

## Parenting tips 101

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When you purchase a new automobile, there is a certain amount of regular maintenance service that must be performed in order to keep your car running properly. Although scheduled maintenance will not keep your car from needing repairs from time to time, it will certainly improve the performance and efficiency of your automobile, and prolong the life of the car. There's nothing glamorous or convenient about having this maintenance performed. However, failing to replace the engine oil or radiator coolant, driving on under inflated tires, or failing to replace worn parts at scheduled intervals can spell disaster for your car.

In some ways, the same is true for parenting. There are some basic procedures that will improve the efficiency and performance of your family, and reduce the amount of stress and conflict in the home. Surprisingly, it seems that more families seeking therapy are skipping their family "scheduled maintenance," and then wondering why things break down. However, parents that practice these preventative maintenance techniques are likely to enjoy much more harmonious family relationships and find their children are happier, better behaved, and more successful academically and socially. Following is a list of some family preventative maintenance techniques:

- 1) **Treat children with love, respect and genuine concern.** Parenting is much more than the application of rules and discipline. Children require loving relationships with parents and other caregivers. When you think back on the adults that most positively influenced you as a child, you will undoubtedly think of the adults in your life who cared the most about you. As parents, it is important to take the time to show our children that we care. Let your children know through your actions as well as words that you love them and they are special. Set aside time to talk, play and work with your children. Develop an interest such as a craft, hobby, game, sport or other activity with your children. Praise children often. If possible, set aside other matters when they come to you with a concern. Be respectful of your children and genuinely concerned about their challenges and frustrations. Celebrate their accomplishments and share in their successes. Avoid any put downs, name calling, or derogatory comments. When criticizing or reprimanding, do so in a neutral tone of voice.
- 2) **Establish regular routines, rules, and consequences:** For the most part, children benefit from predictability and structure. This allows children to come to know what can be expected of them and others in certain situations. A routine is a list of activities or tasks a child is to perform at a regular time. For example, a regular morning routine may consist of having a child arise, wash their face and hands, get dressed, have breakfast, brush their teeth, make their bed and pick up pajamas, gather school materials together, and so forth. If desired, a written or pictorial list can be developed and posted in a child's room. This will help children become more independent in completing steps in a routine. Parents are also encouraged to establish clear rules for behavior in the home. Rules should apply equally to all (except where developmental stages must be taken into account), including parents. Many families encourage children to participate in developing the list of rules. Both parents must agree on the rules, and agree to enforce them consistently. Finally, consequences should be used consistently. For example, if name calling results in time out for one child, this should apply to others as well, and should be used for each instance of name calling. One exception is that parents may consider graduated or increasing consequences for repeated instances of the same behavior, for example, loss of TV privileges or early bed time in addition to time out if a child name calls more than two times.

- 3) **Practice what you preach.** Be sure to model the behavior you wish your children to exhibit. Children are very sensitive to how their parents act, more so than what they say.
- 4) **Reward good behavior, ignore minor disruptive behavior, punish rule violations:** Take extra care to encourage, recognize, and praise children for appropriate behavior. Of course, children who go above and beyond should receive special recognition, but don't forget to praise everyday good behavior. Parents may also wish to set up a special reward for a child as an incentive to work toward a goal. For example, a parent may wish to encourage a child to work toward earning a meal at McDonald's by completing all assigned homework for a week. Social rewards (special time together, renting a movie to watch together, a family outing) have advantages over purely tangible rewards (e.g., a new toy) although both are appropriate. Minor disruptive behavior may be ignored. However, if a warning is given, be sure to intervene with a consequence the next time the behavior occurs, rather than repeatedly warn or reprimand. Effective consequences are those that tend to be immediate, are logically related to the rule violation when possible, and time limited. Examples of logically related consequences include writing a letter of apology for hurting someone, or returning a stolen item to a store. Avoid consequences that persist more than 24 hours although in some cases these are appropriate, for example, being restricted from use of a bicycle for a week due to reckless riding. Although parents are strongly encouraged to be consistent with consequences, in some cases it may be appropriate to have a child "earn off" a reward. For example, if a child is restricted from watching television for the night as a consequence, parents may wish to allow the child to earn this privilege back by completing 30 minutes worth of chores, in order for the child to watch a special program. Be sure to implement consequences in an emotionally neutral fashion.
- 5) **Set aside time for chores and homework:** Parents and children lead very busy lives. Parents are encouraged to set aside time for household chores and homework on a daily basis. Ideally, children should complete homework immediately after school (or after a short break). This helps prevent procrastination or putting things off, and allows children to complete these tasks while the lessons are relatively fresh and before they become more fatigued. Parents are encouraged to use Grandma's rule, or allow access to enjoyable activities such as television viewing or using the phone "as soon as" chores and homework are complete. Parents are encouraged to provide support and assistance to children completing their homework (but don't do it for them!), and check homework to insure that the child understands the concepts being rehearsed. If issues arise concerning the difficulty or quantity of homework, call your child's classroom teacher as soon as convenient. Chores help children learn responsibility and that they have a role in helping the family work together. These can include aspects of personal care (such as picking up their own toys, clothes, and school materials) as well as family care (taking out the trash or vacuuming the living room). It is preferable for children to have chores to complete on a regularly scheduled (preferably daily) basis rather than on an "as needed" basis.
- 6) **Develop and live by a moral code:** Parents are encouraged to teach their children the values and morals they wish to instill in their children. This doesn't mean that you have to set aside a specific time to discuss these, but be sure to take the time to discuss your values and morals when situations arise that draw on these. For example, when watching a show where lying, fighting or stealing is promoted as a positive solution, discuss your views (and your child's views) about this and come up with other ways that this problem could have been handled. Discuss the benefits of living by your values and morals. Encourage children to take on the perspective of others (for example, "How would you feel if you were in that situation?"). Act on your values and morals in tangible ways – donate money or time to help others and explain why to your children. If you have your children attend Sunday school, be sure that you attend a worship service.

