

Positive Parenting during the First Critical Years

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Enhancing parent-child interaction

A comprehensive guide to the principles of enhancing
parent-child relationship and positive parenting.



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Parenthood, that is, how an adult takes care of their children while aiming for their gradual autonomy, develops from the child's birth and is prepared even earlier, from the prenatal period. Parenting is the most critical process for the safety, health, and development of the child and has a neurobiological background; it resides in an instinctive mode in humans and nature in general. However, research and experience have shown that certain parenting skills can be helpful for a child's overall development, for enhancing the parent-child relationship, and for managing the unwanted behaviors that young children often display.

The young child's brain is constantly developing, based on a genetic predisposition. The social, emotional, and educational stimuli that the infant and child receive, initially from their immediate environment, interact with their genetic background and shape their overall capacities, as well as their future health and well-being. The term "neuroplasticity" describes the brain's capacity to rearrange itself, formulating new connections throughout life. The brain's sensitivity to environmental stimuli and neuroplasticity mainly characterize young children; however, research has shown that the adult brain also changes when one becomes a parent.

Every adult becoming a parent tries to be the best parent they can be. There is no perfect parent, as there is no perfect person. Depending on the characteristics and experiences, the adult who becomes a parent tries to find the optimal way and the most time possible to respond to the child's needs and contribute to their development to the maximum degree. Positive parenting aims to maximize the potential of each child, through the knowledge of scientific data on early development, but also the improvement, as much as possible, of parenting skills.



The Onassis Foundation, aiming to support young parents in this difficult yet magical journey of a new family's creation, presents the "Positive Parenting during the First Critical Years" initiative. Through a series of online meetings, which focus on thematic areas such as developmental milestones, enhancing the parent-child relationship, behavioral issues, as well as socialization and boundary-setting issues, we stand next to those who need guidance in something completely new in their lives; for every new parent who is learning with their child and wants to learn more and for all of you who are trying to develop your skills in play, rewarding, and "don'ts."

Following the overwhelming response of parents to the previous online meetings, which exceeded 22,600 views on the Onassis Channel on YouTube in a few months, the Onassis Foundation complements the overall initiative with two online guides, provided free of charge and accessed by all, without any fees or time restrictions.

This guide has been compiled in the framework of this specific initiative and provides guidelines for enhancing the parent-child relationship. Building healthy communication between parent and child is important for the development of a positive relationship and starts with mutual play. One of the most demanding tasks is the parent's response to the child's behavior. Positive attention, praise, and reinforcement of desired behaviors are key tools for managing the behavior of young children.

All families are not alike. We know that every child and every parent is unique. Each family and each of us face different situations every day and there is not a single approach pattern that fits all. The following recommendations do not constitute strict guidelines for how each parent should exercise their parental role. We hope we offer some general ideas and directions that may help improve parenting skills.

It must be noted that under no circumstances should this guide be considered a substitute for formal pediatric attention and care. For any concerns, you will have to refer to your pediatrician or a developmental pediatrician.

1. Enhancing parent-infant interaction: “Sensitive Parenting”

Mutual exchange of stimuli between parent and infant, through talking, touching, “skin to skin” contact, and crying strengthens special brain paths by subtly attuning the parent’s brain to the infant’s, enabling the infant to adjust to parenting and the parent to the infant’s behavior.

Interaction between children and parents or caregivers is a basic and necessary element in the child’s development; infants and toddlers will seek interaction through expressions, gestures, and “babbling,” and adults will respond to them. The way parents/caregivers respond to the baby’s needs and “calls” affects the baby’s brain architecture and has possible effects on their social and emotional development, learning capacity, and behavior.

Physical contact, hugging, and breastfeeding:

- contribute to the development of a secure attachment between parent and infant
- are linked to “rewards,” such as “comforting” and feeding
- reduce the manifestations of stress
- enhance lingual and cognitive skills
- prove beneficial for the child’s physical health.

“Sensitive Parenting” is the constant, non-stop adaptation of the parent to the infant’s “signals,” such as crying, calling, worry, and mainly refers to the first year of the child’s life. “Sensitive Parenting” has a positive impact on the social and emotional development of the child, improving their social adaptation, empathy, and regulation of emotions.

