

Ten Ways to Empower Your Child



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I believe that in our work with children (and with other adults?), we can all benefit from agreement on a few basic premises.

- All of us humans do the best we can all of the time. In hindsight, however, our best at some moments may seem to us better than our best at others.
- Every child wants to succeed. If a child doesn't succeed, some obstacle stands in the way, and grownups have the responsibility for finding it and eliminating it.
- Socially undesirable acts are committed when people believe they have no other choice. It is therefore very important for all of us to feel we have a number of options.
- All of the actions of any one person are behavior of which anyone is potentially capable under some set of circumstances and are therefore part of the human condition.

The old-fashioned way to increase a child's sense of having power was to state baldly, "You can either carry out the trash right now and then watch television or forgo television tonight. Which do you choose?" But let's be real: this is really an ultimatum rather than a choice.

Taking a different approach, you as a parent can invite your child to identify the largest possible number of options and select the one that is right for him. In other words, you can show your child how to brainstorm. Ask, "How many ways are there of solving this problem?" Encourage your child to think big. You can make the process into a game. You will be teaching a valuable life skill.

When I help kids pick tactics to achieve an identified goal, as I frequently do, I remind them that we don't always have all of the information we need to make a

perfect choice. As a result we must try just to make the best decision we can, and one that fits with our values, given the information available to us. If we do so, then looking back, months or years from now, we will know that we did the best we could today—which is all that any of us can ever expect from ourselves.

I also advise kids to make the smallest decision possible, given the issue at hand (thereby keeping as many options open as possible), and to trust their instincts about timing. We don't navigate most of life's major turning points until we are ready.

I believe that these guiding principles lay the foundation for lifelong tolerance and acceptance of ourselves, a necessary prerequisite for respectful treatment of others. As a parent, you can also increase your child's confidence, resilience, and sense of self in some more specific ways.

1. Let your responses to your child build self-awareness. Ask, "How did you feel when that happened?" and "What would make you feel better right now?"
2. Ask your child's opinion—about purchases, plans, family crises, local or national news, and decisions that entail values and priorities—and express appreciation of it.
3. Accept differences of opinion without put-downs ("You're not old enough to know about such things!"), and avoid power struggles. Use your sense of humor, and don't sweat the small stuff.
4. Invite your child to teach you something. Respect his expertise.
5. Welcome the opportunity to apologize, and give credit where credit is due. "You were right and I was wrong." Show your child that the act of apologizing needn't feel like giving blood.
6. If you, the parent, or another child owes an apology because someone's feelings got hurt, make sure the victim finds the apology sincere. Also be sure that the offender follows up with the question, "How can I make it up to you?" and heeds the answer.
7. When your child talks, listen and show that you are getting the message. Don't offer to fix a problem unless you are asked for a solution. Over time, your child will feel safe talking to you about anything. To learn everything you will ever need to know about the skill of listening, read *Between Parent and Child: The Bestselling Classic That Revolutionized Parent-Child Communication*, by Haim G. Ginott, Alice Ginott, and H. Wallace Goddard (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003).
8. Accept and label feelings without compromising your expectations. "You look angry right now, and we can talk about that, but you still need to pick up your room."
9. Validate and normalize your child's feelings so that she does not see herself as different from other people. "Of course you felt embarrassed! I think anybody would in that situation!"

10. Respect your child's boundaries. (How can we expect children to respect ours if we don't respect theirs?) Teach your child how and when to say, "I'd rather not have this conversation right now," "I'll have to get back to you about that," and "We need to talk about this, but it will have to be later, because I'm too upset at the moment." Remember to ask, "Would you like a hug?" "Is it okay if I come into your room?" "I'd like to read what you wrote in your journal. Would you allow me to see it?"

Look for every opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your child. When you do, you will be increasing her capacity for relationships with other people throughout her life.

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