone who is the parent your child deserves. But that's risky.

The crippling trauma of a divorce and the child's resulting lifelong insecurity about life and relationships may be worse than the vague or even fairly certain hope that the next step-parent will be the magical one that will make everything rosy for you and your child. Every child needs a secure family, not a perfect one.

3.

You can't expect to raise perfect children even if you are perfect parents. We like to think, and our therapists and the writers of our favorite self-help books like to reassure us, that everything that isn't ideal in our life is Surely our parents' fault. You may be right in thinking that you are to blame for your kid's hang-up, that your child's teachers are going to think your child's failures are because you are not sufficiently involved (even though your child's therapist is probably telling you the kid is a screwup because you are too involved). Your parents and in-laws overflow with wisdom that may or may not be applicable, and the neighbors have another set of ideas about how you are

making a mess of things. Everybody will blame you except the child. But if you are too willing to blame yourself, the child will take the cue from you and blame you for his or her failures, and that's a lot worse.

Don't worry. Your children will probably turn out to be pretty much the way you are unless you try too hard to change them. If you raise your child violently, your child will learn to be violent. If you scream and yell, your child will learn to scream and yell. Certainly no child can change the thing you are always screaming about and still retain any self-respect. If you are anxious about your child's failures, you can make the child so nervous the failures will be inevitable.

Just stop trying to fix your normal children, show the joy you take in them, talk to them about their experience of the world and tell them about yours, make them face the world even if it scares you both, and they will become just like you. You have no way of making them turn out better than you; they have to do that on their own. And if you are really perfect in some way, they will have to find their own way to distinguish themselves.

You can't have a perfect child because you are in some contest with the other parents, or because you are afraid the inspection committee will come along and tell you what you have suspected all along: that you are a terrible parent and a terrible person. Anyway, children learn from their mistakes, not from their parents' anxiety that they will make mistakes. You can require that they face life, and even that they develop competence in the basic skills, but excellence can only come from their own hunger for it, and that can come only when their initial efforts are praised.

In some ways, damaged children are actually more gratifying to raise, especially if the disability shows. If a kid is blind or deaf or missing a body part or two, the world does what the world should do for all kids: assesses the child's performance on the basis of his or her own merits and the child's own development, rather than as part of some contest with other kids.

In other words, it is not a contest, so stop trying so hard to win at it, and just enjoy the wonder of it all.

4.
You can't expect children to repay your investment in them. Some parents believe that if they put enough time and money into it, the child is supposed to reward them with a comparable amount of parental pride. I see men who know something about sports, the military, business, or all three, but nothing at all about being a human being. They attempt to turn their children into lucrative sports stars by investing their hard-earned time and energy into full-time basic training and coaching. At either the stroke of puberty or the last straw in personal humiliation, whichever comes first, the child must of course rebel, and the father, who really had only the best of intentions, doesn't understand what has happened. Children, however dutiful, can only dedicate their lives to their own dreams, not the fulfillment of their If parents' fantasies overwhelm their kids, if the children lose their sense of self by buckling under and merging with their parents' ego, they can't go on.

Kids must feel safe in an activity before they become competent at it and, finally, pull back and differentiate. Only then can they excel while remaining their own person, capable of pride in their skills and self-respect with their parents.

5.
You can't expect the children to show appreciation for your efforts. If a child takes the parent quite for granted, without having to avoid giving or taking offense, without having to keep score on who owes whom what, that should be appreciation enough. It shows that the child feels the parent's steady love and knows that the parent has gotten as much as has been given from the parenting process.

The child may adore and cherish the parent and may still take the parent for granted, and forget to send a card on Mother's Day.

6.
You can't expect your children to give you the sort of exclusive loyalty, the almost monogamous dedication, that you might reasonably expect from marriage. A parent might naively assume that since "I was always there for the kids while he worked or played golf or screwed around," or that since "I supported them while she lay around watching TV and drinking," then the kids owe allegiance to me. It may feel like a terrible betrayal in a divorce or a marriage at war when the kids take the "good" parent for granted and throw themselves after the "bad" parent who escapes parenthood for another go at childhood, but it is necessary for the child who doesn't know a parent to find out personally what's missing, what's wrong.