General advice for the first year of life:

- Spend time cuddling and holding your baby. This will help them feel cared for and safe.
- Talk to your baby—while looking them in the eyes often—in a soft tone, animating your voice accordingly.
- Respond to your baby when they make sounds by repeating the sounds and “building” or adding words on top of them.
- Play with your baby interactively, read, sing and play music to them.
- Breastfeed as much as you can.
- No exposure to screens at this age.
- Take care of yourself in order to meet your baby’s needs.

2. Enhancing parent-child relationship during the preschool years

Communication and the parent-child relationship are enhanced through appropriate play, but also through positive attention to the actions and “deeds” of the child.

PLAY

Play can:

- strengthen social, communicational, and emotional skills, such as language, emotion recognition, and expression
- improve problem-solving skills
- attract positive attention, making it less plausible for the child to attract attention in a negative way.

How it is done

The child chooses the game, is the leader, and directs playing.

The parent may select the moment of the day when the play will take place. During playing, the parent must:

- concentrate on the child and play (switch off your mobile to avoid interruptions)
- participate actively (acquire a role)
- hand initiative to the child to build their own story, adapting to their rhythm, and encouraging them
- reward effort, creativity, and a good idea
- use the occasion as a platform to offer descriptive comments and enhance language and learning.

Techniques

- Fun: show enthusiasm for what the child does (especially for toddlers)
- Reflection: the parent repeats and “builds” upon what the child says
- Imitation: the parent copies or mimics what the child does, coaching them on how to engage in play
- Reward positive behavior, ignoring unwanted behavior

Duration: 15 to 20 minutes, depending on age

PRAISE

Praise is based on the idea that we seek social acceptance in the same way we seek material reward. Children tend to replay behaviors that attract their parents' attention. Praise is effective when:

- We always clarify what we give praise for; for example, "Well done for helping your sister" or "Well done for putting your toys away."
- Praise always follows immediately a "wanted" behavior.
- We show enthusiasm, especially to toddlers. Exclaim in excitement or gesture in support. All these cause positive feelings and mobilize children to try again in case of failing.
- We praise effort or process. This approach may inspire children to persist in trying in the face of difficulties. It underscores the basic parameter behind success: the belief that we improve by keeping on trying.

Also:

- Watch out for Fake Praise: Children—especially the older ones—may feel that we do not understand them or that we try to manipulate them (usually > 4-5 years old).
- Watch out for Overpraising: We avoid rewarding children constantly and upon every occasion, for things that come handily and are achieved easily.
- It is better to praise effort or a strategy or what they achieved changing. The praise should be for what they do and not for what they are. We avoid comparing them with other children.
- We offer comments on their skills, such as how they managed to solve a problem, complete a task, etc.

Objective: To push children towards improving themselves and not "winning" others, otherwise, they might lose their inner motive.

Praise is not the only means for a parent to show acceptance, encouragement, and love. Children need parental support and affection not only when they achieve something or do something right, but mainly when they are going through stress, disappointment, and failure.

3. Positive Discipline

Children understand "good" or "bad" from the way their parents react to their behavior, meaning the way parents discipline their children. However, children vary in how they adapt and respond to different situations. Some children feel upset by a sudden change in plans, while others are more flexible. Some get tired at predictable times, while others at more variable times. Some are more active, while others are more quiet. These differences in behavior are known as variations in temperament. Variations in temperament prove important depending on the environment's expectations and demands.

TEMPER TANTRUM

Temper tantrums usually occur at the age of 18 months to 3 years and are an expected part of development. They might be more frequent and intense in children with signs of neurodevelopmental conditions, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Temper tantrums exacerbate when a parent responds with anger: the child wrongly understands that the outbreak of anger is a subsequent reaction to frustration.



BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

For a parent to successfully manage a situation or a problematic behavior, they may either modify the child's physical environment, to prevent the episode or address the consequences appropriately.

The trigger for a "crisis" might be, for example, restricted access to something (being told "no," "don't," "stop"), a need for attention, a difficulty with tasks, a change in routine, a provocation by a sibling, or fear.

