

# The 10 Things Parents Do That Sabotage Their Children's Happiness And Success

*Are You Sabotaging Your Child's Success Unknowingly?*

**By Shelly Lefkoe**

**L**ike most parents you love your children. But if you are like many parents you may be doing things that hurt your children's chances for having real happiness and success when they grow up.

And most of what you are doing is so subtle you probably don't even realize your parenting is harming your children until someone points it out to you. So I'm going to stick my neck out and point out these common parenting errors, as well as provide positive parenting alternatives.



For twenty years I have had the privilege of helping clients solve such problems as procrastination, social anxiety, the constant need for the approval of others, fear of public speaking, relationships that don't work, money issues and countless others.

In virtually every case the source of these problems was their (mostly subconscious) beliefs about themselves, people, and life.

### **The Killer Beliefs**

By beliefs I mean statements about reality we think are true, such as, *I'm not good enough, I'm not important, I'm not capable, I'm inadequate, and Mistakes and failures are bad.* (These are some of the most common beliefs that almost everyone has.)

Now imagine my friend Jane grows up with these beliefs I just mentioned and my friend Johnny (not that many people are named Jane and Johnny any more) grows up with the beliefs, *I am good enough, I am important, I am capable, I'm adequate and Mistakes and failures are learning opportunities.* If I asked you to bet which one would have a more successful life, would you take my bet? Which one would more likely take risks and be innovative? Which one would ask for what they want? Which one would go for it when they wanted something? Every one of my thousands of clients bet on Johnny.

So even if we never thought about it before, it's clear that our beliefs have a significant impact on our lives. And if our beliefs determine how our lives turn out, then what is your job as a parent? **Your job as a parent is to facilitate your children in creating positive beliefs about themselves and life. Period!**



Based on my experience with thousands of clients who have had a wide variety of behavioral and emotional problems as adults- almost all of which can be traced to beliefs formed as children in interactions with their parents -I know **what type of parenting produces positive beliefs and what type produce negative, crippling beliefs.**

# The 10 Most Common Parenting Errors And Their Positive Alternatives

Here are ten common things many parents do that lead to negative beliefs that sabotage their children's lives as adults. And here are ten alternative ways to interact with your children that will lead to positive beliefs, high self-esteem, a high level of self-confidence, and more success and happiness as adults.

## Common Parenting Error #1

***Playing with your cell phone or watching TV when your child is talking to you.***

Imagine talking to an adult friend who is playing with his cell phone while you talk to him. If you really want to get a sense of what your child feels, take a moment and really imagine this. ... How would **you** feel? What would **you** conclude?



Here is what most kids would conclude:

*I'm not important. What I have to say is not important. People aren't interested in what I have to say.*

## Positive Parenting Alternative

**Listen when your children speak.** Be interested in what they are saying. When we can't give our kids our full attention at any given moment, **instead of saying in a frustrated or annoyed tone of voice**, "Not now, can't you see I'm busy (or on the phone)?" or pretending to listen when there's something else on your mind, ask the person you are talking to to hold for just a few seconds.

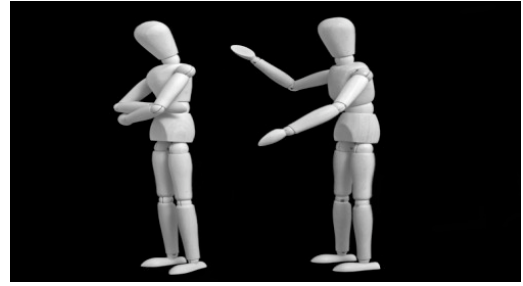


Then say to your child, "What you have to say to me is very important and I can't give you my full attention right now. As soon as I (finish my call, complete what I'm doing, etc.) **you'll have my undivided attention.**" (This takes 12 seconds.) Children may not be happy that they can't get your attention at the moment they want it, but they are unlikely to conclude *I'm not important*.