When a parent tries to get his or her life from the grown child, it will destroy either the child or the relationship, and it indicates that when the parent was raising the child, the parent did not "get it." He or she didn't realize who was benefiting from the process, and therefore didn't become his or her own person. Recycling an adult through childhood, so the parents can feel loved without having to risk a relationship with another adult, is cumbersome.

If parents want unquestioning loyalty from a creature who will never desert them, perhaps they should get a dog. Dogs merely wag their tails and lick the hands of whoever feeds them, even if they get beaten as well. Dogs demand nothing more from life than food. Some parents would raise children like that, but even the best-trained humans are not so reliable in that role, and have been known to run away from the best-appointed homes.

There are those parents who destroy their children by getting between them and the other parent, getting between them and their grandparents, getting between them and the child's friends or mates, getting between them and their in-laws, and even getting between them and their own children.

Puppies can be paper-trained at a very early age, and while still quite young can be taken outside to pee on the lawn. Dogs are already learning entertaining tricks while human children can't do much more than pull things over on top of themselves. Dogs are a lot cheaper at every stage of development and you don't have to worry about them growing up, leaving you, and telling a therapist what a miserable parent you were.

7.

You can't expect your children to serve as cheap labor for you. Some potential parents are seeking a practical use for children. Families used to breed children for labor, to work in the mines or the mills, and the children were rewarded with a little pay and a lot of honor. Growing up in the country, I had farm work to do and animals to feed and tend, and I loved it because it made me feel useful. In some parts of the world, families have seeing-eye children for the blind adults. Children are natural, eager apprentices, excited to learn whatever the parents know how to do, delighted to follow the parents around learning their skills. There should be no thought of having someone around the house who doesn't share in work needing to be done. Children, if they are to become adults, should be functional and proud of it.

Somehow it doesn't work out that way nowadays. For one, child labor is now illegal, as every child knows. And anyone who has tried to teach a child to do his or her chores can immediately see the folly in that effort. It takes far more effort to get a child to dean his room or take out the garbage than it does to do it yourself. I see rich kids who will cut a deal with their parents and earn what in other families might be a week's wages for washing the car. It is as if work -- and even punishment -- is beneath the dignity of His Majesty The Child.

Of course, children may eagerly join parents in doing whatever work around the house they do themselves. Kids are so eager to work with parents, and so loathe to work for them. Moreover, a child who would declare global nuclear war rather than pick up his underwear may eagerly slave away for minimum wage at McDonald's. Working for someone other than parents can seem like a victory rather than a defeat.

8.

You can't expect children to save a relationship. Some women foolishly have babies to save a bad marriage, to get some guy to marry them, or even just to get him to drop by from time to time and be nice to her. It is not a good idea. Having a baby with a guy who is afraid of commitment and family life, afraid of husbandhood and fatherhood, will not reliably bring him closer to you. And if he doesn't like you very much to start with, he's not likely to like you better when you wake him up in the middle of the night to throw a hungry, wet, feces-smearred, squishy noisemaker at him.

The most inescapable fact of human biology is that females can create life from their bodies and males cannot. Patriarchy was invented to give men some feeling of involvement in the creation of life. But beneath the patriarchal posturings of male ownership that cover the sterile shame of male uterus-envy, there is full awareness on the part of men that they can never experience anything comparable to the mother-child relationship. As a result, men are likely to distance themselves from the early stages of that symbiosis. Perhaps overwhelmed and fearful, a man may consider the mother-and-child unit to be complete but dependent and turn his attention to conquering the world and turning himself into a hero for them.

Of course, once the child is weaned and able to venture out into the world, the father is quite capable of joining in or taking over. But men who didn't get much fathering in recent generations may not know what a father is for, and women, who usually got even

less fathering than men did, are likely to be even more misinformed about what men are capable of doing. If the father feels left out or if the mother leaves him out, it bodes badly for the relationship. He generally takes on the parenting role initially because of his commitment to the mother, and if that relationship is not a loving one, he may have trouble bonding with his son or daughter--unless, of course, he has bonded well with his own father. In the long run, how a man does as father and husband is mostly dependent upon what his own dad did as father and husband.

9.

