

THE INTERNATIONAL
BESTSELLING SERIES

THE RULES OF PARENTING

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RULES
OF
PARENTING

Ask your child what they're going to do next time. Remember that they don't have to be competitive. Sometimes, the best answer is to stop competing, or to care less when they do badly, or to enjoy the match/exercise/process and not be so focused on the result. But of course there are times when they will really want to win. In which case they can train harder, or get more sleep the night before, or practise their leg spins more often, or put in more revision. It's easier to cope with losing if you start to visualise how you can change things next time. And it helps you to see that at least some elements of success are within your control.

Another useful question is to ask your child who they think deserved to win or to come top. If you can encourage them to be honest like this, they'll often recognise that the result was right. And they'll see who they can learn from for next time.

Once your child has got a balanced view of where they went wrong, and how to avoid such disappointment next time, you can find something good to say that's genuine. 'You may not have been the fastest, but you certainly showed great determination.' Remembering, of course, that it's important what you praise them for.

**IF THEY'RE UNHAPPY
WITH THEIR PERFORMANCE,
ASK THEM WHY THEY THINK
THEY DIDN'T DO BETTER**

Don't be proud

It's a very common habit these days for parents to tell their children they're proud of them. You'd think that would only be a good thing, wouldn't you? And yet, although it's the last thing they intend, these parents are doing their kids no favours.

Here's the problem. Pride in your child is a strong emotion, so what these parents are inadvertently telling their child is that their emotional wellbeing is predicated on their child's achievements. That's a hell of a burden to place on them, and puts considerable pressure on the child to keep making their parent proud. That's not the intention, but it's the effect. Just like praise, you have to be very careful not to create a bar your child will feel they have to keep clearing. And while praise creates pressure for a child to keep earning your approval, pride puts pressure on them to keep making sure you feel good. That's an even tougher call, and an unfair responsibility on them. In fact it's a form of emotional blackmail, albeit totally unintended.

As with praise, your child will register – if unconsciously – what makes you proud, and draw conclusions about what values are important. Is it always exam results or sporting achievements? What does that say? If they want you to be happy they must go on getting great results? That's not actually a pressure you want to put on them (I'm sure) but that's what they'll hear. Maybe you're proud of the effort they put in, or the way they behaved. You're still letting them know your emotional wellbeing is tied up in them repeating that whenever it arises in future.

But you do feel proud, don't you? And you want to let them know they've done well. That's fine. You just need to keep your emotions out of it. And then, as with any praise, keep it proportionate and be wise to any pressure you might be creating. Your child will be delighted to be told that you admire their self-discipline, or have huge respect for how they handled losing the match. Tell them you wish you were as good a diplomat, or what guts it must have

taken to come out as gay to their friends, or ask them to tell you how they set about learning all those lines for the school play. All these things will make them glow, without them feeling you have an emotional investment in them being able to repeat it every time.

Of course once in a blue moon, when your child does something truly remarkable, it won't hurt to tell them you feel proud. But limit yourself to, say, half a dozen times through their whole childhood so it doesn't become a habit (no, I'm not kidding). And, as with praise, think very hard about what values you're imparting in your choice of what to be proud of – and whether you're inadvertently setting a high bar for them in future.

Of course you're welcome to *feel* proud of them as often as you like. Just don't inflict it on them by saying it out loud.

**PRIDE PUTS PRESSURE ON THEM
TO KEEP MAKING SURE YOU
FEEL GOOD**

Know the value of boundaries

I watched a neighbour of mine once as her 4-year-old jumped up onto the wall surrounding their front garden and ran along it. This might not sound so bad, but on the other side of the wall was a 15 ft drop to a concrete parking area. I must have looked horrified because she clocked my reaction and said, 'I know. I've told him not to but he just ignores me. What can you do?' Well, I was so speechless I didn't actually answer her. (Besides, if I'd told her she'd just have ignored me.)

You know as well as I do that the answer to her question was, 'Say no and mean it'. It was a particularly graphic example of how children need boundaries – in this case for the poor little chap's personal safety. Actually, this child was a prime example of what happens when you don't give kids clear boundaries. He was known (out of earshot of his family) as the 'feral child' because he was wild. He was constantly pushing to see how far he could go, and apparently there wasn't a limit.

The feral child misbehaved appallingly, had very few friends, and must have thought his parents didn't care about him at all. After all, if they had, would they have let him run along a wall with a 15 ft drop? Would they have allowed him to behave as he pleased without ever paying him attention, no matter what he did?

The world is a scary place when you're a child. It's also pretty scary when you're an adult. The best security children have is a clear set of rules and guidelines so they can be sure they're staying within safe limits. They test boundaries constantly, especially when they're little, not because they want to extend them, but because they want to *make sure they haven't moved*. Your job is to make those boundaries clear to them and guarantee that they'll stay put. So you say no to them every time they climb up on the

wall, and if necessary you lift them down to enforce the rule. That way you'll have a safe, confident, happy child who knows where they stand, can learn about the world around them because it doesn't keep shifting, and who knows you love them.

And by the way, that means both of you (if you're not a single parent). It's no good if one parent enforces the boundaries and the other doesn't – that just confuses the kids more. You have to share the hard cop role (more on this in Rule 39). It doesn't matter if the odd detail varies (maybe one parent always lets them sit on a lap for stories while the other likes them to snuggle down under the covers). But for all significant rules, both of you must enforce the boundaries if you want happy and confident kids.

**BOTH OF YOU MUST
ENFORCE THE BOUNDARIES
IF YOU WANT HAPPY AND
CONFIDENT KIDS**

Bribery doesn't have to be bad

Boy, has bribery got a bad name with parents. It's reckoned to be one of the worst things you can do. But hang on a minute – let's define bribery first, shall we? Suppose your child is behaving appallingly and you tell them you'll give them a tenner to shut up and behave. Well, OK – that, I grant you, is bribery. We won't do that, obviously.

How about this one then? Your child is behaving perfectly *at the moment* but you suspect it may not last. Maybe you're about to drag them off to the shops, or make them do their homework, tidy their room, eat their greens, turn off the TV, go to bed or do something else that generally elicits a bad response. You tell them you'll reward them in some way if they continue to behave well. Do you reckon that's bribery?

I don't. And I'll tell you why. When I used to work in big organisations, they were always telling me that if I coped with this responsibility I'd get promotion, or if I performed to a certain standard I'd get a bonus. I can't see the difference. They didn't call it bribery, mind you, they called it incentivisation. And it was considered a Good Thing.

So let's have none of this nonsense about not incentivising children. So long as you do it before the bad behaviour starts, it's a very sensible approach.

Of course, you want to be careful about the kind of incentives you give. If you always use money, you send out a depressing message to your kids about how the world works. Not to mention ending up skint. And you want the size of the incentive to match the size of the demand you're making in response. Don't buy them a whole new wardrobe to reward them for hanging up half a dozen items of clothing.