

12 Parenting Essentials

1. **Love.** Love is many a thing, from a feeling that might be selfish, to a service done in secret. Love can be the crest of an emotion, or it can be the toil of assistance. Love can be forgiveness, or it can be judgment, a balm to soothe, or a surgical knife. Love can be decidedly blind or painfully seeing—praise or rebuke.

If love wore one expression, if its hands were always open, if it gave and never retained, then it could exist as a sentiment without thought. But true love places a supreme demand on the resources of wisdom, for manifestations of love are as varied as human need. If the end of love were passivity, the absence of conflict; if it laid aside principles for peace, laid aside conflict for cordiality, it would not be a virtue. It would be vice.

That love sometimes leads one into desperate sacrifice, with no certain promise of return, that it requires trading one goodness—your own—for another, makes it as rare as manifestations of deity. Love must be ready to embrace or to refrain from embracing, to give or to deny. It requires expenditure and vigilance. Love must be ever alert—a delicate, shifting balance of law and grace. The final measure of love is not the cloak of emotion it wears, but the service it renders. Certain love is not found in the good feelings but in the high cost to the one loving.

Rather than say, “Children need love,” we must define the acts of love by which children will realize their full potential. For the *sentiment* of love can be as harmful as that of hate. As all the Law is contained in this one commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” so parenting is nothing more than the activity of love. But as the law meticulously defines the expressions of love, so the works of love must be defined.

2. **Security.** Not just physical security—sometimes parents cannot control the circumstances—but security of soul. It is not only that parents provide food, shelter, and clothes, but that children feel their commitment to do so. This is not about what you do; it is about atmosphere, the very breath of home-life. The soul of a parent is the source of this security. Outward circumstances cannot touch that secret place where children feel their parents’ love and good will. Morale is of utmost significance in business, war, and sports; how much more in a child attempting to win against the world? The child must be able to assuredly say to himself, “I am worth having people care about me.”

This inner security is absolutely essential to healthy development. Without that peace of soul that comes with knowing that you are supremely valued and that there are people in the world who have an unswerving commitment to your happiness, then a child has no ground on which to stand while growing up.

A well ordered and disciplined environment can be helpful, but it is not essential. Children living in poverty, occasionally evicted from tenement houses, cast upon the street with all their belongings, and ridiculed by their peers can still be rich in emotional security. Children of single parents can also be secure and stable. “Disadvantaged minorities” need not be disadvantaged in providing emotional security for their children. Providing for a child’s physical needs is insufficient in and of itself. It takes a giving soul, not just a giving hand.

3. **Acceptance.** This does not mean that children are to receive unconditional approval, but that whether parents are approving or disapproving, children never feel that they have been dismissed. Our present age is pervaded with the “to each his own” approach to human relations. It is the assumption that there are no absolutes. Allow the child “free expression,” never reject any conduct, maintain a positive face regardless of behavior. The error of this is apparent in its fruit.

But the relationship parents have to their children is different from general society. It is the parents’ duty, as well as their instinct, to accept and care for their children until they leave the nest. Regardless of children’s conduct, they must know that their parents have an unconditional commitment to their ongoing development. For someone else to value your life is to have a life that is never without value. To have someone else forgive, when you cannot forgive yourself, leaves the door of forgiveness ever open. To have someone accept you, when your conduct demands that you be rejected by all, places you under demand to act so as to deserve the sweetness of that acceptance.

4. **Respect.** Children are future adults—little people. They have the same souls, the same feelings, pride, shame, desire to be accepted, to be approved. Children have opinions, ideas, and views that they like to share. They may talk you to death, but often what is tiresome to an adult is significant to a child.

A child has a right not to be tickled until it hurts, not to be bullied aside simply because he is smaller. If a child is to respect himself and others, he must be shown respect. A child that does not respect the person, rights, and feelings of others is usually just reciprocating in kind. A human being without self-respect is lower than an animal. Children estimate their value according to how they are valued by others.

