

Feeling Less Burdened

There are moments when parents let their guard down, either in counseling or in the middle of a parenting talk and say something like: “I’d like to be able to parent in a calm and patient way but I’m just not wired like that.”

What does that mean, “not wired like that”? Do certain parents think their inability to stay calm, forgive instantly, and discipline with reassurance instead of anger has something to do with their genetic makeup? And if it doesn’t have to do with their wiring, what does it have to do with?

More likely, it has to do with the burden parents feel to get everything right. Everything! Children should never fall behind in school, never be disrespectful, always get along with their siblings, and never have friendship problems. And the list goes on and on without end. I believe that more than any other single factor, it is this *self-imposed, unrealistic burden that makes it hard to parent in a calm and patient manner.*

The first step towards parenting the way we promise ourselves we will when our children are not around, is to learn how to feel less burdened by the responsibilities of parenting. Start by rethinking what constitutes the burden. Do you have unrealistic expectations about how your children are supposed to act at their ages? Do you believe they should “change on a dime,” never repeating their mistakes, rather than accepting that children (and adults!) change slowly.

Parenting is definitely an enormous responsibility. But that only makes it more urgent that we learn how to feel less burdened by its enormity. How our children turn out has more to do with how we respond to them than what we are responding to. How do we sound when we give a consequence? Are we constantly nagging and reminding? Do we get more and more impatient when they make the same mistake over and over again?

But there is a way to feel less burdened. In fact, an important part of working with parents is teaching them how to identify the components of the perceived burden that actually comes from stress they carry needlessly. For example, if parents of 4th-graders panic when assignments are done poorly, or when 7th-graders roll their eyes in a disrespectful way, they are creating needless stress by panicking. If parents remember that 4th-graders are allowed to struggle for a while as they learn the skills required to become a successful student, and that 7th-graders almost always go through a time of inflated grandiosity, they will feel less of a burden and be able to handle the challenging moments calmly.

Fourth-graders can lose the privilege of being driven places until they are all caught up and 7th-graders can lose their right to practice with their team until they find their lost manners. The point is our children need us to be unburdened by needless stress. *Let us only feel burdened by the standards for our own behavior.* It is unnecessary for us to need our children to be better than they can be. May we learn how to think about parenting in a way that allows us to be calm, patient and forgiving at all times, especially when our children are making mistakes. That is the only way we will be able to see the moment clearly, find the teachable moment, and help them learn what they can from their mistake.

Let's hoard our psychological resources. Our children need us to not get worn out, not be at wit's end, and not act as if we feel the world is ending. Try to remember that all that is happening is that our children are acting like children. They are works in progress, learning the best way they can, by making mistakes. It does not mean that there is anything wrong with our parenting when our children make mistakes. As long as we handle ourselves with calmness and inner strength, they will gradually learn from the privileges lost, consequences given, and from our forgiving tone, gentle presence, and from our successful protection of the connection.

Dr. Steve Kahn is the author of *Insightful Parenting: Making Moments Count*. Please check www.drstevekahn.com for additional (free) articles about parenting or to learn more about the book, available both in paperback and as an audio book. Please feel free to share this article with others.