

5 of the Hardest Things Parents Face: How to Handle the Most Challenging Parenting Issues

by Janet Lehman, MSW



Watching my child struggle without stepping in to “fix” things for him was one of the hardest things I’ve personally experienced as a mom, even though I knew it was the best thing for him. And the truth is, from the very beginning, being a mother is a balance of taking care of your kids while letting them grow up and learn from their mistakes. Your role of simply loving and protecting your baby from pain and discomfort changes to one of accepting that your child or teen will need to experience natural consequences for his or her actions. The hard part (for them and for us!) is that these consequences almost always include some discomfort, disappointment or pain.

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Along with the good, the list of tough things we face as parents is long—and as we all find out pretty early, there are so many challenges that we never even considered or knew about before having children! As a mom and therapist of 30 years, I've found the following to be five of the most difficult.

1. “Parent the child you have, and not the child you wish you had.” Many times, we try to parent our kids based on what we *think* they should be like, and not upon who they really are. Listen, it can be tough and exhausting to have a son with ADHD, or a teen with ODD who’s defiant and disrespectful. Or you might simply have a child who’s very different from you, so trying to see her side of things becomes a constant, draining battle. You might think, “Hey, this isn’t what I signed up for! Is this what motherhood is *supposed* to be like?” As a mom and therapist, I know that when you accept that your child is not ^

who you thought she was going to be, a real grief can emerge. You might have to give up certain dreams you had for your child's future when you realize she's just not going to take the path you'd hoped she would.

Understand, though, that once you let go and accept who your child is, a different kind of love can develop, because you'll be able to see her clearly for the person she truly is. I have found that true acceptance is one of the most powerful, loving things a parent can give to their child. It's the basis for so many things, including being able to develop and communicate reasonable expectations for appropriate behavior. Old power struggles fall away, which can give you space to nurture new aspects of your relationship. As an added bonus, when you accept your child for who she is, she can then become better at accepting herself.

2. Letting Your Child Experience the Pain and Discomfort of Natural

Consequences: I remember feeling terrible when my son, who was a toddler at the time, pushed a door open and fell down some stairs while we were visiting family. We'd all looked away for a split second, and that was all it took. This was traumatic not only for my son, but for us as parents. I remember realizing that I couldn't always keep him safe from everything. (Thankfully he was only a little bruised.) Even though it was clearly an accident, I still felt like a bad parent. These feelings are natural, but it's important that you learn how to deal with them. The goal for all of us is to learn from each experience and try to be reasonable about what you have control over – and what is beyond your control.

It's not a good idea to try to protect your child from experiencing the consequences of his actions. Look at it this way: how will your child learn from his mistakes if you take away the natural outcome of a poor choice he makes? In fact, we humans learn through trial and error. We try something, it fails or we get in trouble, and we try another way. We misbehave, someone gets mad, so we stop. If you put up a protective fence around your child and try to fix things for him, how will he learn to do things differently next time? As my husband James Lehman said, "It's helpful to allow your child to struggle. Change happens out of struggle and in moments of accepting responsibility for our actions."

It's our job as parents to help our kids through these difficult times, but it's not our job to bear all their burdens for them. This may mean letting your child feel some pain and disappointment of natural consequences if he's acted out. You can help him by talking about how he can handle himself differently next

time, and teaching him some good coping strategies. By simply letting your child know you're there for him because you love him, you're giving him one of the most important things a parent can ever give.

3. Facing Judgment, Shame and Blame from Others: If you have a child who acts out and engages in other challenging behaviors—tantruming, yelling, disobeying you or being annoying and obnoxious—you've probably gotten "the look" from friends and strangers alike. You know the one—it says, "What's wrong with you? Why aren't you doing something about your child's behavior?!" It can make you feel like a terrible mom or dad, even if you know you're doing everything you can to raise your child the best you know how. And the truth is, others will probably judge you—it's human nature. If you're in this situation, it's natural to worry about your child disappointing you or embarrassing you, and also worry about how others will react to your child's misbehavior and blame you.

But when your child is acting out and you're feeling judged by others, stop and say to yourself, "I can't read other people's minds." If you try to imagine what others are thinking, 95 percent of the time you're going to read something negative there. That's because whenever we're negative, we interpret other people's perceptions of us as negative, too. And in these situations we don't read people's minds in search of hope. We read them in search of criticism—especially when something is going wrong. So when you feel yourself trying to guess what your neighbor, your mother-in-law or your friends are thinking, just tell yourself, "I'm not a mind-reader; I don't know what they're thinking." Stop the tape that's playing in your head and move on. This is also part of the process of learning how to engage in "positive self-talk," or talking to yourself in a way that promotes calmness and hope, rather than panic.

4. "I Hate You, Mom!" One of the hardest things parents face is when their child is mean, rude or disrespectful. Your child may have always been this way, or the change in their personality might have seemingly happened overnight—perhaps when they hit the pre-teen years. Your 10-year-old loves being with you, but the next thing you know, she's screaming "I hate you," calling you names, and refusing to go anywhere with you.

The words "I hate you" can have the power to reduce any parent to tears or anger—it can make you feel like you've failed and wonder where you went wrong. Kids know that saying these words can paralyze a parent during a fight, which is why they use this tactic to get what they want. As hard as it is, try not to personalize your child's behavior. When you personalize things, it makes it

very hard to be objective about how to respond to your child in the moment. A good thing to do when this happens is stop, breathe, and instead of a knee-jerk reaction, respond with (for example), "We're not talking about that right now. We're talking about the fact that you need to do your homework."

You can also ask yourself, "What does my child really need from me *right now*?" It might be some space, or it might be for you to follow through on a consequence you issued. But remember, try not to take these words from your kids personally.

5. Letting go: During your child's pre-adolescence and adolescence, you are constantly confronted with letting go, especially if your kid seems to need to learn things the hard way. A natural part of adolescence is risk taking – which often results in breaking rules and inappropriate behavior. It becomes extremely important as a parent to be able to disconnect from your own emotional response to this misbehavior (feeling guilty, embarrassed, ashamed, or simply disappointed). As parents, when our kids get older, we need to pull back and become coaches and teachers, still loving our children as people, but giving them space to learn.

As painful as it is to accept sometimes, our children are born to move away from us. There is a sense of grief that goes along with this; I've experienced it myself. It's important to remember that this work of caring for our children while they are constantly separating from us and becoming individuals can be stressful and demanding.

A "Good Enough" Parent

You can't protect your children from everything bad that might happen to them, or from the poor choices they may make, but you can help them learn from the bad situations they get themselves into. Your child will likely not thank you now for letting her struggle on her own and suffer through a consequence, but she may surprise you when she's an adult by telling you that your coaching, teaching or limit setting made a positive difference in her life.

One final word: It's difficult for parents to figure out what is right; and the truth is, there really isn't a "right" answer all the time. It's important to accept that there are choices to make, and that choices often come with anxiety.

Remember that you are doing the best you can and making the best choices possible. More important than trying to be a perfect parent is to be a "good enough" parent, who takes care of their child and tries their best. Hard situations are part of life – situations from which we can learn and grow. And

as parents we can support our children through the difficult times. This doesn't stop at adolescence because we will be parents forever – our role just continues to change over time.

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Janet Lehman, MSW has worked with troubled children and teens for over 30 years and is the co-creator of *The Total Transformation Program*. She is a social worker who has held a variety of positions during her career, including juvenile probation officer, case manager, therapist and program director for 22 years in traditional residential care and in group homes for difficult children.

