

Top Ten Tips for Parenting

by Tim Carey

I'm usually pretty uncomfortable about giving advice and suggestions to other people. The things that I find helpful from my perspective, to live the life I want, are not necessarily going to be helpful for others to live the life they have in mind.

With that caveat out of the way, I think parenting is a unique privilege and perhaps the single most important role in society. I've found the principles from Perceptual Control Theory (PCT; www.iapct.org; www.pctweb.org) to be of enormous assistance in thinking through ways to build strong, stable, and contented family relationships. From these principles, I've gleaned some ideas that may be of interest to you.

To reconcile my difficulty with giving advice, I've framed these "tips" as questions to invite you to reflect on your role as a parent. Through this reflection you might have the opportunity to consider the extent to which the way you are currently parenting measures up to the parent you would most like to be.

I read these questions out to my ten year old son to seek his opinion as to their value. He said “They are good. Reading them you could really get some good ideas about how to be a better parent.”

Here are the questions with some explanatory sentences and additional questions accompanying them. You’ll notice as you read through the information that there are common themes and even some overlap in the explanations provided with each topic question. There is a great deal of convergence in many of these ideas but arbitrarily dividing them into ten separate topics might help to illustrate them in different ways so that one or more of the explanations might make sense to you.

1. Is parenting a priority?

To what extent do you think about parenting as your most important job? Is parenting something you make time for or does it routinely get relegated to the bench while you attend to other things such as work commitments, going to the gym, or a weekend away with the girls? It’s definitely important to maintain a balance in your life and looking after yourself is essential. When there is a choice to be made, though, how often does parenting win out? If your favourite TV show comes on just at the time your child wants to hear a bedtime story, what do you do? To what extent did your life change after becoming a parent or is parenting something you fitted into the life you had created before you became a parent?

2. What are your parenting goals?

When I read this question to my son, he said “You should know what you want to achieve by being a parent.” I couldn’t put it any better. What do you want to achieve as a parent? In 30 years’ time, what memories do you want to have of “right now” and the time you spent with your children? What memories do you want your children to have? In many parenting programs there is a strong

emphasis on the child's behaviour and things parents can do to shape or guide this behaviour. What about your own behaviour? How much of the time do you spend being the parent you want to be?

3. How often do you let them be?

“Letting them be” isn't necessarily the same as ignoring them or leaving them alone. Where practical, though, to what extent do you provide your children with the space to learn and grow and develop and find out about themselves? Are the young people you parent able to choose the clothes they wear? Can they make their own decisions about how much food they put on their plate from the dietary options you provide? How is bedtime decided? If we left a voice recorder in your house for a day, what would we hear? Is your communication with your child characterised by instructions and commands or do you convey as sense of intrigue and wonder at discovering the person who is “becoming” right before your eyes.

4. How strong are your relationships?

How often do you spend time just hanging out and having fun with your child? Are there activities you both find enjoyable that you do together on a regular basis? Is your child someone you enjoy spending time with or would you rather find other things to do? Whenever there are difficulties, and there will always be difficulties, your ability to resolve these difficulties successfully may very well hinge on the strength of your relationship.

5. Do you admit it when you're wrong?

No-one gets it right all the time. Many children have a strong sense of justice and fair play. How do you handle situations when you've got it wrong? Do you believe that, as a parent, it's important not to show weakness and admit that you're wrong? What might your children be learning from the expression of a belief like this?

6. Do you reflect the qualities you want your children to value?

When I read this out to my son, he said “Does this mean ‘Are you a good role model?’”. Once again, I think he nailed it. Do you value cooperation? If you do, how often do you cooperate with your child on things where they would like you to cooperate? Do you value honesty? Are you honest with your children? Children seem to learn far more by the sort of person we are than by what we directly set out to teach them. When plans go awry, how do your children see you respond?

7. Do you know your children?

Do you know what your children like and don't like? Do they have goals that are important to them? How do you and your children spend your time together? Do you discuss things with them and seek their ideas and opinions? From the very beginning people have preferences about the way they like things to be. As we grow and learn these preferences can expand and become more sophisticated. Preferences can also change with new experiences. Do you ever find yourself saying to your child “But you always used to like X.”? How well are you keeping up with your child's changing priorities and values?

8. To what extent do you ask questions rather than giving commands and instructions?

There is certainly room for both questions and instructions in the course of routine parent-child communication. If you pay attention, however, it's likely to be the case that the proportion of instructions you issue far outweigh the amount of questions you ask. There are countless opportunities when children and young people could be asked rather than told. For example, rather than saying “Get your coat before we leave the house.”, you could say “Are you wearing everything you need before we go out?” or “When you look at the weather outside, what clothes do you think you'll need?”. Asking questions encourages children to think about things in a way that giving instructions

doesn't. It's important though, to avoid asking questions rhetorically. Rhetorical questions are not that different to instructions. A useful guideline with which to reflect on your questioning style is to consider whether you would ask questions of another adult, your partner perhaps or a friend, in the same way you ask them of your child.

9. How much fun do you have with your children?

In the hustle and bustle of daily living we can get caught up in routines, deadlines, and appointments and not pay enough attention to just enjoying the other people we are building a life with. How often have you had a good belly laugh with your children? Have you ever done silly things together? Do you ever spend nights playing games rather than watching the television, posting on facebook, or answering emails? In years to come, your children might not remember how many friends you had on facebook but they might reminisce fondly about the times you had tickling tournaments or built a pirate ship together.

10. How does your child experience you?

If you spend time wondering about the world as your child experiences it, what would your best guess be about how your child views family living? We can never know this with certainty of course but it can be a useful thought exercise nevertheless. Are your children's daily lives characterised by closeness, conversation, camaraderie, and compassion? Or would their experience be more about being directed, instructed, and ordered around? Would they describe you as stern and strict? Is that the way you want them to describe you? How would you like them to think of you? Are the experiences you present them with on a daily basis consistent with the way you want them to experience you as a parent?

Now that I've outlined my ten top tips and provided a little explanation with each one, perhaps you'll find something useful in the ideas I've discussed. The

more you can recognise that your children are trying to make their worlds be the way they want them to be just as you are, the more you might be able to find creative and enjoyable ways to live harmoniously together. A book that might be really helpful in understanding social relationships in general, and parenting as a special type of social relationship, is “Controlling People: The paradoxical nature of being human”.

Parenting is the greatest trip on earth. I wish you the ride of your life.

About the Author

Tim Carey is a Professor and Director of Flinders University's Centre for Remote Health in Alice Springs, Australia. He is a clinical psychologist, researcher, supervisor, teacher, and trainer. Tim has over 100 publications including books, book chapters, and journal publications, blogs on Mad in America and Psychology Today, and he has developed a personalised psychotherapy called the Method of Levels.