5. **Communication.** Communication is the vehicle of society. Interpersonal relationships are built on communication. It is essential for intellectual development. Several studies have shown that infants isolated in their cribs, away from human contact, score much lower on IQ tests taken later in life. Children that are not the objects of communication become incommunicative. Read to your infants. Show them things and give a name to everything. Talk with, not just to, your three- and six-year-olds. Listen to your teenagers and learn from them.

6. **Time,** not just “quality time” but quantity time. Know this, that when you are not spending time with your children, someone else is. When you received your child into this world, it was like receiving a beautiful book with all blank pages. Like a daily planner, each fifteen-minute interval has an empty line beside it. Your child’s history is not yet written. The sum total of life is the accumulation of minutes---minutes listening to someone, talking to someone, seeing or hearing something said by another, or minutes consumed watching a video produced by a disreputable character from Hollywood. Everyday, you write in that book, line by line; or you take your child to a baby sitter or to school, and you turn the book over to someone else, and they too write into your child’s life. The hour you spend with your child is not more influential than the hour someone else spends. Value time enough to spend it on your children.

7. **Boundaries.** Children must learn quickly that they are not the center of the universe. Others have needs and rights as well. Self-restraint is essential to society. Animals do what they want to do and what they are big enough to do with impunity. Humans must consider what is right—thus boundaries. Just as nature contains innate laws that carry consequences when violated, so the world of mind and soul is governed by laws (boundaries). Boundaries exist even where they are not recognized. When a two-year-old takes something away from a three-year-old, he discovers a boundary.

Children need to have it deeply instilled that they are subject to irrevocable boundaries. Boundaries with no consequences are no longer boundaries. That one should design his own boundaries and be responsible to no one is anarchy. Self-control is the pinnacle of human existence. The essence of sin is lack of self-control. It is the parents’ responsibility to clearly legislate boundaries and enforce the keeping of them.

8. **Structure.** Doing the same thing each day at the same time is structure. Any individual, not just children, left to do as he pleases from one moment to the next will likely do nothing unless it is immediately gratifying. To determine ahead of time what needs to be done and then doing it at the allotted time enables one to do the unpleasant with regularity. A schedule prevents one from procrastination. It relieves boredom, gives a sense of security, and minimizes stress. Good habits of scheduling one’s time are best established early in life, before four years old. Without structure, the child lives as an irresponsible rogue. Structure allows children to set goals and sacrifice to reach them. It is the road to betterment.

One of the most common concerns of parents is sibling squabbles. Children that are on schedules are far less likely to gripe, complain, and fight.

9. **Belonging/significance.** Children must feel they are a vital part of something significant.; One feels himself to be a part of that to which he lends significant contribution. A child that is served, but not called upon to contribute, will have low self-esteem. Everyone needs to be needed.

“Positive affirmation” is degrading if it is not based on genuine performance. Children will appreciate praise to the extent that it accurately reflects their real performance. False praise is received as manipulation. When children are part of a family team overcoming real obstacles, they know they are needed. Their contributions are essential, so they are essential. To struggle together and win together is the wedding of souls.

10. **Example.** Be what you want your children to be. “More is caught than taught.” Children read actions better than words. They are imitators, taking on the likeness of the ones they most admire; If you cannot walk your talk, don’t expect them to. When the older child develops bad habits, the younger children will follow his example and probably take it a step further in the wrong direction. Likewise, if you get that first child in control, you have a good example for other children who come behind.

11. **Crisis management.** Life often moves from one crisis to another, especially for children and teens. There is frustration, disappointment, rejection, failure, sickness, pain, etc. The ability to view supposed crises as opportunities greatly lessens the stress in life. A person with that kind of outlook is called “brave, resilient,” or “wise.”

You might call this, “coping skills.” When you are there beside your child for eighteen years, you will share responses to life’s knocks. They will learn from you how to deal with anger and conflict.

12. **The meaning of life.** A human without purpose is a parasite. In the heart of everyone is the faint knowledge that “I have been placed on this earth for a purpose higher than pleasure. I have a destiny to fulfill.” As Christians, we know our destiny is to “be conformed to the image of his son (Rom. 8:29).” We must teach our children to live in light of eternity.