## Common Parenting Error #2

### **Criticizing and judging your child's behavior.**

Whenever you say things to your children like, "What's wrong with you?", "Don't you think you should have ...?", "How many times do I have to tell you?", or whenever you make those disgusted faces - your child walks away feeling **"less than."**



The beliefs they are likely to form are: *I'm not good enough. There's something wrong with me. I'm inadequate.*

### **Positive Parenting Alternative**

Empower your children with your words and actions. Saying "good job" all the time is not the answer. Nor is lots of arbitrary praise.

**We want our children to be inner focused not approval junkies.** So acknowledge them for their effort. Find something they did "right" and point it out. Let them know that learning and mastery happen over time. Share with them how long it took you to learn.

For example, when my older daughter Blake was three or four years old she came into the room and her shirt was buttoned wrong. She bounded into the room shouting, "Mommy, look! I buttoned my shirt all by myself."

I replied "Wow! How did you ever get those little buttons through those little button holes with those little fingers?"

She beamed. Then I said, "Now that you can do that I'm going to show you a trick that's only for grownups. But you can't tell anyone who's not a grownup. Okay?"

So I showed her how to line up the tabs at the ends of her shirt and then let her button it again. Then I said "Wow! I still can't get over how you did that."

## Common Parenting Error #3



**Getting upset and angry when your kids make mistakes or fail; telling them that if only that had listened to you they wouldn't have screwed up.**

If you do they likely will conclude *Mistakes and failures are bad* and *If I make a mistake or fail I'll be rejected.* Other common beliefs include *I'm not competent* and *I'm not capable.*

There was an article in *Fast Company* magazine (an excellent

business publication) where **Sergey Brin and Larry Page** (the founders of Google) were quoted as saying, "We're going to have to start our own schools because kids come out of school afraid to make mistakes and fail and you can't work for Google if you're afraid to make mistakes or fail."

**Michael Jordan** was quoted as saying "I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career, lost 300 games and on 26 occasions was entrusted to take the games winning shot and missed. I have failed over and over again in my life and that is why I succeed."

### Positive Parenting Alternative

Teach them that mistakes and failures are learning opportunities. (Tony Robbins likes to say there is no such thing as "failure"; there are only "learning opportunities.") Show your children how to **learn from their mistakes and failures**. Share yours with them. Let them know that all great people have failed.

**Find your own stories**, like penicillin was discovered when a scientist "made a mistake" or Thomas Edison tried hundreds of filaments for the light bulb that didn't work before he found one that did work. In the book *Success Built To Last*, the authors studied 200 leaders and found they had four things in common. The fourth was that they were all masters at failure.



When your children "fail" ask them questions.

When Brittany, our youngest daughter, was 14 we had just moved to California. She made her first friend and wanted to have a sleep-over with her. She knew that we wouldn't permit it unless the girl's parents were there, so she told us the parents would be home when in fact the parents were in Europe and only a 25 year old sister was home. She got caught lying.

In our family there is no greater value than honesty so this was a big deal. Britt was crying and said she felt like she "shit" on our relationship. My husband Morty asked her several questions: "What were you thinking? How do you feel about what you did? Would you do it differently next time? What did you learn? What do you need to say to feel complete?"

She said that she learned that lying to us felt really crappy and sleeping over wasn't worth it. Morty said to her with a smile, "**What a great learning opportunity.**" Punishment was not necessary. Britt had learned from her mistake and, to the best of our knowledge, has never lied to us since then.



## Common Parenting Error #4

*Getting caught up in your daily routines and not having special alone time with your kids.*

Spending time with and acknowledging children is one of the most important jobs of being a parent.

I observed a child dive into the water, come out, and then say, "Mommy watch!" After the mom said, "Wow, great dive!" the child did the same thing over and over yelling, "Mommy watch!" before each dive. He just wanted her attention. I remember one of my clients telling me that his mom used to say, "You're just doing that to get attention." He said, "If she knew I was doing it for attention, why didn't she just give it to me?"

