

Perfect Parents Don't Exist: Forgive Yourself For These 6 Parenting Mistakes

By Sara Bean, M.Ed.



Guilt and parenthood just seem to go together. Maybe you lost control and screamed at your child today, or perhaps you're struggling to give your kids enough—or you might be worrying that you're doing too much. Whatever the cause, most parents experience guilt regularly. I've talked with so many people who were beating themselves up over something they'd done, sure they'd "failed as a parent." But as James Lehman said, "It's not about blame or fault; it's about taking responsibility."

This takes the blame out of the situation and helps parents to focus on the next step. Here are six parenting moves to forgive yourself for—that means putting aside the blame, forgiving yourself for your mistakes or perceived shortcomings, and moving forward with a fresh perspective.

"It's not about fault; it's about responsibility."

1. Losing it and yelling at your kids out of anger or frustration.

Unless you're straight out of some squeaky clean 50s TV family, you're bound to have negative feelings toward your children at times. It's normal to feel angry, frustrated, or disappointed when your children don't behave the way you expect. It's certainly not easy (or maybe even possible!) to stay calm all the time. If you're like most parents, you probably raise your voice, yell, or even scream at your kids now and then. And let's face it, for their part, kids are great at pushing your buttons. Your child studies you for a living and knows just what will push you over the edge. It's normal to feel guilty after "losing it," but there *is* a silver lining here: you now have an opportunity to model responsibility and problem solving for your child. For example, you can approach your child and demonstrate a sincere apology (taking responsibility). You can also tell her how you will solve the problem more effectively next time (problem solving), by saying something like, "Next time that I get that frustrated, I will walk away and take a break to cool off."

2. Being inconsistent with discipline.

Part of a parent's job to set limits on their kids. It's also normal to have difficulty being consistent with those limits. Maybe you're tired, feeling overwhelmed and frayed, or just not sure how to handle your kid's behavior. Perhaps you have a child who "pushes back," and gets really mad when you do set limits—and this makes being consistent even harder. If this is the case with you, remember this: if your child doesn't get upset with you at all, ever, then you probably aren't doing your job very well! When you're setting healthy limits and boundaries for your child, there will be times where he will feel sad or angry with you. It's your role to set limits and your child does not have to be happy with them.

To start being more consistent, you'll need to assess the situation: what areas are you inconsistent in? What causes you to falter with consequences or follow-through? Is it that you're forgetting what you said you would do, or that you are too exhausted hold your child accountable and stick to the limits? Identify your personal obstacles, and then make a plan to tackle them one by one.

A note for parents who are worried they're too permissive: Maybe you feel that you don't set enough limits or that you give your child too much free reign, and her behavior is starting to cross the line. It's never too late to start defining those boundaries. Choose one area to focus on first (let's say it's backtalk) and slowly start introducing more limits into your home life. Decide in advance how you will hold your child accountable if they don't respect the boundaries. Remember that at first, your child may up the ante a bit and try to push back, but stand firm and things will settle down. It's not easy, but it's never too late to start setting more limits or being more consistent.

3. Blaming yourself for your child's behavior.

When times get hard, it can be so easy to blame yourself and feel pity for your child. This can happen when there's a death in the family or in divorce situations. It's easy to let go of some of your standards and limits because you feel that your child is going through such a tough time and he needs a break right now. Or maybe your child's co-parent has gone AWOL and you feel like you have to make up for their absence in some way. Whatever your situation is, remember that this is part of life. As difficult as it is, bad things happen to everyone. Of course you want to be empathetic and listen to your child (and get him or her outside help or counseling if they need it) but it doesn't mean that you should allow them to behave inappropriately. It's a tough lesson for

kids, but nobody has that picture perfect life and no child grows up in a bubble that protects them from struggles and negative emotions. As parents, as much as we'd like to, we just can't foresee and prevent conflict, tragedy, or loss. Trying to "make up for" life's struggles by being overly permissive or by having deep pockets and doing too much for your child is a mistake.

When times get tough, children really just need someone to listen and to take responsibility and continue to guide them along in a regular routine with healthy and appropriate structure. Children should still have rules and consequences, as well as chores and responsibilities. Do your best to strike a balance and also provide your child with open arms and ears to love and guide them through it. You can't control other people or the world around you, but you can control yourself and how you parent your child. It's always best to focus on what you can control and remind yourself that you're doing your best, and you are enough.

