

Mary: Wake up, Robert. It's late – get dressed quickly! Here are your long pants. I'll help you put them on.

Robert: But ... I want to wear my green shorts.

Mary: My darling, don't be silly. Here, put these on quickly and then put your library books in the bag and come to breakfast...

Mary: Robert, you haven't got your library bag! You never remember to bring it, my boy. Now the teacher is going to be very cross!

Teacher Tumi: Good morning, Robert! Good morning, Mary! Put your bag into the crate, Robert!

Mary: Robert forgot to bring his bag again, today, Tumi!

Tumi: Oh, there's always so much to remember in the morning, isn't there! Never mind, Robert – next week we will send a reminder in your lunch box. Show mummy the new sticker on your caring caterpillar and tell her why it is there.

Robert: I picked up the dirty pieces of plastic outside so that the tortoise wouldn't eat them and die!

Tumi: He cares so much about animals, doesn't he, Mary? He got a sticker last week for filling up the rabbit's water bowl when it had been knocked over. His caring caterpillar will turn into a butterfly soon and join the other butterflies in our tree!

Mary: You see, Robert! Rethabetswe and Jill have already got their butterflies in the tree. You must be like them and not always be forgetting to do this and that!

Tumi: Well, he remembered to hang his bag on his hook, didn't you, Robert? Well done!

Mary: But it's upside down!



1. Why is life always such a rush?
I hate waking my poor child up so early.
2. Should I let him choose his own clothes?
What if they look silly? What if they are too cold?
3. Will he remember to do all these things?
4. Is it his fault?
Do I have to remind him more than once?
Will the other adults back me up on this one?
5. Do I remember to greet children in their own right?
6. When my child doesn't greet adults, should I let him seem rude, or answer for him?
7. How can a child learn responsibility?
8. Have I noticed the good things he does?
9. What if my son is good at things that I feel are too feminine, or what if I feel my daughter is too much of a tomboy?
10. Is competition a good thing or a bad thing?
11. Some things are not as important as other things. Isn't it false or patronising to praise a child for a very tiny thing he has done, like a drawing or an automatic action?
12. Shouldn't children learn to conform?
13. How will my child learn if I don't point out where he is going wrong?

Discussion

Although the child in this scenario is in the pre-school years, self-esteem continues to be an issue for years, even into adulthood, probably! You will see that almost all the discussion could be applied to primary and high school children as well.

1. Give yourself and your child enough time in the morning. A rush brings out the worst in everyone. Go to bed early if you are waking up early. Plan ahead, and encourage older children to plan ahead as well, packing bags the night before and writing down the week's activities on a poster on the fridge door, for example.
2. Responsibility begins with making choices. Don't worry if the clothes don't match! Decision-making is an important skill for a child to develop. Each decision carries consequences and it is useful to encourage your child to look at the consequences before making the final decision. 'OK, you don't want to wear this green jersey, but it is cold and I am not allowing you to go to school without wrapping up. How will you keep warm?' He might suggest a blanket, but realise that he would not be able to play freely, and might opt for a different jersey. Allow choice within the parameters of safety and health that you set.
3. Children of 3 can only remember one instruction at a time. We set them up for failure if we ask them to do too much, and this will erode their self-esteem. Practise giving complex instructions in a fun way: 'Skip to the kitchen and fetch me a small spoon and put it on my lap.' By 5 they should handle more, but you will need to nurture the skill constantly.
4. Adults need to take ultimate responsibility for important issues. Remind children and check that they follow through. Also, by saying that 'teacher will be cross', you stifle that relationship: rather allow 'teacher' to dictate his/her own relationship with your child.
5. A child's esteem is boosted if he is greeted in his own right. Greet

adult and child, but don't embarrass the child if he is shy.

