

# 11 Things I Wish Every Parent Knew

Written by Stephen Cowan, M.D., FAAP

Saturday, 01 March 2014 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 12:36

After 25 years practicing pediatrics, and caring for thousands of children, I've noticed some patterns that offer me a deeper vision of health. I'd like to share some of those invaluable lessons with parents.

**WELLNESS LIFESTYLE**

## 11 THINGS I Wish EVERY PARENT KNEW

After 25 years practicing pediatrics, and caring for thousands of children, I've noticed some patterns that offer me a deeper vision of health. I'd like to share some of those invaluable lessons with parents.

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- 1 Growth and development are not a race.** These days we're in such a rush to grow up. In our mechanized, post-industrial world of speed and efficiency, we've forgotten that life is a process of ripening. To get good fruit, you need to nourish strong roots. Pay attention to the ground that supports your child's life. Go for a walk with your child, sit with your child, play together, tell him a story about your experiences as a child.
- 2 Creating family traditions encourages strong roots and a healthy life.** This takes time and practice. Personal traditions are sacred because they promote exchanges that strengthen bonds of love and intimacy and build the kind of confidence that will carry your child through the world.
- 3 We grow in cycles.** There is a rhythm and pulse to each child's life—sometimes fast and intense, sometimes slow and quiet. Just as each spring brings a renewed sense of appreciation for life, each stage of a child's life is a time of new discovery and wonder. After all, learning is not just a process of acquiring information. It's the process of re-examining your ideas, and sometimes this requires forgetting in order to see with fresh eyes. Some children will take a step backward before making a great leap forward. Growing in cycles means that we don't get just one chance to learn something. The same lesson will offer itself up to us again and again as we pass through the seasons of our lives. There is deep forgiveness in this way of understanding childhood, which I find takes the pressure off parents to "get it right" the first time.
- 4 Encouragement is not the same as indulgence.** We are not in the business of raising little kings and queens. Kings don't do well in our world. Recent studies have shown that indulgence actually weakens your child's powers to survive, deflating motivation and diminishing feelings of success. Encouragement means putting courage in your child, not doing things for him. Create a supportive context that will open up a path without pushing your child down it. Unconditional love is the scaffolding that encourages your child to take chances, to experiment, and to fail without judgment. Sometimes being an encouraging presence in your child's life means standing a little off in the background, there to offer a compassionate hand when circumstances call for it, but trusting in his innate ingenuity. There is a distinction in encouragement. Indulgence, on the other hand, limits freedom by inflicting a child's sense of entitlement and reducing the patience needed to work through obstacles when he doesn't instantly get his way. Indulgence leads to small-minded thinking.

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ground that supports your child's life: Go for a walk with your child, eat with your child, play together, tell him a story about your experiences as a child.

**2) Creating family traditions encourages strong roots and a healthy life.** This takes time and practice. Personal traditions are sacred because they promote exchanges that strengthen bonds of love and intimacy and build the kind of confidence that will carry your child through this world.

**3) We grow in cycles.** There is a rhythm and pulse to each child's life— sometimes fast and intense, sometimes slow and quiet. Just as each spring brings a renewed sense of appreciation for life, each stage of a child's life is a time of new discovery and wonder. After all, learning is not just a process of accruing information. It's the process of transforming our ideas, and sometimes this requires forgetting in order to see with fresh eyes. Some children will take a step backward before making a giant leap forward.

Growing in cycles means that we don't get just one chance to learn something. The same lesson will offer itself up to us again and again as we pass through the seasons of our lives. There is deep forgiveness in this way of understanding childhood, which I find takes the pressure off parents to "get it right" the first time.

**4) Encouragement is not the same as indulgence.** We are not in the business of raising little kings and queens. Kings don't do well in our society. Recent studies have shown that indulgence actually weakens your child's powers to survive, deflating motivation and diminishing feelings of success.

Encouragement means putting courage in your child, not doing things for him. Create a supportive context that will open up a path without pushing your child down it. Unconditional love is the scaffolding that encourages your child to take chances, to experiment, and to fail without judgment. Sometimes being an encouraging presence in your child's life means standing a little off in the background, there to offer a compassionate hand when circumstances call for it, but trusting in his innate ingenuity.

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There is spaciousness in encouragement. Indulgence, on the other hand, limits freedom by inflating a child's sense of entitlement and reducing the patience needed to work through obstacles when he doesn't instantly get his way. Indulgence leads to small-minded thinking.

### **5) Pushing your buttons is a spiritual practice, and children are our spiritual teachers.**

You don't need an expensive spiritual retreat to become enlightened. Your little sage-teacher is right in front of you, offering you true wisdom free of charge!

Children watch our every move when they're little, studying our inconsistencies as they try to figure out this crazy world. And they will call you on it. When a child pushes your buttons, remember: They are your buttons, not hers. Take the time to listen to what your child is trying to teach you. One of the secrets of parenthood is our willingness to transform ourselves out of love for our child. When you're willing to look at your buttons, you open up a deeper self-awareness that is transformative for both you and your child.