Depending on the situation, it may be applied:

A. ANTECEDENT MODIFICATION (problem prevention)

- Remove dangerous, fragile, and other similar objects; avoid visiting toy stores if a temper tantrum is likely to happen
- One-to-one activities with an adult, to attract positive attention
- Breaks
- Maintenance of routine
- Observe how the child interacts with their siblings and find activities for both (or more) children
- Avoid things that scare or upset the child

B. CONSEQUENCE MODIFICATION

- Consistency in the application of rules
 - Removal of the child from the crisis situation, time-out, or ignoring of misbehavior
 - Increase the frequency of attention to appropriate behavior
 - Praise or reward for the completion of a task, shift to a preferred task, provide help
 - Encourage on the completion of a task, ignoring unwanted behavior
- ✓ Consequences should directly follow behavior
✓ Praise must always be specific ("Well done for...")

HOW TO GIVE INSTRUCTIONS

- Attract the child's attention, always maintaining eye contact
- Provide clear, concise, and direct instructions to the child, making sure that your instructions fit the comprehension abilities of the child (depending on its developmental stage)
- Wait 5-10 seconds in silence
- Maintain the same reaction, every time, for compliance or non-compliance
 - If the child responds and complies, **RECOGNITION** ("Thank you for..."), **PRAISE** ("Well done for..."), or **REWARD** ("Let's play a game now...") should follow.
 - If the child does **NOT** respond and does **NOT** comply, we repeat the instruction while physically guiding it (for example, by guiding their hands to the toys) or provide a warning. If the child responds, recognition, praise, or reward follows. If the child does not respond, a consequence must follow such as "Time Out."

REINFORCERS

Any response to a behavior that sustains or increases the frequency of this behavior is called a reinforcer. Positive enhancement increases the possibility of a behavior, providing the child with what it wants, which is usually positive attention.

Reinforcers might be:

- **Social attention:** praise, comments, playing games, gestures
- **Tangibles:** toys, stickers
- **Privileges:** more TV/Computer time, later bedtime, greater independence
- **Tokens:** money, exchange cards, etc.

“PUNISHMENT”

- Punishment does not teach “wanted” behavior, but it may be a necessary component of behavior management. The overall context and situation of the child should always be taken into consideration (e.g. if they are sick, tired, etc.).
- It is applied when an unwanted behavior can't be controlled.
- As in rewards, it must immediately succeed behavior, being prompt and specific.
- Corporal punishment is NOT recommended. It has a negative effect on the parent-child relationship and unpleasant repercussions in time. Usually, child abuse starts with corporal punishment.
- Time Out: withdrawal from positive reinforcement (such as social attention and activities).
- Verbal reprimand/brief instruction to change behavior.
- Privilege removal (not engaging in fun activities for a while).
- Removal of praise stickers (if such a system is in use).
- Grounding.
- Natural consequences (not for serious matters).

Time Out: Withdrawal from an activity, withdrawal of positive reinforcement for a certain period of time following a problematic behavior. Time Out is meaningful only after quality Time In. It is ideal for serious, low frequency problematic behaviors:

- For 2-6 years, a brief time out is recommended (1 minute per year)
- Not more than one warning
- Brief justification in the beginning
- Brief explanation in the end (not lecturing)
- Return to Time In right after (in a neutral or positive tone)
- Implemented for 1 or 2 behaviors

IGNORING*

- ✓ The parent withdraws eye, body, and verbal contact
- ✓ Neutrality: absence of anger/disapproval
- ✓ The parent focuses attention elsewhere
- ✓ When a misbehavior stops, the parent restores attention
- ✓ Avoid any reference to previous misbehavior
- ✓ Ignoring requires steadfastness and consistency

* Not recommended when children safety issues are implicated. Be careful when implementing ignoring: it might not bring forth a desired behavior and, on the contrary, worsen the crisis. The parent might get angry and punish the child, causing thus negative attention. Alternately, the parent may yield in the demands, leading them to understand that they can get what they want through misbehavior.

“Sensitive Parenting,” namely the constant orientation of the parent to the infant’s needs, the enhancement of the interaction between parent and child, emotional communication, play, positive discipline, the promotion of social skills, but also the environment’s enrichment with appropriate educational stimuli, summarize the cycle of positive parenting. Any child that faces a low or high risk due to genetic, neurobiological, and environmental factors will highly benefit from their positive interaction to their parents and might amplify their potential. However, at certain times, children’s and parents’ characteristics, or environmental factors, might require further, special, or more intense care and guidance. In cases where there is concern for the child’s development and behavior, parenting, or the environment, there are always expert professionals to offer proper assistance.



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