6. Gently encourage your child to answer for himself, but remember that he is only small, and is probably shy, but will grow up. Keep encouraging him to do it, and it will probably start to happen. Sometimes we worry that people will judge us by how our child behaves. 'My child doesn't greet people – they will think I am rude!' or 'My child's face is full of mud and paint – people will think I have a dirty house!' However, it can damage our child's self-esteem if we make him carry the burden of our self-image! The child is an independent being. He is at a different stage of confidence in relating to others. He needs to get dirty to live life's experiences to the full! And relax – other parents know this.
7. A child should be encouraged to be responsible, but not berated for forgetting. Teach him strategies to help him remember the next time: draw a wall-chart, put pictures on the fridge door, leave items at the front door the day before, etc. Let him feel the consequences of forgetting, but not in a way that undermines his confidence. Get him to draw the reminding picture, or get him to run in and fetch the forgotten lunch box, but don't shame him in front of others.
8. Look for things to praise, and praise often. 'Well done, you remembered to put your lunch box in the kitchen'; 'Thank you for greeting Biko's mother so nicely!' Continue to praise your children into their teenage years and beyond! Sometimes our praise suggests a condition: "I love you because you have done this good thing." Make opportunities to remind your child that he or she is unconditionally loved. Tell your child often that you love her or him.
9. Allow a wide range of interests. If your child is secure and loved, his expression of himself will be a growth experience. Allow boys and girls to explore different aspects of their emotions and feelings: this will make them fuller human beings, and they will develop self-knowledge and self-confidence.

10. Use others for encouragement, as Tumi did, not for comparison. Negative comments seem to make performance worse, not better. Instead of saying, 'Your room is so untidy – look at Betty's neat room!' try this instead: 'It's easy to see the different pairs of socks in this drawer – can you lay your shirts out the same way so that you can choose them easily?'
11. It may sound false or patronising to you, but a child needs praise. Make sure the praise is true! If a painting is clearly not the work of a budding artist, I can say, 'I love the way you gave the dolphin such a happy face!' or 'It must have been fun to draw a picture with such bright colours in it!' Praise for the child is even more important than praise for their deeds. I can say, 'You've really worked hard on that lego castle!' or 'You must be very patient to sit and make that puzzle so carefully!'
- If your child is impatient, watch for a moment where he shows patience, and praise him for it. Children respond well to praise and it encourages them to try their best again next time!
12. Difference needn't be wrong! An anti-social action needs to be

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discouraged, but unimportant differences should be allowed in order to show the child that his self-expression is good. You may think your son is showing a problem if he colours a tree purple, but he has made a decision and if his decisions are repeatedly criticised, he will not feel confident in himself.

13. Celebrate the learning process all the time. Children are not supposed to know all the answers yet: that is what we are there for! It is discouraging for children if we point out everything they are doing wrong. If my daughter bites another child, I need to make her know that she must never do that again, but I can also ask her about what made her angry, and teach her a more appropriate way to express her feeling of anger. If my son picks the neighbour's roses and gives them to me, I need to acknowledge the kindness of the deed before teaching him that the roses belong to someone else.
- Make it clear that their misbehaviour does not change your love for your child: you love them for who they are – the mess or naughtiness is a separate issue.

All young people are basically good
– from *Ten Attitudes of Marcellin Champagnat*, founder of Marist Schools

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Useful contact information

Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre	011 484 1734
Depression and Anxiety Support Group	011 783 1474 / 0800 567 567
Childline	08 000 55555
Victim Support Unit	011 483 4621
Famsa: Parktown	011 788 4784
Soweto	011 933 1301
Lifeline	011 728 1347
Teddy Bear Clinic	011 484 4554

Further reading

Raising Emotionally Intelligent Children by Leonie Henig for Smile Education, 2001
Fully Human, Fully Alive by John Powell, SJ, Tabor, Chicago, 1976
Kids are worth it! by Barbara Coloroso, Quill, New York: 2003
Parenting with panache by Dereck Jackson, Wordsmiths, Johannesburg: 2001
SAALED NEWS Vol 26 No 1, February 2006 'How can parents model good listening skills?'

Other titles

in this series include:

Peer pressure
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 Fear
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