

Avoid Parenting Traps: Ways to Prevent Conflict with your Child

When you become a parent, no one hands you a guidebook on how to raise children. Sure, there are tons of books out there that parents can buy, but there's no set book of standards that serves as a real "how to" guide on being a good parent and raising happy, healthy and well-adjusted children.

Fortunately, there are some practical, time-tested tools that can be used by parents, especially when trying to work through emotional conflicts with their son or daughter. They come from a non-profit organization called Starr Commonwealth, which has been helping improve the lives of children and their families for nearly 100 years.

The first step is not to fall into the most common "parenting traps." That's according to Dr. James Longhurst, a licensed psychologist for Starr Commonwealth and its private referral residential program, Montcalm Schools for Boys and Girls. "All parents, from time to time, find themselves in one of these common traps. Acknowledging that this happens to all parents, at least on occasion, is the first step to preventing future conflicts," says Longhurst.

According to Dr. Longhurst, the first, and one of the most common parenting traps is Sending for Reinforcements. "By this, we mean calling in an outside party for the primary purpose of showing your child who is in charge," says Longhurst. "Sometimes, our instinct is to feel we need to prove to our child that as parents, we are the ones in control. Our style can, at times, be a 'I'll show them whose the boss' attitude, that unfortunately, is based on conflict."

Another common parenting trap is Liberation. "It's an attitude of 'go ahead, do your own thing and decide for yourself (and suffer whatever consequences occur) that we send our kids,'" says Longhurst. "This is giving them more freedom and responsibility than they are ready to handle and it unfortunately sends children a message to go out and get guidance from someone else...not you."

A third parenting trap adults often fall into when facing conflict with their child, is Surrendering. "This is when we just plain give up," says Longhurst. "We are convinced that there's nothing we can do. We allow ourselves to think that our child just won't listen any more and we ruminate and fret about what we've done wrong as parents," says Longhurst.

The final most common parenting trap that adults can find themselves in is called Joining the Opposition. "These are the parents who want to be a part of their kids' culture," Longhurst says. "Sometimes parents can try to be a part of their child's peer group, imitating their behavior and expressing anti-authority attitudes. While it's an understandable desire to want to be a friend to your child, it really means you're not being a true parent to your child," says Longhurst.

So what's the best way parents can avoid some of these common traps? According to Dr. Longhurst, the solution lies in a strength-based approach to parenting, especially during times of conflict. "The strength-based philosophy is a tool we use throughout all Starr Commonwealth and Montcalm School programs," says Longhurst. "It is a time tested approach that has been proven to work whenever families face conflict."

The strength-based parenting approach is a tool that enlists the strengths of children. "When parenting," says Dr. Longhurst, "we need to listen to our children and consider their input. While they may never admit it, children want us to help provide limits, structure and guidelines for them. As much as children would like to see a 'true democracy,' parents must always be mindful to provide the benevolent and caring figure of authority.

"It's also critical that we learn how to sort through our child's complaints and emotions to understand the true challenges they are feeling," adds Longhurst. "A kid's anger is most likely originating out of emotionally charged stressors. Sometimes your child can just get overwhelmed with the emotional

parts of his or her life and display frustration through withdrawn behavior, acting out these feelings or engaging in self-defeating behavior.”

If your child exhibits these types of behavior, the key is to sincerely listen long enough and well enough to their concerns to help them come up with their own solutions. Dr. Longhurst adds that parents need to be prepared to help their child “drain off” these intense emotions and be able to then discover what the real underlying issue is that is upsetting them. Just by using these attentive listening skills, you will be able to start on the path toward healthy conflict resolution in your household.

Montcalm Schools is a not-for-profit, private-referral school and treatment program built on the proven tenets of Starr Commonwealth, one of the oldest, most respected child organizations in the country. For more information, visit their web site at www.montcalmschools.org or call (866) 244-4321.