

What Makes a Good Parent?



Reprinted with permission. A scientific analysis ranks the 10 most effective child-rearing practices. Surprisingly, some don't even involve the kids

By [Robert Epstein](#)

November/December 2010 *Scientific American*

Amazon.com lists an astounding number of dieting books—more than 16,000. But parenting guides far exceed that number: there are some 40,000 of them, including books such as Jane Rankin's *Parenting Experts*, that do nothing but evaluate the often conflicting advice the experts offer. People, it seems, are even more nervous about their parenting than they are about their waistlines.

Why is there such chaos and doubt when it comes to parenting? Why, in fact, do most parents continue to parent pretty much the way their own parents did—or, if they disliked the way they were raised, the exact opposite way? Shouldn't we all just find out what the studies say and parent accordingly?

A growing body of research conducted over the past 50 years shows fairly clearly that some parenting practices produce better outcomes than others—that is, better relationships between parent and child and happier, healthier, better functioning children. And just as we use medical science cautiously and strategically to make everyday health decisions, we can also make wise use of research to become better parents.

A new study I conducted with Shannon L. Fox, a student at the University of California, San Diego, which we presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association this past August, compared the effectiveness of 10 kinds of parenting practices that have gotten the thumbs-up in various scientific studies. It also showed how parenting experts rate those practices and looked at just how many parents actually use those practices. In other words, we compared three things: what experts advise, what really seems to work and what parents actually do.

Our study confirmed some widely held beliefs about parenting—for example, that showing your kids that you love them is essential—and it also yielded some surprises, especially regarding the importance of a parent's ability to manage [stress](#) in his or her own life.

Ten Important Competencies



To figure out which parenting skills were most important, we looked at data from about 2,000 parents who recently took an online test of parenting skills I developed several years ago (accessible at <http://MyParentingSkills.com>) and who also answered questions about their children. Parents did not know this when they took the test, but the skills were organized into 10 categories, all of which derive from published studies that show that such skills are associated with good outcomes with children. The 10 skill areas measured by the test were also evaluated by 11 parenting experts unknown to Fox and me, and we in turn were unknown to them (in other words, using a double-blind evaluation procedure).

On the test, parents indicated for 100 items how much they agreed with statements such as “I generally encourage my child to make his or her own choices,” “I try to involve my child in healthful outdoor activities” and “No matter how busy I am, I try to spend quality time with my child.” Test takers clicked their level of agreement on a five-point scale from “agree” to “disagree.” Because all the items were derived from published studies, the answers allowed us to compute an overall skill level for each test taker, as well as separate skill levels in each of the 10 competency areas. Agreement with statements that described sound parenting practices (again, according to those studies) yielded higher scores.

The 10 kinds of parenting competencies, which we call “The Parents’ Ten,” include obvious ones such as managing problem behavior and expressing love and affection, as well as practices that affect children indirectly, such as maintaining a good relationship with one’s co-parent and having practical life skills.

In addition to asking test takers basic demographic questions about their age, education, marital status, parenting experience, and so on, we also asked them questions about the outcomes of their parenting, such as “How happy have your children been (on average)?,” “How successful have your children been in school or work settings (on average)?” and “How good has your relationship been with your children (on average)?” For questions such as these, test takers clicked on a 10-point scale from low to high.

With scores in hand for each parent on all “The Parents’ Ten,” along with their general assessments regarding the outcomes of their parenting, we could now use a statistical technique called regression analysis to determine which competencies best predict good parenting outcomes. For an outcome such as the child’s happiness, this kind of analysis allows us to say which parenting skills are associated with the most happiness in children.

Love, Autonomy and Surprises

Our most important finding confirmed what most parents already believe, namely, that the best thing we can do for our children is to give them lots of love and affection. Our experts agreed, and our data showed that this skill set is an excellent predictor of good outcomes with children: of the quality of the relationship we have with our children, of their happiness, and even of their health. What's more, parents are better at this skill than they are at any of the others. We also confirmed what many other studies have shown: that encouraging children to become independent and autonomous helps them to function at a high level.



But our study also yielded a number of surprises. The most surprising finding was that two of the best predictors of good outcomes with children are in fact indirect: maintaining a good relationship with the other parent and managing your own stress level. In other words, your children benefit not just from how you treat them but also from how you treat your partner and yourself.

Getting along with the other parent is necessary because children inherently want their parents to get along. Many years ago, when my first marriage was failing, my six-year-old son once led me by the hand into the kitchen where his mom was standing and tried to tape our hands together. It was a desperate act that conveyed the message: "Please love each other. Please get along." Children do not like conflict, especially when it involves the two people in the world they love most. Even in co-parenting situations where parents live apart, it is crucial to adhere to practices that do not hurt children: to resolve conflicts out of sight of the children, to apologize to one another and forgive each other (both can be done in front of the kids), to speak kindly about the other parent, and so on.

Stress management is also important for good parenting, just as it is vital in all aspects of life. In our study, parents' ability to manage stress was a good predictor of the quality of their relationship with their kids and also of how happy their children were. Perhaps more telling, people who rated themselves as great parents scored more highly on stress management than on any of the other nine parenting competencies. There is, possibly, a simple lesson here: parents who lose their temper around their kids know that that is bad parenting. Keeping calm is probably step one in good parenting. Fortunately, stress management practices such as meditation, imagery techniques and breathing exercises can be learned, no matter what one's natural tendencies. People can also learn better organizational skills and even ways of managing stressful thinking.