- 7) **Supervise and limit television viewing:** Children have access to information on television, computer programs, video games and movies that many parents find objectionable. In addition, excessive television viewing is associated with higher rates of obesity and behavior problems in children. Pediatric Center staff recommend that children watch no more than 90 minutes of television, video games, movies, etc. per day. Parents are strongly encouraged to be selective about what their children watch. The content of television viewing should be limited so that children's exposure to themes of violence, sexual activity, or horrific themes (e.g., frightening movies) be prevented or limited. It is recommended that televisions and video games not be placed in children's bedrooms, as it is not possible to monitor the content and duration of viewing, and tends to lead to other undesirable habits (social isolation, watching TV while falling asleep, delaying academic studying, etc.). When possible, parents are encouraged to watch programs with their children in order to monitor and discuss what is viewed. This can have the added benefit of encouraging children to share ideas with parents and allows parents to discuss right and wrong, cause and effect, or other facets of events that are depicted on programs.
- 8) **Mealtimes:** We encourage parents to establish regular meal times, particularly in the evening, and encourage all family members to be present at meals. Parents should ensure that children have opportunity to have three regular meals per day. Ideally, meal times should be a time to relax, enjoy one another's company, and share information about the day's events or other topics of interest. Make sure you set aside enough time from your schedules and activities to allow for this. Parents may wish to "assign" family members different days to say a blessing or come up with an appropriate topic to discuss, e.g., Where to go on vacation, animals you'd like to see, the best thing that happened today, ways to help a friend who is sad, favorite season of the year, etc. We recommend that the television and other appliances be turned off. Appropriate eating habits and manners may be modeled and encouraged by parents. Children's access to snacks, candy, sweetened beverages, etc. should be limited for at least one hour before mealtimes. We recommend that parents encourage children to eat between-meal snacks that are nutritious and relatively low in fat. Caffeinated beverages should be avoided.
- 9) **Bedtime:** Children's mood and behavior is very dependent on their getting enough rest. As with other routines, it is strongly recommended that children have a regular bedtime and bedtime routine, or set of tasks prior to bedtime, e.g., washing face, getting into pajamas, having a snack, brushing teeth, picking up toys, etc. Parents are encouraged to spend some time with their children in a soothing but enjoyable activity prior to bedtime, such as reading a book together. Children should be encouraged to complete all tasks prior to bedtime, including getting a last drink of water and using the toilet. Bedrooms can be lit with a dim nightlight or indirect hall light. We recommend that parents avoid lying down with their children to help them fall asleep (or sleeping with their children), as children often come to rely on the presence of a parent to fall asleep. Instead, if necessary we recommend that parents sit in a chair in or just outside the child's room while the child falls asleep. Interaction after bedtime should be kept to a minimum.
- 10) **Encourage social relationships with peers:** Encourage your children to spend time with other children. This can be in structured, supervised settings such as sports programs, after school interest or recreational programs, boy or girl scouts, church or synagogue youth groups, etc. Also, encourage your children to spend time with peers in less structured settings, such as inviting a friend over to play. Make sure that your children have adequate supervision when going to others' homes.