You can't expect the benefits of child raising to come immediately. Like farming, child raising enforces patience. There is no way to speed it up, and any effort to do so will just screw it up. Child raising forces busy people to slow down and live their lives in real time, moving no faster than the earth does, blocked from taking any short-cuts. Once you are operating on earth time with your child, you begin to see and hear and smell and feel things you had forgotten all about. You may not get as much done, but you will get far more from everything you do. Don't worry, you won't miss a thing.

10.

But finally, you must expect to make one crucial concession to child raising. As you raise your children you will have to forgive your parents, either for loving you too much or for not loving you enough. While that is the most important step in getting control of your own life, for those who endeavor to go through life as their own pampered child or as an indignant victim, it is a terrible loss. The act of becoming a parent involves the willingness to expose yourself to having your child feel toward you the way you feel toward your parents.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF PARENTING

1.
Thou shalt not consider "your" child to be any different in kind or quality or rights or privileges than any other child on earth.
2.
Thou shalt not teach children to be violent by being violent with them.
3.
Thou shalt not teach children to be unpleasant and abusive by being unpleasant and abusive with them.
4.
Thou shalt not shame a child for not excelling and leaving you feeling ashamed around the parents of more successful kids. Your need for "your" child to excel is your problem. You may shame a child only for not trying.
5.
Thou shalt not make a child feel guilty for not loving you enough. Make a child feel guilty only for hurting other people.
6.
Thou shalt not teach a child to fear. Instead you will let the child teach you to stop fearing the things you fear now.
7.
Thou shalt not teach a child any of the traditional nonsense about gender, about what he or she is permitted to feel, what he or she is permitted to do.
8.
Thou shalt not let your gender determine your functioning as a parent. Specifically, do not let yourself get trapped into doing a great deal more or less of the parenting than your partner. Such a triangle will eventually destroy all three relationships. Children need fathers as much as they need mothers; fathers need children even more.
9.
Thou shalt not pull back from loving your adolescent just because they must pull back from you and your efforts to control, protect, or fix them. It is just when they hate you most that they most need your steady, reliable love.
10.
Thou shalt not destroy your child's childhood so you can relive yours. Don't worry, if you can stick it out you will ultimately be much rewarded. You may even be rewarded with a grandchild and get to start the process all over again.

21 TRICKS FOR TAMING CHILDREN

1. Hold babies close to your skin for many hours every day. No matter how delicious your baby smells, resist the temptation to take a bite.

2. Play mostly Mozart or Haydn so the baby will grow up intelligent, secure, and prepared to join an orderly, graceful world.

3. Talk to your baby. Long before the baby is old enough to understand a word of it, tell the baby everything about you, all the wonderful things you're too modest to tell others, and all of the secrets you wouldn't want even your analyst to know. You will value the baby even more if he or she knows you better than anyone else.

4. Spend a lot of time on the floor with the baby seeing the world from the baby's perspective.

5. Be careful in naming the baby. The name should connect the baby with his or her heritage rather than his or her generation. Don't name your baby after movie stars, cartoon characters, or all the other babies born that year.

6. Share your baby with other parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Never try to do it alone; you will exhaust one another with your needs. As the old African proverb says, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

7. Take your baby with you wherever you can, but make sure you leave the baby some of the time. You both need to know that you can get along without one another.

8. Never punish a baby. Whatever the baby does is exactly what he or she is supposed to do, so just stand in awed wonder and adore the magical unfolding of the child.

9. Punish children rarely and minimally. Instead, talk to them about the complexities of knowing the right thing to do in a confusing world.

10. You can't teach a child too much. The child will eagerly and joyously learn everything you eagerly and joyously teach them. Learn together.

11. Shoot out the TV. If you read, the child will read. If you exercise, the child will exercise. If you watch TV, the child will become the lazy slacker you seem to be.

12. Always express your optimism about the child's basic goodness. Children will become whatever you tell them they are. You must never insult or ridicule a child.

13. Go with little children wherever they go and do whatever they do about half the time. Then take them with you to do whatever you are doing the other half of the time.

14. Don't drink or do drugs while you are with your children. You need all your faculties about you. If you must abuse your brain, do so at work, where your job is less important.

15. Provide structure, like meals and family outings, and expect the child to fit into it. Don't overschedule a child's activities away from home. The child must, above all, be a member of the family.