Here is a great story to illustrate the **importance of giving your children quality time.**

There was a woman having a tea party with her little girl. A woman passing by got a flat tire and rang the bell of the home where the tea party was taking place. She asked the mom if she could use the phone to call AAA. (This was in the days before cell phones.) She made her call and came out and said to the mom, "Can I ask you a personal question?" The mom said yes. The woman said "How can you be sitting here having a tea party with your child when your house is so messy?" To which the mom replied, "Because when my daughter grows up she'll remember the time I spent with her at the tea party, not what my house looked like."

Remember, all children when they're small ask "Why?" all day. **If you don't spend time with them they're going to ask themselves, "Why?"** And the typical child will conclude: I'm not important. There's something wrong with me. No one cares about me.

**And how will those beliefs manifest in adult life?** Choosing people who do not treat them as if they're important, not asking for what they want, or not taking care of themselves.



### Positive Parenting Alternative

Spend time with your children. *Quality time.* This doesn't mean that the house has to be a mess. **Just make sure your priorities are straight.** Sometimes I would play a game with my girls. I'd set a timer and see who could do their chores in five minutes so then we could have time to play a game together.

By the way, it feels as if my 21 year-old and 27 year-old were just born "yesterday." They grow up and leave the house so quickly. Enjoy the time you have with them before they leave; it will come faster than you can possibly imagine.

## Common Parenting Error #5



### ***Being your child's boss.***

Let me explain what I mean by this. The old school of parenting comes from the assumption that you're the boss and that children should "Do as you're told because I'm the parent."

After working with literally thousands of clients one of the most common crippling beliefs I've found comes from this parental assumption. What belief do you think it is? Close your eyes and remember when you were a kid and were told to do things "**Because I said so**" or "do it or else," or "don't you dare talk back to me." How did you feel? ... What did you conclude? ... If you were a typical child you concluded, *I'm powerless.*

Children with this belief either become compliant or worse, rebellious (trying to get some power). Would you want either kind of child when they are offered drugs at school? Sex? The chance to cut school? I think not.

Eating disorders often result from these beliefs because the only thing you feel like you have power over is what goes into your body. People who get into abusive relationships frequently have this belief.

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### Positive Parenting Alternative

**Give your children choices or use humor.** Morty used to tell Britt it was time to brush her teeth before bed. Then he would quickly say, "Do you want to march into the bathroom or should we sing into the bathroom?"

And she would often say laughing, "Let's roll into the bathroom." And Morty would get down on the carpet and

roll into the bathroom with her.

**Let them do things their way when there is no danger.** My husband Morty has a wonderful parenting philosophy ("wonderful" because it is likely to result in positive beliefs, not just because I like it). If the kids weren't hurting themselves, another, or something (property) they could do what they wanted. He said to them, "Being your dad doesn't make me your boss. Mom and I are here to guide you and keep you safe until you can do that on your own."

As a result, our kids are incredibly **independent and are not afraid to try new things**, they travel anyplace in the world on their own, and they have taken responsibility for their own lives - and they've been like that since they were about 10 years old.

By the way, this does not mean we didn't make a lot of parenting mistakes. We did and we learned from them. In fact, much of what I'm telling you here we learned the hard way!

## Common Parenting Error #6



***Spending time worrying about what others think and telling your children that people's approval is important.***

Do you remember how much your parents worried about what the neighbors (or the people in the store or restaurant) would think when you didn't do what they wanted you to do? Did you ever find out what the "other people" thought? Has what they thought impacted your life in any way?

I've never gotten a "yes" to this question when I ask my clients if what the neighbors thought had any impact on their lives. As one of my old "gurus" used to say, **"No matter what you do, someone is not going to like it so you may as well do what works for you."**

When your child has the belief "What makes me good enough is having other people think well of me" the results are devastating. **Rather than doing "their life" they're trying to please others** and they end up sacrificing their satisfaction and joy in life. I worked with a man who always wanted to be a baseball player. His parents told him it wasn't practical so he became a lawyer to please them. He has hated every day of it. I have heard many such stories in my practice.



