

Putting the fun back into parenting

A common comment often heard from parents is that they frequently feel like they do nothing but focus on the negative. Their reasoning for travelling to the negative is typically a justified one – that being they are trying to get children to behave. Without a parenting approach that seeks to instill more desirable behaviours in children, households can quickly become disruptive and chaotic. Nevertheless parents, as a result of their efforts to guide children's behaviour, are left feeling like they are playing the bad cop more often than the good one. Not surprisingly, most parents would prefer to be the good cop. To help them achieve such an outcome, this article aims to help discover ways to put the bad cop to bed and bring forth the good cop.

Parents are busy

Parents are busier today than they have ever been in the past. As such, there is often less time to connect with children than parents would ideally like. To tell parents to simply make time is unhelpful because it is often not possible. Therefore parents need a quick user's guide to finding ways to connect with children with minimal effort, energy or financial means. The following section will deliver a few ideas.

Connecting to children's likes and interests

Knowing what interests, likes and hobbies children have is one of the quickest ways for parents to jump into the fun cop role. Children love sharing their likes and interests, happily showing off their skills and knowledge. Spending time with children doing the things they like is a sure-fire way to connect with them. Even if the child's interests are not shared by the parent, children appreciate parental efforts when parents engage in the child's preferred activities. When children see parents showing a genuine interest in their lives they will want to talk and engage more with the parent. Because the child has an affiliation with their preferred activity/ies, they will enjoy playing the expert, guiding the parent and sharing their knowledge and skills, something that will help build their self-esteem and identity and in the long-term, the child-parent relationship.

Avoid activities the child lacks interest in when child-parent connection is the goal

Just like children, parents have likes and interests of their own. Parents' own desires to teach children about the things they like can tempt them to try to connect with children by doing the things parents like. Unfortunately children will not always like the same things parents do. When parents try to engage children in activities that they enjoy but the child does not, there will likely be an uphill battle, one that makes what should be an enjoyable moment turn into one fraught with possible tears, tantrums and fights. If connecting with the child and building some memorable moments is the goal, the focus should be on the child's likes rather than the parent's.

Extracurricular activities

There is no right or wrong amount of extracurricular activities that children should or should not participate in. Instead, the only consideration needed is to be able to determine if the quantity of extracurricular activities is removing all opportunities for child-parent connection, for example, each day is so packed with different activities there is little to no opportunity to chill out as a family.

Another consideration to take into account may include identifying if the child is getting too tired and their moods are affecting the overall energy between family members due to participating in too many activities. While it is nice to be busy, learn skills and have opportunities to be social, it should not be to the detriment of the family's ability to enjoy time together. When family members cannot enjoy being each other's company due to excessive tiredness (parents included) there may be a need to reevaluate the need for so many extracurricular activities.

Technology free times

Technology is fast becoming a focus of conversation for multiple reasons. There are many pros and cons relating to technology and it is up to parents to decide if and how much technology is allowed in their homes. Nevertheless, one thorn technology can create is that when people are using devices or have technology playing in the background the opportunity to connect, be present and show genuine interest in each other's lives is diminished. To counteract this potential problem, parents can establish technology-free times, whereby everyone, adults included, bar the use of technology for a set time period. When technology is removed from the equation family members can play with each other, talk and connect, thus allowing some fun and good times to roll forth.

Special time

As previously mentioned, busy schedules can leave parents feeling as though there is no time to connect with children. Compounding this problem is that busy schedules leave time for routine tasks only such as dinner, baths/showers and bedtimes. It is not uncommon for parents to have to revert to bad cop mode to make these routine times happen. This can result in the positive to negative ratio (parents saying positive to negative things to their children) becoming disproportionate with the bad cop taking charge.

Swinging this ratio back into balance can happen with relative ease when parents engage children in special time. Special time is defined by the parent spending one-on-one time with children. During these times the parent allows the child to choose the activity they are going to do, for example, play a board game, go for a bike ride (assuming supervision of other children can be maintained) etc. Parents, naturally, can put a caveat on how much (if anything) can be spent and how far (if anywhere) the child and parent can go.

Special time does not necessarily need to have a set time frame, but anything from ten to fifteen minutes can suffice. For super busy parents five minutes is better than nothing. Providing the parent's focus in one hundred percent on the child, special time will inevitably have a positive effect.

The one to five ratio

As mentioned above, there is something known as the positive to negative ratio. Put simply, to sustain healthy relationships human beings need a balance of five positive interactions to every negative interaction. Or, in other words, if someone hears a negative comment, five positive comments are needed to negate the impact the negative comment had. Given the highlighted point above, routine times like mealtimes, bedtimes, bath times etc. can force the parent to adopt the bad cop role. Bad cops usually grumble and say negative things such as, "you're not listening", "I'm getting cross", "if you do not get into that shower in the next five minutes then there will be no T.V. tomorrow" etc. These types of comments undoubtedly leave parents feeling like all they do is grumble at their children, driving home the point that parents often feel like they do nothing but nag and badger children. To rebalance this ratio parents can focus and comment on all of the little things that children do that are not negative. For example, "thanks for waiting for me to stop talking", "you're playing really nicely at the moment – congratulations", "thanks for that cuddle". Positive comments do not need to be focused around the big things children say or do or successes they have. By targeting smaller, less obvious behaviours, even when children are doing their best to bring out the bad cop, the good cop is able to make more regular appearances.

Reconnecting with nature and the great outdoors

Children need to move about. Unfortunately for them the world has changed in significant ways, meaning they do not always get out like children of yesteryear did. Backyards are getting smaller and in some cases do not exist at all. Despite this fact children still need to move and have opportunities to get outside and expend pent up energy.

When and if possible, finding opportunities to leave the world of walls behind and trading it for sticks, leaves and trees can do wonders for children. When children have the opportunity to climb, run and play unhindered they will reconnect to their innate desire to play and remember what true childhood happiness is. Watching children play and explore is a wondrous experience, one that can allow the parent to play the role of the good cop without having to think about it.

A summary of how to become the good cop

Parents frequently feel like they are playing the role of the bad cop more than the good one as a result of having to guide children to behave in desirable ways. Given that parents' lives have changed so much there is less free time than ever before. Time limitations mean that parents are trying to squeeze so much into children's and their day that the only real time they get to spend with their child/children is when they are trying to wrap the day up and get the children off to bed. Naturally these routine times can create conflict and force the bad cop to come out to play.

To counterbalance the bad cop role with the good cop one simple life hacks can be created to ensure parents can be the fun, good guy just as often. These life hacks include replacing activities that parents enjoy with ones children prefer. This is particularly important if the goal the parent is trying to achieve is to bolster the child-parent relationship. Evaluating the impact of extracurricular activities can determine if children are participating in too many activities and/or if the activities are impacting a child's or parent's moods due to excessive tiredness. Technology can affect the child-parent relationship and detract from the amount of quality time children and adults spend together. Allowing for a portion of the day to go technology free creates time in the day where family members can reconnect without distraction. Introducing special time creates opportunities for adults and children to connect. While ten to fifteen minutes is desirable, five minutes (for parents who are time-poor) is better than nothing and will be appreciated by the child. Another way to balance the bad cop/good cop act is to focus on the ratio of negative to positive interactions. Looking for the small positive things children do and commenting on them can help adults achieve this task. The final point in this article considered the idea of getting children outdoors, allowing them to reconnect with nature and their inner desire to play, climb, run and jump.

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