**6) A symptom is the body's way of letting us know something has to change.** Good medicine asks, "What is the symptom trying to accomplish?" rather than simply suppressing it. Our body has its own intelligence, and yet so much pharmaceutical advertising tries to convince us that there is something wrong with feeling symptoms. Much of my medical training was focused on stopping symptoms as if they were the problem. (This is like telling the body to shut up. It's rude!) We don't trust the body's intelligence. We think too much and tend to be afraid of feelings in our body.

But children have taught me that a symptom like fever is actually not the problem. Whatever is causing the fever may be a problem, but the temperature is simply the body's way of trying to deal with what's happening. What other symptoms does the child have? If he is playful, you may not need to suppress the fever. It means the body is trying to make metabolic heat to mobilize the immune system. To help the body do this, you can give warm (not cold) fluids so it doesn't dry out, and nourishing foods like soups to fuel the fire.

**7) Be prepared.** The one phrase that stuck with me from my time as an Eagle Scout was the Scout motto: "Be prepared." This is a state of readiness that can be fueled by confidence or fear.

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These days I practice what I call “preparatory medicine” rather than preventive medicine, so that getting sick is not seen as a failure. Being healthy does not mean never getting sick. Life is a journey of ups and downs and the growing child lives in a constant state of flux. A resilient immune system is one that learns how to get sick and get better. Living too clean a life robs us of the information necessary to be fully prepared to recover.

Rather than living in fear of illness, there are natural ways we can support our children to recover from illness quickly and efficiently: good nutrition, hydration, probiotics, rest and exercise. But the most important? Rather than focusing on how often your child gets sick, celebrate how often she gets better.

**8) Healing takes time.** The most alternative medicine I practice these days is taking time. As a society, we’re addicted to quick fixes because we have no time to be sick anymore. As a doctor, I was trained as a kind of glorified fireman, looking to handle emergencies quickly and efficiently.

In emergencies, strong medicine is often necessary to save lives, but most health problems in childhood are not emergencies. In those instances it takes more than strong medicine to get better; it takes time. I realize that taking another day off from work because a child has been sent home from school with a runny nose can add real stress to our already stressful lives. But children have taught me that healing is a kind of developmental process that has its own stages, too.

When we don’t take time to recover, we rob our children of the necessary stages they need to learn from if they are to develop long-lasting health. When we take time to recover, illness becomes a journey of discovery, not just a destination; we begin to see our health and illness as two sides of the same coin.

**9) The secret of life is letting go.** Life is a process of constantly giving way. Things pushed past their prime transform into something else. Just as spring gives way to summer, so is each stage of development a process of letting go. Crawling gives way to walking. Babbling gives way to speaking. Childhood gives way to adolescence. By breathing in, you breathe out. By eating, you poop.

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Each season, each stage, each little rhythm of our lives is a matter of letting go. This allows us to get rid of what we don't need to make room in our lives for new information. Learning to let go is not always easy, and each child has his own adaptive style and timing. Nature favors diversity. Remember to honor your child's unique nature. This is what my book *Fire Child, Water Child* is all about.

Perhaps the most important way children teach me how to let go is in the way they play. Playing means letting go of our inhibitions; it frees us up and allows us to not take ourselves too seriously.

**10) Trust yourself: You're the expert on your child.** One of the most important things I teach new parents is how to trust themselves. Nowhere is this more daunting than when a new baby comes into our lives. We're expected to know everything, and yet we feel like we know nothing. But children have taught me that this knowing-nothing can be a real opportunity to exercise our powers of intuition.

Mindful parenting begins by listening with an open heart to your child's life without fear or panic. Studies have shown that a mother's intuition is more powerful than any lab test in picking up problems. Unfortunately, today we are flooded with so much scary information that it interferes with our ability to listen to our own intuition. (Just think of the arrogance of a doctor who acts like he knows your child better than you do!)

Take a tip from your baby. Look into your baby's eyes. Imagine what it feels like to be conscious of the world before you have language, before all those labels that scare us and divide things into good and bad, right and wrong. Babies have no enemies. This is seeing from the source. It is what Zen Buddhists call "beginner's mind." Watch closely how your baby breathes with his belly. This is Qigong breathing. Stop thinking for a moment and try breathing this way. You may just find the answers you need waiting for you there.

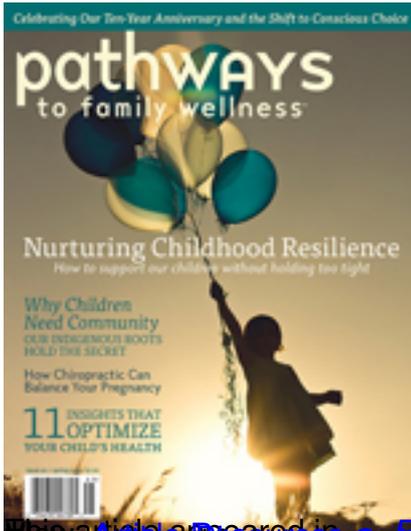
**11) Take the long view.** It's easy to get caught in the immediacy of a problem, especially at 2 a.m. Having watched thousands of children grow into adulthood, what sometimes seems like a big deal at 4 months old or 14 years old may be no more than a small bump in the road. Children have taught me how to take the long view of life. When we step back and see the big picture of our lives, we discover wisdom and compassion.

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