When I was a kid **the most important thing to my mom was that I was liked and included by others.** She would say things like, "They're all wearing their hair long." "They're wearing prints now not solids." "What would they think if you ...?" The joke in my house was my brother asking why he was never home when "they" were around.

My mom was thrilled when I was included or invited to a party and devastated when I wasn't. As a result of this I would dress in a way that was to every one's liking rather than expressing myself and having fun with my clothes. If I was in a room and everyone in the room liked me except one person, all I could think about was that one person. When I walked away from people the voice in my head would yak away, **"Did I say the right thing?"** If I wasn't invited to a party I would be upset.

After I got rid of the belief, What makes me good enough is having others think well of me, my life changed dramatically. I call it my "Martin Luther King Jr. moment." I felt "Free at Last!" Now I am my **authentic self and the voice in my head is quiet.** I no longer have to call friends to see what they're wearing to a party or event. I wear what I want to wear.

### Positive Parenting Alternative

Teach your children to **stop before they do something and ask themselves the question, "What might the consequences be if I do this thing?"** This skill will serve them

tremendously when they grow up. Imagine your teenager stopping and asking: "What might the consequence be if I have unprotected sex? If I take this drug? If I drink and drive? If I don't study for a test?"

Can you see how this question is so much more powerful than, "What will people think?"

## Common Parenting Error #7

### ***Acknowledging your children primarily for what they do or don't do.***

As a result of this practice, most people grow up thinking they are human **doings** and not human **beings**.

Think about how you talk to your child from morning 'til night. "You didn't clean your room." "Did you do your homework?" "Thanks for taking out the garbage?" "What did you do today?" "Congratulations, you got an A."

### **How many of us acknowledge our children primarily for who they are rather than for what they do?**

Have you ever been to a funeral where friends and family acknowledge the deceased for what she did? She owned three businesses or she was worth millions. Or do they say, "Here lies Stephanie. She was a devoted wife, a great friend, she listened when people talked; she was kind and caring. She always encouraged her children and friends when things weren't going well." We value who people **are** and yet some families mostly talk about what their children **do**.

I have worked with many clients who were workaholics. Andy, a client who had amassed a net worth of over ten million dollars by working day and night, told me one day that he didn't know his kids and that his wife was ready to divorce him because he was never home. He told me that when he pulled out of the driveway on Saturday morning on his way to the office and saw his neighbor playing with his kids, he ached to go back but couldn't.

What drove him to work all the time? **Here were a few of his beliefs.** *I'm not important.* *I'm not good enough.* *What makes me important or good enough are my accomplishments.* This last one came from wanting his father's acknowledgment desperately and only getting it when he did things his father valued.



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## Positive Parenting Alternative

Acknowledge your children for who they are (their qualities of character), *not what they do*. Tell your kids that you're so glad to see them. That you love spending time with them. That they are a joy to be with. That they have a great sense of humor and always make you laugh.

That they are easy to be with. That you love to watch them be with their sibling or friend.

**Acknowledge their journey, not only their destination.**

Here's one of my favorite parenting stories. When Britt was 9 years old she was a competitive swimmer. One day she had a lousy swim meet and came out of the water very sad. Morty acknowledged her feelings by saying, "I know that you work so hard in practice and you are disappointed that you didn't swim well. You really wanted to do better, didn't you? But please remember that you are a competent, capable, lovable, important kid who just had a lousy swim. Your worth and value is not a function of how fast you go across a swimming pool. **And I love you no matter how fast you swim.**"

## Common Parenting Error #8

***Blindly accepting parenting advice from friends or even "experts."***

Don't even do what I am suggesting in this article just because I say so. **Check every bit of advice with your mantra:** What belief is my child likely to form if I do or say (whatever) on a regular basis? If the beliefs are likely to be positive, go ahead. If the beliefs are likely to be negative, you probably ought to look for better advice.