4. Doing too much for your child.

Doing too much for your child, or "over-functioning," is another role that's easy to fall into for parents, especially when they are feeling guilty. Every day parents all over the world tell their child to do their chores, for example. They tell them once, and then three times, and then six, and then finally it's just easier to give up and do it yourself. Or perhaps your child is struggling with a school project and crying and carrying on about how it's too hard. It's very important not to step in and rescue your child from challenges. Whatever those challenges are, doing too much to help your child through them is only going to give your child the message that you don't see him as capable, or smart enough, or able to do it on his own. The next time you think of doing something for your child that he can do on his own, and really *should* do on his own, think about how you can guide him through rather than depriving him of the opportunity to learn a valuable life lesson.

5. Giving ineffective consequences and threats.

"You're grounded for life!"

"You're never going to _____ again!"

"If you don't stop it right now, I'm packing up all of your toys and throwing them in the trash!"

Sometimes when parents get overly frustrated, they reach too far in an attempt to find a solution that will get their child to immediately change their behavior. Most parents have done this at one time or another, which is why "You're grounded for life!" is such a classic (and humorous) catchphrase for parenthood.

First, forgive yourself. No parent is perfect, and we all say things that we don't mean when we're upset or angry. There are a few issues with this type of parental response that you should know about. When you threaten or give consequences in the heat of the moment, the things you say you're going to do are often things you can't realistically enforce. What also happens is that you use words that aren't effective in teaching your child the skills he needs to change his behavior. It also teaches your child that he can use threats in the future to get his way. Giving consequences that you can't (or don't want to) follow through on sends the message that you don't mean what you say; your words will start to be meaningless to your child. Your best bet? Take a deep breath, and stop giving consequences in the heat of the moment. Walk away and cool off, and then later on you can hold your child accountable with consequences that are well-thought out, logical, and meaningful.

6. Feeling like you never have enough to give.

Many parents feel that they aren't able to spend as much quality time as they would like with their children. Part of this is the world we live in; we work hard to support our families, and modern life is fast-paced and frantic. Remember that you are only one person. There is only so much you can do in a day. Keep your to-do list and expectations realistic. Second, schedule some quality time with your child each day, whether it's playing a board game after dinner, helping with homework, cooking with them, or going for a walk. You might also try to establish some regular weekly family time, if you can, where you all take turns choosing a family activity. The phones go off, laptops are put away, and you focus on just having fun together.

On top of never having enough time, does anyone ever really have enough money? For most of us, there are always bills to be paid and expenses that come up unexpectedly. Life costs money and it seems like parents are constantly in competition with others to give their children the most and the best. The best house, the best phone, the best clothes, the most toys, and so on. Often, your child's best friend will have something super cool that you can't afford, and your child will feel jealous and left out. You might feel guilty that you can't buy your child the things all his friends seem to have. One way to think about it is to realize that how you deal with your feelings about this is a

choice. You can choose to dwell on it and feel badly, or you can decide to shift your focus. Ask yourself, "what's most important here? What do I want my child to learn in life?"

If you ask me, it's more important that you are teaching your child strong values: hard work, saving money, careful spending, gratitude for what you have, giving to others who are less fortunate. Considering all these things, is it really that important for your child to upgrade to the new iPhone? Instead of wracking your brain to figure out how you can buy that fancy item for your child, why not help your child think of some ways to earn and save money to buy it himself? Perhaps if he earns a certain part on his own, you can reward his hard work by matching a portion of his earnings. The point is to try taking the focus off of the material things and putting some back on values. Be the kind of parent you want to be, not the kind of parent you think others expect you to be.

The bottom line here is that perfect kids and perfect parents do not exist. Parenting is a learn-as-you-go thing. James and Janet Lehman say to "expect setbacks with progress." We all make mistakes or do some things that we regret, or that are ineffective for our kids. That's okay. The great thing is that tomorrow is a new day—and you can forgive yourself, learn from your mistakes and move on.

About Sara Bean, M.Ed.



Sara Bean, M.Ed. holds a Masters Degree in School Counseling from Florida Atlantic University. She has worked with children and families in home, school, and foster care settings for over 10 years and is currently working as a Licensed School Counselor at an elementary school in Ohio. Sara is a proud Aunt of three, and served on Legacy Publishing Company's Parental Support team from 2009-2012.