



# Ten Common Parenting Mistakes & Alternatives

By Cliff Crain, MFT

## “How can I get my child to follow the rules without all the hassle?”

This is a commonly asked question by caring parents. This article will detail ten common discipline mistakes made by well-intentioned parents, and offer some effective discipline alternatives.

To begin with, let's be honest and admit that parenting is often hard work. Bright, caring parents still need to learn new techniques if they are to be successful. Falling back on the way we were parented, such as “demanding” obedience”, often creates it own set of problems.

On the other hand, being an overly indulgent parent isn't any better. This “whimpy” parenting style, common in the suburbs of California, can create self-centered children who feel they must always get what they want.

There is a better way! Below you will find ten common mistakes some parents make (even you sometimes?) and some alternate suggestions.

### # 1 **NAGGING:**

No one likes to be nagged. Yet, this is often what parents resort to doing if they do not have other tools in their parenting toolbox. Parents sometimes nag to avoid yelling. For example, a parent might repeatedly ask, “Have you done your homework yet?”

**Alternative** – Realize that we, as parents, are in charge. Children feel safer and behave much more appropriately when they feel that their parents are confident and in charge of the family. Get the child's attention and give a clear message one time about what you expect. Later, follow through with a consequence (calmly given) if the expectation is not met.

**Example** – I explained to you that there was to be no toys out until your homework was finished, and you had shared it with me, so you have chosen to not watch TV (or use any electronic devices) for tonight. Note: you must then follow through by not allowing TV use that night.

### # 2 **YELLING:**

Do you enjoy being yelled at? Neither do your children. Most children will eventually stop listening to parents who habitually yell. They rightfully feel disrespected. Far worse, some will obey when yelled at by a parent, and at the same time internalize feelings of suppressed anger, guilt and shame.



**Alternative** – Unless it is a true emergency, teach yourself to “push the pause button” and take a breath when you feel like yelling. Once you are calm, you can assert your authority and calmly take charge by

stating your expectations, and /or enforcing reasonable consequences. Studies show that children respond much more appropriately to parents who take an action instead of raising their voices.

**Example** – Instead of yelling at the child who left his bike in the driveway, calmly explain that the culprit has chosen to not use his bike for the next week. Then lock the bike away from the child!

### # 3 ***DEMANDING ACTION NOW:***

Please understand that your children are not BAD KIDS (and you are not a BAD PARENT) just because your kids do not act like little Marines when given a task. Commands like “Do it this instant!” and “Come here right this minute!” need to be used sparingly. They are disrespectful and demeaning. They create unnecessary tension, frustration, and resentment for all concerned. If done too often, they tend to be ignored.

**Alternative** – Try to be aware enough of time that you can ask your children calmly to complete a particular task.

**Example** – Instead of “Come here NOW! We are leaving!” at the end of some play time at a park; tell your children something like this, “OK, we need to leave in 5 minutes. You can have one more turn on the slide.”

### # 4 ***PUNISHMENT FOR ‘BAD’ BEHAVIOR:***



Punishment is about causing a child to suffer for his/her poor choices. *Punishment fosters resentment and builds anger and low self-esteem in the child.* Throw out the concept of ‘punishment’ and adopt the idea of using discipline to teach your child. Discipline is all about helping your child learn from life, and does not need to inflict pain!

**Alternative** – Explain your expectations and the consequences clearly. Give the child respect and encourage the child to make wise choices.

**Example** – You might say to your child, “I see by your behavior that you have chosen a time out.” Then follow through by having the child removed from where he is for a short period of time. Note, a more sophisticated approach is needed by the time a child is 9 years old. See [Parenting Teenagers With Love & Logic](#) by Jim Fay.

### # 5 ***LECTURING:***

Children do not respond well to lectures (you may have noticed this already). They learn quite quickly to tune out!

**Alternative** – Take an action! After you have clearly explained your expectations and the consequences have been made clear, avoid repeating yourself.

**Example** – “We agreed that if you used my tools, you would put them back where they belong. Since you chose to ignore our agreement, They are off-limits to you for the time being.” (Can be locked away)

## **# 6      *USE OF PUT-DOWNS AND SARCASM:***

Put-downs and sarcasm makes children feel disempowered, unloved, inadequate, insecure and shamed. Parents who do this usually do it under the guise of ‘being funny’ and it is usually because someone did this to them when they were growing up. It is past time to drop this practice and treat your children respectfully.

**Alternative** – Become more aware of your language. Ask yourself how you would feel if someone used put-downs and sarcasm when talking to you. Learn to express your feelings clearly, stating how you feel about a child’s choices, but NEVER attacking the child as a person (not even as a ‘joke’!)

**Example** – It is much more respectful to say something like “I hate it (or feel embarrassed) when you act so silly”... rather than “You are just a silly-bozo!”

## **# 7      *USE OF GUILT TRIPS:***

Put-downs Again, parents who resort to the use of ‘guilt trips’ with their kids have generally learned this from their own parents. No matter where a person learned it, loving parents need to become more aware of this behavior, and end the habit. Guilt trips can do serious harm to a child’s core beliefs.

**Alternative** – If you find yourself using guilt trips on your kids, and blaming them for situations you find yourself in, it may be that you and your family might benefit from exploring these issues with a trained therapist. There are much better ways to go through life!

**Example** – Instead of “If it wasn’t for you being so lazy, we would have gotten here on time!” ... try being more straight forward. Say something like, “I really do not like coming here late. We are going to have to find a solution, or you may not be able to come with us next time.”

## **# 8      *COERSION:***

This is the use of, or threat of the use of, physical force to make your child comply. For example, dragging your screaming child into a classroom or a dentist office.

**Alternative** – Help your child express his true feelings so he knows that you understand what he is going through. Most fears are reduced when they can be authentically shared with someone who cares. This will take some time on your part, but your child will come away feeling loved, not shamed. Then you can ask him what you might do to make the situation easier. Doing this will give your child a sense of control, and reduce anxiety and fear.

**Example** – Ask your child, “Would you feel better if I come into the class with you, or would you rather go in by yourself?” Ask non-judgmentally, and be prepared to accept your child’s choice.

## # 9 **SPANKING AND PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT:**



This is generally handed down from your own parents as a natural way to discipline children. For many years it was thought that children need to be “broken” like wild horses.\* Research is now quite clear that there are many better ways to educate children and help them develop positive habits. Physical punishment is seen as abusive, and is a major cause of numerous emotional issues in adult life.

**Alternative** – Read a parenting book, or take a parenting class, so you can learn new techniques to express yourself effectively and appropriately.

## # 10 **SETTING TRAPS:**

Because of how we were raised, some of think it is normal to try to catch our child lying or cheating. For example, after finding a candy wrapper under a child’s pillow, a ‘trap setter’ might ask, “Have you been eating candy and not telling me? No?!! Then what about the wrapper I found!!”



The result of an interaction like this is for the child to learn to mistrust his parents... and the world in general! He may well become defensive and learn to lie and conceal his true self as a form of protection.

**Alternative** – Be straightforward and honest about your concerns and fears.

**Example** – You might say something like “I found some candy wrappers. Can you tell me about them?”

Under stress we all tend to fall back upon what is easiest, not what is best. We return to our old habits; things we learned years ago. Becoming a truly effective parent requires that we admit that we have much to learn. Successful parents are always adding more tools to their parenting toolbox.

***Good luck to you! It is worth the effort!***

---

\* See Alice Miller’s [For Your Own Good](#)