

Dr. Wendy Mogel's

OVERPARENTING ANONYMOUS

A 26-step program for good parents gone bad

I've written these steps to provide encouragement to well-intentioned, devoted, loving, intelligent parents who feel powerless to stop themselves from overindulging, overprotecting and over-scheduling their children. Parents who get jittery if their offspring aren't performing at a high level in every area. And parents who have unwittingly allowed traits like self-reliance, resilience, accountability and a spirit of adventure to slip to the bottom of their parenting priority list.

1. Don't confuse a snapshot taken today with the epic movie of your child's life.

Kids go through phases. Glorious ones and alarming ones.

2. Don't fret over or try to fix what's not broken. Accept your child's nature, even if he's shy, stubborn, moody or not great at math.

3. Look at anything up close and you'll see the flaws. Consider it perfectly normal if you like your child's friends better than you like your child.

4. Work up the courage to say a simple "no." Don't try to reach consensus every time.

5. Encourage your child to play or spend time outside using all five senses in the three-dimensional world. How come only troubled rich kids get to go to the wilderness these days? Send your kids to camp for the longest stretch of time you can afford. Enjoy nature together as a family.

6. Don't mistake children's wants for their needs. Don't fall for a smooth talker's line about the urgent need for a cell phone "in case of an emergency, Mom!" or a new car "because it's so much safer than your old van." Privileges are not entitlements.

7. Remember that kids are hardy perennials, not hothouse flowers. Let them be cold, wet or hungry for more than a second and they'll appreciate the chance to be warm, dry and fed.

8. Abstain from taking the role of Sherpa, butler, crabby concierge, secret police, short-order cook or lady's maid. Your child is hardwired for competence. Let them do things for themselves.

9. Before you nag, remind, criticize, advise, chime in, preach or over-explain, say to yourself, "W.A.I.T." or "Why am I talking?" Listen four times more than you talk.

10. Remember that disappointments are necessary preparation for adult life. When your child doesn't get invited to a friend's birthday party, make the team, or get a big part in the play, stay calm. Without these experiences, she'll be ill-equipped for the real world.

11. Be alert but not automatically alarmed. Question yourself. Stop and reflect: Is this situation unsafe, or just uncomfortable for my child? Is it an emergency or a new challenge?

12. Learn to love the words "trial" and "error." Let your child make mistakes before going off to college. Grant freedom based on demonstrated responsibility and accountability, not what all the other kids are doing.

13. Don't be surprised or discouraged when your big kid has a babyish tantrum or meltdown. Don't confuse sophistication with maturity. Setbacks naturally set them back. They set us back, too, but we can have a margarita.

14. Allow your child to do things that scare you. Don't mistake vulnerability for fragility. If you want her to grow increasingly independent and self-confident, let her get her learner's permit when she comes of age; don't offer a nuanced critique of her best friend or crush.

15. Don't take it personally if your teenager treats you like crap. Judge his character not on consistency of in-house politeness, clarity of speech or degree of eye contact, but on what teachers say, whether he's welcomed by his friends' parents, and his manners towards his grandparents, the neighbors, salespeople and servers in restaurants.

16. Don't automatically allow your child to quit. When she lobbies passionately against continuing an activity or program that "isn't how I thought it would be!" it's tempting to exhaust yourself selling her on the benefits. Instead, remind yourself that first impressions are not always enduring; that a commitment to a team or group is honorable; and that your investment (of time and/or money) is not to be taken for granted. But do take her reasoned preferences into account when making future plans.

17. Refrain from trying to be popular with your children just because your parents weren't as attuned to your emotional needs as you might have wished. Watch out for the common parental pattern of *nice, nice, nice... furious!*

18. Avoid the humblebrag parent, lest you begin to believe that your child is already losing the race. Remind yourself that kids' grades, popularity and varsity ranking are not a measure of your worth as a parent (nor theirs as people). Recognize that those other parents are lying.

19. Wait at least 24 hours before shooting off an indignant email to a teacher, a coach or the parent of a mean classmate. Don't be a "drunk texter." Sleep on it.

20. Consider the long-term consequences of finding workarounds for the no-candy-in-camp-care-packages rule. If you demonstrate that rules are made to be broken and shortcuts can always be found, you have given your child license to plagiarize or cheat on tests.

21. Maintain perspective about school and college choices. Parents caught up in the admissions arms race forget that the qualities of the student rather than the perceived status of the school are the best predictor of a good outcome.

22. Treat teachers like the experts and allies they are. Give your child the chance to learn respect. It's as important a lesson as Algebra 2. Remember how life-changing a good relationship with a teacher can be.

23. Praise the process and not the product. Appreciating your child's persistence and hard work reinforces the skills and habits that lead to success far more than applauding everyday achievements or grades.

24. If you want your child to be prepared to manage his future college workload and responsibilities, take care before you hire a tutor, private coach or college application consultant. There's no room for all of them in a dorm room.

25. Rather than lurking, snooping, sniping or giving up, practice sensible stewardship of your child's online activities. Evaluate her level of self-respect and good judgment in other areas.

26. Treat ordinary household chores and paid jobs as more important learning opportunities than jazzy extracurriculars. With real-world experience, your child will develop into an employable (and employed) adult. That said, accept that older children will get chores done on AST (Adolescent Standard Time).