16. Give the child something valuable to do, not, as discipline or punishment or evidence of parental control, but because the family needs it done.

17. Insist children go to school even if they aren't feeling well that day, but let children take off a day from time to time when they feel particularly well.

18. Be polite to children. You are teaching them how to behave properly, so treat conflicts as exercises in manners rather than revelations of basic inner rottenness.

19. Try not to be too rich or too poor. Either extreme changes children's sense of reality, and the worth they put on their own efforts.

20. Express constant pride in your kids, not just for their successes, but for the workings of their mind, body, and emotions. Adore them just for letting you be part of it.

21. If your children don't seem to appreciate you, don't try to make them feel guilty about it, just disappear from time to time, leaving a vague note. Couples need to escape regularly. Children's greatest security comes from parents' relationship. Titillate them with your love.

21 TRICKS FOR TAMING ADOLESCENTS

1. Celebrate their puberty. If they take their sexuality underground because it embarrasses you, they will quickly follow it and may not emerge for a few years.

2. Don't let your teenage kids shock you. Insist upon hearing it all, and honestly compare your own adolescence. Adolescents aren't alienated; their parents are.

3. Stay connected with your adolescent kids. Get them out in the woods or up on a mountain, anyplace where you are not in control and you are dependent on one another.

4. Keep adolescents moving. They are only a problem when they stop. Sports and work save lives.

5. The rules must be clear. Negotiate them, write them out, have the child sign them, magnet them to the refrigerator, and follow them yourself.

6. Don't escalate the punishment as a way of getting an adolescent under control. Your efforts will only throw them out of control. Just keep them with you until they have heard your calm feelings about what they are doing and you have heard theirs.

7. If kids refuse to do what you tell them, refuse to provide goods and services for them. Don't fight with them, just starve them out.

8. Don't try to protect kids from natural consequences. That is how they learn about reality. Your punishment only teaches them unpleasant things about you.

9. Don't threaten anything you aren't willing to do. Underreact and make the kids wait for your reaction.

10. Don't turn matters of style into matters of substance. Let them get themselves up in weird ways without making it a moral issue.

11. Don't respect your children's privacy. Don't let them hide in their rooms and keep their lives secret from you.

12. If there are two or more parents you mustn't do anything unilaterally, you mustn't undercut one another, and you mustn't fight it out in front of the adolescent. You don't have to be right, but you do have to be together.

13. If you are a single mother of a teenage son, accept your authority and don't let your son think he is the boss. Don't bring in a new stepfather just now unless he is extraordinarily humble and powerless. If you feel the need for a male partner in parenting, pull in the real father, or perhaps an uncle or grandfather, but you stay in charge.

14. Try to listen to their music. You can't be expected to live with it: it loosens the wallpaper, undermines the foundation, and defrosts the refrigerator. But the lyrics help you to better understand how scary it is to be an adolescent.

15. Never let your kids embarrass you, or let the reactions of shocked friends, gawking strangers, or indignant teachers be more important than the feelings of your beloved child who just made a humiliating mess.

16. Cultivate a bad recent memory. Refuse to recall what they did wrong the day before. Start each day as if it were a new relationship. Adolescents change so very rapidly and self-consciously, it probably is.

17. Whatever age your kids, try to hold them every day.

18. Don't go nuts over what your adolescent is doing until you have talked it over with the family therapist. You may need one unless you have used the previous 38 tricks, are a particularly cooperative couple, or are backed up by a good team of aunts and uncles.

19. As a last resort, call the cops. Kids must understand that the world supports your efforts to raise them, unless you are violent or angrily insulting to a teenager; only a maniacal parent would be as foolhardy as that.

20. If older teenagers don't respect the comforts of family life, let them leave. If they get along O.K. without you, then they were right: they didn't need you after all. But if you're not too unpleasant, soon they'll see that they want you, and that's better for you both.

21. Remember that adolescence is a time of normal psychosis, the most painful time in anyone's life. You've been there, so you can see it from the adolescent's perspective but they can't yet see it from yours. Keep thinking about how wonderful it will be when it's over and your kids are free to become just like you. They will come to love you just as much as you love your parents because they'll learn this, as they'll learn everything, not from what you tell them is right, but from your example.