

13 Steps to Effective Caregiving

Firm, firm, firm and friendly

Without firmness, you will not earn respect from a child. Respect is more than a nice thing to have -- it is a statement that the child believes you have sufficient power in a situation to do what needs to be done. Therefore, you must have consistent follow-through and not fall for manipulative tricks. Teachers know that you must first impress upon students that you mean business and then you become friends. The same is true for substitute caregiving.

Being friendly is important because some abused children worry about further abuse. Unless you can lay down the law in a neutral or friendly fashion, the child may believe that you are simply another abusive adult. Being firm when it is fair and when you can distinguish between the child and the behavior is the goal. It may be a new experience for many children.

Stay in control of your behavior, your feelings, and your household

Although healthy families understand that the adults in the family are in charge, this often is not true in unhealthy families. Abused children know that adults who cannot control their feelings are either dangerous to themselves or to the child. Manipulative children know that if they can get you frustrated, upset or hopeless, they can control you. Some children try to rule the household with their behavior or attitudes. Ask yourself the question, "Is there anything the child can do today that is sure to make me angry?" If so, the child will probably do it! A general rule is to never get angry or frustrated when the child wants you to. An effective caregiver stays calm and in control, no matter the challenge.

Be a good listener

After you have been very clear about what you expect from the child, take the next step and be a sensitive listener. Being a good listener means that you are truly interested in what they have to say. You can't fake this with children. They know if you are just putting up with them or if you are really interested. It also means that you do your best to understand their point of view. Ask questions, rephrase what they say in order to get it clear and show patience when they are not sure of the right words by giving them a chance to think it through. Let's be honest; some of the things that interest a child are not exciting to you, so it takes work to be truly interested. It will take time and effort to listen to a child.

Take care of yourself

Being a full-time caregiver can make you boring or a bomb ready to go off. The same can be true of all parents. You can't be a parent 24 hours a day and have a life. When you are a parent, do a good job. But leave your job to be able to do other things as well, like being a good spouse, employee, gardener, friend or other important roles. Much of the time, children take more than they give. Your energy is like your bank account. If there are only energy withdrawals and no energy deposits, the result is predictable. If you don't have a full life, your emotional bank account will soon be overdrawn.

Have realistic expectations

Unrealistic expectations of children may be either too difficult or too easy. Both of these expectations work against you and the child. Get the facts on the child in your home. Are there medical or psychological reasons that the child has problems understanding or following directions? If you don't know the facts, you may be asking for more or less than you should from the child. It is asking too much to expect the child not to make mistakes, to always do the right thing, and to understand your reasons and motivations for what you say and do. When you don't ask enough of children, consistently doing for them what they can do for themselves, it robs them of the opportunity to develop a sense of competence and self reliance. Not asking enough is letting them off the hook when they break the rules, "because they have had a hard life." They are going to have an even harder life if they do not learn to be responsible for their actions. Don't ask for too much or too little. Strive to make your expectations of the child realistic.

Keep a sense of humor

This is one of the best ways to take care of yourself. An ability to laugh, particularly at oneself, is one of the true signs of wisdom. If you can find no humor in a situation, you are probably taking it too seriously. Parenting is difficult and serious enough without us making it more so. If you aren't having fun being a parent, the chances are they are not having fun being a child. It is important to model a sense of humor.

Know when to get help

The problems children bring into your home are not your fault. You aren't expected to know how to handle everything that you face. The scary parents are those who never ask for help. It is important to be able to say, "I don't know what to do." When you are stuck, get help. Ask a friend, someone you trust, a caseworker or certifier, counselor or minister. Another sign of wisdom is knowing what you don't know and finding someone who may be able to help you.

Teamwork is the key

Parenting is a team sport. There are times when a parent doesn't have a partner or has a partner who gets in the way rather than helping. When this is the case, the wise parent will get help from a friend, family member, counselor, advisor or someone who helps them do the best job they can as a parent. It is not always true that two heads are better than one, but it is usually true in parenting!

Don't stop learning

If you think you know all there is to know about parenting, then write a book, become famous, and make lots of money -- but don't be a caregiver! Caregivers must know that they will be asked to come up with solutions to problems they have not caused and have never faced before. They must think on their feet. They must be prepared to make mistakes and to learn from them. If you are someone who knows that you don't always know, then why complain when a child gives you a chance to learn more? Children are excellent teachers when they make it difficult for us. You have the choice of complaining or you can appreciate the opportunity. An effective caregiver, one who has done it for many years, is usually one who continues to learn and grow, and understands that challenges are one of the best ways to learn more.

The best you can do is your best

If this sounds obvious, then ask yourself why you are upset the next time you do your best and it doesn't turn out the way you wanted. We often confuse success with the outcome of a situation. Success is really when we do the best we can in any situation, not when the situation turns out exactly as we would like. Any experienced parent knows that you seldom get exactly what you want from a child. Effective parents focus on doing the best parenting job they can, but also understand they cannot control how it all turns out. So give your children love, support, firmness, communication, respect and advice and then feel good about your efforts even if the child rejects it all. If you expect yourself to do better than you can, you will not be an effective caregiver very long.

Be respectfully curious about the child's former way of life and family culture

Maintaining a respectful curiosity about a child's former way of life and family culture will allow you to better understand the motivations of the child and help them know that you value them. It will help their family feel valued, too, and could lead to developing a good working relationship with the family. Ask children how they got ready for school, how they got ready for bed at night, how they celebrated special events or what kind of special foods their family ate. All of this will give you clues to their likes and dislikes and the areas in which they may need special support and coaching. The key is to show interest in, not scorn for, their former life.

The more you learn about the child's former life, the easier it will be to develop helpful interventions. For example, if you learn that the child was deprived of food, the behavior of hiding and hoarding food begin to make sense. The caregiver can then work with the child to develop a trusting belief that food will be available.

