



# The Pressure of “Parenting”

Dr. Matthew Liebman

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## “Parenting” is a Verb

Before 1960, parenting (i.e. the verb, meaning “to parent actively”) was not a widely used or recognized term in the American vernacular. It was not until psychologists began responding to societal norms and an increased knowledge-base that we began to use this term to describe the idea of “doing the job of the parent.” We use it to highlight the phenomenon that as parents, we have a role and responsibility, and that is to ensure the health and happiness of our children.

However, this is not what we really *mean* when we talk about “parenting.” What we *mean* when we talk about someone’s parenting is the idea that someone should or should not be doing something to or with their child. What we *mean* when we discuss parenting is that there must be a correct (and therefore an incorrect) way to do things. It is a term that now, in 2019, can make parents feel critiqued and judged by the world around them. Fear of judgment from those who observe our parenting can create enormous pressure and anxiety for those who take on this role. Almost more importantly than that, the fear of not parenting correctly can foster indecision, undue stress, and feelings of low self-worth/self-confidence in the parent. And, almost more importantly than that, these feelings can then be transmitted to our children without even realizing that this transmission is occurring.

## Is There a “Correct” Way to Parent?

There is certainly an *incorrect* way to parent. Physical harm of any kind is not only incorrect, it is ineffective and wrong. Abuse of any kind (physical, emotional/psychological, verbal) is also not only incorrect and wrong, it is not effective in fostering healthy future relationships or feelings of self-worth in our children.

Beyond these aforementioned hard and fast rules, the guidelines for parenting in 2019 become a bit grayer. I am

often asked questions about when parents should do something: *When should we get him his first phone? When should she be allowed to be alone in her bedroom after school? When should they stop playing X-Box/PS4?* The answer is almost always the same – it depends on your child.



Some children can handle their own responsibilities without prompt, which includes being able to turn-off myriad technologies without resistance or pushback. Other children require more frequent prompting and redirection, which includes use of physical timers, 10- and 5-minute warnings before transition, and reminders of responsibilities that must be tended to. One is not better or more correct than the other. It is simply a matter of knowing what your particular child needs and being willing to aid them in meeting this need effectively.

Human beings are hardwired to find comfort in belonging to part of a group, and it is natural for us to then compare ourselves to other members of the groups within which we feel a part (i.e. I am a student at this school, like everyone else here). This natural comparison in parents, however, can often lead us to question whether or not we should or

should not be doing something that others are doing with their child.

Sometimes these comparisons can help us know what we could expect from our children, and so can aid our roles as parents positively. For example, learning that your 18-month-old child should be able to walk by comparing them to the children around them can help guide you to resources if they are struggling. Other times, these comparisons make us feel inadequate (or worse, make us fear that our children are somehow inadequate) which can negatively impact our interactions with others and them. For example, feeling like other children are completing their homework each night in one hour and your child is taking two or more can then foster feelings of being “lesser than” and color dialogue with them in an invalidating, or even aggressive, way.



### Assess Your Values

The way to parent “correctly” involves you, as a parent, first defining what it is that you value. Do you value loyalty? Friendship? Achievement? Family? Adventure? There is not a correct value system to ascribe to – it really is simply about what you, as parents, feel is important to encourage and foster in your children.

A good first step to take, if you have not ever done so, is to sit down with yourself or your parenting partner and discuss what values you are trying to impart to your kids. Ask if the things you are focusing on with them are actually what you find important. Come up with two or three core values that you would like to make sure are at the center of your parenting.

Next, and sometimes most challenging, is we must consciously and truthfully evaluate whether or not our interactions with our children are actually lining up with

the values we say we adhere to. For example, if you decide that loyalty is an important core value for your family, and you then encourage your children to abandon friendships based on one or two interactions with those friends, then you are actually acting opposite to what you say your values are. If you decide that you value prioritizing family and then spend your meals together looking at your phone despite the fact that you have told your children that they cannot do this very same thing, then you are not acting in accordance with the values you are trying to highlight. These conflicts can cause distress in the family unit, can increase the likelihood of arguments occurring within and between family members, and can contribute to feelings of confusion and anxiety in children.

It is important to note that although we try our best to impart our own value systems to our children, it is normal for them to begin developing their own value systems to ascribe to as they grow through adolescence. Often, difficulties arise when these values differ from those we are trying to impart. It is imperative to not react to a difference in values with anger and defensiveness – a discordant value system is not an automatic attack on ours as parents. Rather, it is developmentally normal and expected for adolescents to internalize what matters to them, and to nurture a value system that makes sense for the world they exist in (even if it is somewhat different from ours). Approaching conversations around their values *curiously*, not *critically*, can help foster an open dialogue where understanding of one another’s perspective is the goal.

Often, parental defensiveness when children make decisions that do not align with the values they are “taught” comes from a place of fear that either they are somehow doing something wrong, or that we, as parents, are somehow doing something wrong. The reality is that it is possible for neither to be the case. This fear can foster more pressured interactions between parents and children. Parenting decisions made from fear can create more issues than solutions.

Sometimes, the pressure to parent “correctly” is the very thing that prevents us from parenting correctly.

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*Dr. Matthew Liebman is a licensed psychologist practicing at Watchung Psychological Associates in Warren, NJ.*

Matthew G. Liebman, Psy.D.  
(908) 757-1399 x4  
<http://www.drmatthewliebman.com>

Watchung Psychological Associates  
<http://www.wpaapc.com>