Dr. James Dobson, who has **tens of thousands of followers**, advocates spanking a two year old so hard that he **feels it through his diaper!** What do you think a child would conclude from this behavior? *I'm powerless. Hitting is the way to get what you want. I'm bad.*

I've seen parents hit their kids when their child hits another child, shouting "Don't you ever hit anyone."

Pediatrician Richard Farber, who created the **Farber Method** to get children to sleep, advocates letting your children cry until they fall asleep and not picking them up no matter how long they cry. Yes, they stop crying eventually but if the only way they have of making their needs known is crying and that doesn't get their needs met (comforting or getting food), what do you think children would conclude if you did this? *I'm not important. My needs are not important.*

Yes, even three-year-olds form beliefs. In fact, many children form beliefs and hold them emotionally even before they have language.



## Positive Parenting Alternative

Always ask yourself the question, "What might my child conclude if I repeatedly do or say what this person is telling me to do?"

### Common Parenting Error #9

*Telling children not to cry or be upset. Telling children it is not okay to show anger.*

Most parents don't want their children to be upset, sad, or angry. Frequently when our children are sad or angry, we often tell them not to be. We mean well but these comments send a message that having certain feelings and expressing them (especially anger) is not okay.

**Children should have the right to be angry**, which is different from being disrespectful. Imagine feeling angry at someone and expressing your anger to that person, and the person replies: "Stop that right now! It's not okay for you to be angry." How would you feel? You will feel what you feel when you feel it, no matter what anyone says.



Now imagine someone saying to you, "**I hear how angry you were when I didn't show up on time.**" You probably would feel very heard.

When your children are told things like, "Big boys don't cry," "There is no reason to cry," or worse "I'll give you something to cry about," they conclude things such as, Crying is not okay, Men don't cry, It's not okay to show feelings, or My feelings don't matter. **Many people also have the belief that *It's not okay to express anger.***

Some consequences of these beliefs include people not standing up for themselves and **going through life with a fear of conflict.** This leads to people not saying what they think or feel and not getting what they want. People also suppress their feelings and go through life dead to their emotions. When you shut down feelings, **you shut down happiness** in addition to sadness.

## Positive Parenting Alternative

**Validate your children's feelings.** Say things like, "I know that you're feeling sad right now" or "That must have really hurt when your friend yelled at you." Or "You're angry that I won't let you stay up late."

After validating feelings you can say, "You have to go to sleep because I love you and want you to get rest because it is important for you to grow." **When you mirror back children's feelings they learn to honor their own feelings.**

Just because it is okay to experience and express your feelings doesn't mean that all behaviors are okay. When Britt used to get angry I would tell her "It's okay to be angry and tell me, 'Mommy, I'm very angry at you,' but it is not okay to hit me."

## Common Parenting Error #10

### *Withdrawing from your children.*

When you walk away from your child angry he will likely experience that as a withdrawal of love. Close your eyes for just a moment and imagine being a small child and you feel that your parent (the person on whom your survival depends) is withdrawing from you. ... **At that moment do you feel loved or unloved?**

Since children don't know that they are unconditionally loved it feels like their parents don't love them when it seems like they are withdrawing from them. For a young child, **withdrawal can take two forms:** It feels like parents are withdrawing when they are angry. It also feels like they are withdrawing when they walk away from or stop talking to their children as punishment.

If this happens frequently enough the most likely beliefs will be, *I'm not lovable. There's something wrong with me.*

And what is the possibility of a really good long-term romantic relationship if you have these two beliefs?



### Positive Parenting Alternative

Let your children know that **you love them unconditionally** (that there is no condition under which you would not love them) and that you're never mad at them - you're only mad at what they did (their behavior).

This is not merely semantics. Children feel totally differently depending on what you say (and mean).

I remember the time I lost my cool over something that Britt did and I yelled at her, "I'm furious at what you did." She looked up at me and asked: "Are you angry at me or at what I did?" Obviously she had learned that distinction from prior conversations.

**Tell them you love them** and you need a moment to calm down. **Kiss and hug your kids** often and tell them how much you love and appreciate them. Let them know that you may not like their behavior but you always love them.