



## 8 Persistent Parenting Myths (not backed by research)



By Judy Arnall, BA, CCFE-Certified Canadian Family Life Educator

There are always some common parenting myths that seem to pop up as questions in my classes of teaching parenting over the last twenty years. I am constantly amazed at how wide-spread they are across North America and Europe. There is no research that supports the myths, but they tend to persist as advice gets passed down from the generations.

### **1. Bad Habits last a lifetime.**

I'm sure you have heard at least one relative or friend say, "You don't want to bring your baby into bed with you, because then you are starting a bad habit and he will never leave!"

If that was the case, we would never start our babies off in diapers for fear that they will get too cozy in them and never learn to use the toilet. I often ask parents, "Should I start hitting my child over the head with a fry pan now so he gets used to the pain when he begins having childhood headaches later? No!"

It's the same with other lessons in life. Preparation is good, but it doesn't take years. It takes days. Children change and learn new things when they need to learn them. Bad habits take 3 days for children to break and 21 days for adults. (We are a little more set in our ways as we age!) So do what works now. When the time comes to make changes, such as when the situation no longer works for anyone, then make the change. This applies to everything in parenting, from sleep hygiene, to bribing kids to use the toilet, to instilling good study habits.

## **2. Children should have impulse control by age 3 and should therefore "Listen" to the adults.**

No, they don't have impulse control by age 3. Young toddlers and preschoolers are ego-centric, meaning that their needs matter more than your needs. As it should - this is normal development. As they get into the school-age years, they grow aware of and begin to care about other's needs. They will have better executive function (self-control, listening, paying attention) by age 5 and 6, which is why they don't start mandatory school until that age. Even through the school years, they don't have maximum executive function. They begin to have a good dose of it in puberty.

Educators have long known that preschool children's brain development is not there yet, to hold off on their self-desires for the needs of someone else. Parents have to learn this too. Even though young children know that "No!" is a sharp word that means something scary, they still don't have the self-control to restrain their wants when it is said.

## **3. You must correct things in the moment or young children will immediately forget.**

Again, there is no research that supports this. Yes, children forget the place in time when events occur, but they do remember something from earlier in the day. If you are angry, take your ten minute time-out to calm down and then come back to address the situation - calmly and wisely. Or, address it at bedtime when everyone is feeling good and the teaching might stick. Young children will still remember! Lots of repetition will help them develop routine choices.

## **4. Children remember things forever, so pack in lots of learning, activities, lessons, experiences and travel while they are young and before they resist as teenagers.**

I wish! For all the world-wide travelling we did carting 5 children across the globe, they remember nothing before age 12. For all those lessons we stuffed

into their heads, they remember nothing now, years after they dropped them. Well, maybe one or two memories stick out, like three wheeled cars in England, and sinking boats in the bathtub as a science experiment, or the one cool snack someone brought to the soccer game when they were six, but nothing else brought back memories, when I showed them photographs of when they were young. I'm sure those experiences built their brains unconsciously, but they don't even remember their childhood best friends. On the flip side, when I asked my university-aged kids if they remember how much yelling I did when they were young, they replied, "None!" Good thing too!

### **5. Toddlers need harsh discipline to nip bad deeds in the bud, or their deeds will snowball and they will turn into raging, rebellious teenagers at age 16.**

Children develop and grow their brain in stages. Caregivers should learn about physical, emotional, brain, and social development and what to expect at each stage. A child at 13 is a different child than age three. He has a much more developed brain to understand needs and adjust his behaviour. He has much more self-control to hold off on hitting and using his words instead.

Don't project ahead. You have many years in the school-age years to teach and explain, and it will stick because then they will get it. Parents feel they have to teach the most important lessons, hard, at a time when young children's brains are least equipped to understand them. That doesn't mean you just let little Nathan hit his friends. Address the behaviour with teaching words -over and over again. "No, we don't hit our friends. Here, stomp your feet when you are mad!" By 13, Nathan will have the self-control to do it on his own. Aggression is like water coming from a tap - none in the baby stage, full gush at age 2, flow at age 4, trickle at age 6, dribble at age 8 and occasional drip at age 10. By age 12, most children use their words instead of their hands, simply because of brain development and self-control, and certainly less, because of harsh discipline.

### **6. If I don't enforce consequences on my child, how will she learn how the world works? She needs to be punished to learn.**

All the other "parents" in your child's world, including teachers, friend's parents, coaches, etc., will be happy to issue consequences to your child, along with jail time-outs, taking away privileges, and a host of other punishments. Let them.

You, on the other hand, have the vested interest in your child of teaching a real life, handy skill, called problem-solving. It takes time but pays off in increased communication, mutual respect and love. When you problem-solve with your child, aiming for a win-win solution that works for her and you, you are teaching

her a great employment and relationship skill that is valued much more and has greater long term use than punishments. There is no research that supports that punishment enhances parent-child respect, communication and close relationships. There are plenty of studies that show how detrimental it is.

## **7. Children want limits to feel secure.**

No they don't! In fact, children want their way just like adults do. We hate it when we really want something and someone says "No" to us and children feel the very same way. What makes children and adults feel secure is maintaining their autonomy while being informed of expectations. For example, if we are attending a ball, we want to know some idea of what to wear. We don't want to be dictated to, or demanded that we wear a certain item. We want the choice, but also want to know what is expected so we can make an appropriate choice. Children are the same way. They want information and the ability to choose. That is why offering children choices, along with a little background information, helps them with decision making and gives them empowerment.

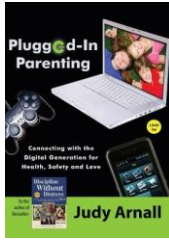
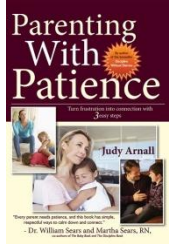
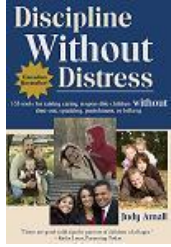
## **8. Teens don't want to hang around with parents.**

Wrong. Most studies done on teens who rebel, act out and engage in delinquent behaviour, do not have warm, caring parents who have structure in the home. Teens want privacy, but they want involved parents who respect them, care about where they are, worry about them, and help them navigate the world. Teen's don't want or need parents that punish, belittle or dismiss them. Be close to your children but let them set the pace for contact. If you are their trusted coach, non-judgmental information source, and problem-solving mentor, as well as a fun person they can beat in video gaming, they will love you forever!

Judy Arnall, BA, DTM, CCFE, currently teaches parenting courses at The University of Calgary, Continuing Education, and has taught for Chinook Learning, Families Matter, and Alberta Health Services for the past 13 years. Judy is the author of the international print bestseller, ***Discipline Without Distress: 135 Tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery*** and the newly released ***Parenting With Patience: Turn frustration into connection with 3 easy steps.***

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