Keeping children safe—a matter of almost obsessive concern among American parents these days—seems to have both positive and negative outcomes. On the bright side, in our new study safety skills did contribute to good health outcomes. But being overly concerned with safety appears to produce poorer relationships with children and also appears to make children less happy. A recent study by Barbara Morrongiello and her colleagues at the University of Guelph in Ontario shows how complex the safety issue can be. In their study, young people between the ages of seven and 12 said that even though they were generally conforming to the safety rules of their parents, they planned to behave like their parents when they grew up, even where their parents were, by their own standards, behaving unsafely. Had they detected their parents’ hypocrisy?



Another surprise involves the use of behavior management techniques. Although my own training in psychology (under the pioneering behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner) suggests that sound behavior management—providing lots of reinforcement for good behavior, for example—is essential for good parenting, our new study casts doubt on this idea. Behavior management ranked low across the board: it was a poor predictor of good outcomes with children; parents scored relatively poorly in this skill area; and our experts ranked it ninth in our list of 10 competencies.

In general, we found that parents are far better at educating their children and keeping them safe than they are at managing stress or maintaining a good relationship with the other parent, even though the latter practices appear to have more influence on children. Getting along with one’s co-parent is the third most important practice, but it ranked eighth on the parents’ list of actual abilities. Even more discouraging, stress management (number two in importance) ranked 10th.

Who Make Good Parents?

Setting aside “The Parents’ Ten” for the moment, our study also shed some interesting light on what characteristics a good parent has.

A general parenting ability appears to exist—something like the “g” factor that exists for intelligence. The g factor for parenting emerged very strongly in our study using a statistical technique called factor analysis, which organizes large amounts of test data by clustering test items into a small number of highly predictive variables. Some people just seem to have a knack for parenting, which cannot be easily described in terms of specific skills.



We also found that a number of characteristics that people often associate with good parenting are probably not very significant. For example, women appear to be only a hair better than men at parenting these days—a huge change in our culture. Women scored 79.7 percent on our test, compared with 78.5 percent for men—a difference that was only marginally significant. Parents who were older or who had more children also did not produce significantly better parenting outcomes in our study. Parents seem to perform just as well whether or not they have ever been married, and divorced parents appear to be every bit as competent as those who are still married, although their children are somewhat less happy than the children of parents who were never divorced.

Neither race nor ethnicity seems to contribute much to parenting competence, and gays and straights are just about equal in parenting ability. In fact, gays actually outscored straights by about 1 percentage point in our test, but the difference was not statistically significant.

One characteristic that does seem to make a difference is education: generally speaking, the more the education, the better the parenting. This might be because better educated people also work harder to improve their parenting skills through parent education programs (confirmed by our data). It is also possible that good parents—those with a high parenting g—are also generally competent people who are better educated. In other words, the g for parenting might be the same as the g for intelligence, a matter to be explored in future research.

The bottom line on such findings is that if you really want to know about an individual's competence as a parent, you should measure that competence directly rather than default to commonly held stereotypes. In the U.S., after all, women did not get the vote until 1920 because of faulty assumptions about female limitations. I believe this is one of the main lessons of our study: there is simply no substitute for the direct measure of competence.

Perhaps the best news is that parents are trainable. Our data confirm that parents who have taken parenting classes produce better outcomes with their children than parents who lack such training and that more training leads to better outcomes. Training programs, such as the evidence-based Parenting Wisely program developed by Donald A. Gordon of Ohio University, can indeed improve parenting practices. Programs are available in major cities around the country, sometimes sponsored by local therapists or state or county agencies. The National Effective Parenting Initiative, which I have been

associated with since its inception in 2007, is working to make quality parent training more widely available (see <http://EffectiveParentingUSA.org> for additional information).



Where Experts Fail

Although parenting experts do indeed offer conflicting advice at times (perhaps because they don't keep up with the studies!), our experts generally did a good job of identifying competencies that predict positive outcomes with children. There were two notable exceptions: First, they ranked stress management eighth in our list of 10 competencies, even though it appears to be one of the most important competencies. Second, our experts seemed to be biased against the religion and spirituality competency. They ranked it rock bottom in the list of 10, and several even volunteered negative comments about this competency area, even though studies suggest that religious or spiritual training is good for children.

Historically, clinicians and behavioral scientists have shied away from religious issues, at least in their professional lives; that could explain the discomfort our experts expressed about religious or spiritual training for children. Why they were so far off on stress management is truly a mystery, however, given psychology's long interest in both the study and treatment of stress. I can only speculate that stress management is not widely taught in graduate programs in psychology-related fields as an essential component of good parenting. It should be.

Bringing It Home

Tempering one's parenting with relevant scientific knowledge can truly have great benefits for one's family. It can reduce or eliminate conflict with one's children, for one thing, and that in turn can improve a marriage or co-parenting relationship. It can also help produce happier, more capable children.

I have seen how this works in my own parenting. I am a much better parent with my younger children (who range in age from four to 12) than I was with my older two (now 29 and 31). The more I have learned about parenting over the years, the more loving and skillful I have become, with obvious benefits. These days I really do hug my children and tell them I love them several times a day, every day, without exception. When love is never in question, children are much more understanding and tolerant when a parent needs to set limits, which I do regularly. I have also learned to stay calm—to improve the way I react to things. When I am calm, my children are, too, and we avoid that deadly cycle of emotional escalation that can ruin relationships.

Most important, I am much more a facilitator now than a controller. While building my own competence as a parent, I have also put more effort into recognizing and strengthening the competence of my children, helping them to become strong and independent in many ways. My 12-year-old son is now a calm, helpful role model to his three younger siblings, and before I get out of bed these days, my 10-year-old daughter has sometimes already made scrambled eggs for all of them—and cleaned up, too.



Epstein, Robert. What Makes a Good Parent? November/December 2010 Scientific American. Retrieved from <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=what-makes-a-good-parent> Reprinted with permission.