

The Best Things I've Learned About Raising Children

I don't consider myself a parenting expert, but I have helped raise six kids (along with their mothers), and being a father has been one of the most rewarding things in my life.

And while I'm not a perfect father, I think I'm pretty good at it. Mostly because I absolutely love it.

Eva and I also have some slightly non-conventional parenting ideas that might be useful to parents who are always looking for new ways of thinking about things.

So I'm going to share the best things I've learned about raising children, not because my way is the best, but because it's always helpful to have a discussion about parenting.

A really important note: Much of the work of parenting, if not most, was done by my kids' moms (my wife Eva and my first two kids' mom). I can only take a little credit.

Here are some of the best things I've learned:

1. **Your main job is just to love them.** We have to take care of their basic needs, of course, but parents add all kinds of extra things on top of that, and make the job really hard. Parenting is often not that complicated — OK, taking care of basic needs is a lot of work, but the basic job of parenting is to love your kids. You don't need to shape them, to pressure them to be better, to make them do all kinds of activities to become the perfect kid. They're pretty damn perfect already. Just love them as they are, and make sure they can feel that love.
2. **Don't hover — let them fall sometimes.** Parents these days tend to be overprotective, to be constantly trying to make sure every need is met, and to be afraid of the smallest fall. Nah. Let them live. Let them have some independence. Let them go out and play without you. Let them fall down and scrape their knee. Let them fail at things. This is how they grow. Imagine if you sheltered kids from failure and pain and struggle their whole lives ... they'd be totally unprepared for the adult world! I'm not saying you should never protect your kid, but the less you can do that, without them dying, the better. Then help them cope with the failure or pain on their own, with you helping them to understand how they can do that. Be there for them, but only to the extent that you're helping them learn to do it on their own.
3. **Harsh disciplinarian methods are more hurtful than helpful.** When I first started parenting, I would yell and spank my kids and punish them for all their wrongdoings. It was totally hurtful, and made them afraid of me. Yes, they would do everything I told them to do, but only because they were scared to do otherwise. And often they'd just hide the things they did, so I wouldn't know. I've learned to mellow out over the years,

to control my temper and be more compassionate. I'm not perfect, as I said, but now I see everything as an opportunity to educate them, an opportunity for them to grow, and a chance for me to just love them. If your parents were disciplinarian, that doesn't make it the way you need to do things.

4. **Reading to them regularly is one of the best things I've ever done.** I read to my kids most days. My wife and I have done that with all the kids, and it's a wonderful way to spend time with them, to foster a love for reading that will help them for the rest of their lives, and to explore imaginative new worlds together. My kids have found a love for reading on their own that came from cuddling with me and reading Dr. Seuss and Harry Potter (a series I've read 4 times over with different kids) and Narnia and Arabian Nights and Don Quixote.
5. **Let them direct their own learning.** Four of my kids are unschooled, but all of them have done learning projects on their own, and I encourage them to learn about whatever they're interested in. Many kids are so used to top-down learning (where they're told what and when and how to learn) that they don't know how to direct themselves. They'll have to learn as adults. But instead, we can encourage them to learn what they're interested in, help them with learning projects until they can do it on their own, and have them learn like adults do.
6. **But give them fun challenges and encourage them to try new things.** Self-directed learning is an incredible method, but sometimes they need inspiration. I like to encourage them to look things up, to dive deep into a topic that interests them, to learn about something they don't know yet will interest them. I try to talk about these things in positive ways, that show how interesting I find them, and I've found that sometimes, that interest and curiosity are contagious. Other times, I challenge them — let's do a drawing challenge, a pushup challenge ... let's see if we can travel a month with only a backpack each, or memorize the capitals of all the states, or as many digits of pi as we can. Let's try to program a simple game. Kids (and adults) respond well to fun challenges.
7. **Teach them to do things on their own, early.** As soon as we could, we taught our kids to do things on their own. Tie their own shoes, brush their teeth, shower and dress themselves, make their own breakfast and lunch, wash and dry the dishes, clean the house, do their own laundry. For one thing, it made our job as parents easier, if they were helping plan meals, do the grocery shopping, and cook dinners once a week. Soon we didn't have to do very much for them. But just as importantly, we were teaching them self-sufficiency — they don't expect things to be done for them, and they learn that they can do anything for themselves that they want taken care of.
8. **Let them take charge of things or participate in work when you can.** Along the same lines, we try to get them to take charge of things ... for example, planning a trip. They do research, look for Airbnb apartments, plan train routes, book flights. When they get to adulthood, they already know how to do these things. They also know how to take responsibility.

9. **Try a democratic process of decision-making.** When we decide where to eat out, or what we should do this weekend, we have a discussion, each contribute ideas, and take a vote. This teaches them to take part in making decisions, instead of having their lives decided for them. But it also teaches them to respect the opinions of others, and that what they want is not the only thing that matters. We do similar things when planning for a trip, deciding whether we should move to a new city, and so on.
10. **Practice mindfulness with them.** I have meditated with all my kids. Not regularly, but enough that they know what it's all about. When my daughter comes to me upset about something, we practice mindfulness of how the emotion feels in her body. Being with the emotion. When my other daughter is feeling anxiety, we talk about how to practice with that as well. They've also seen me meditating in the morning, so mindfulness practice becomes a normal thing for them.
11. **The main way you teach them is by your example.** Speaking of watching me meditate ... this is the main way that I teach them anything. By my example. By how I am in the world. If I want to teach them not to fight, I have to be peaceful. If I want to teach them to be good people, I have to be compassionate, considerate, loving. If I want to teach them to not be on their devices, I have to do the same. If I want them to be active, to eat healthily, to read, to meditate ... then it starts with me doing it. And talking to them about what I'm doing and why and what I'm learning and how I'm doing it. They learn almost everything from what people around them do.
12. **Don't pretend like you know everything.** That said, while I try to do my best in life, I have to humble myself and admit that I don't know everything. In fact, I barely know anything. I can't always think I'm right, nor can I pretend to have all the answers, even if I'm the dad. Maybe my kids know somethings I don't. Maybe we can learn together ... but it starts with me saying, "I'm not sure, let's find out!" This mindset of not-knowing is where learning starts, the space that we can explore together, the space where we become open to each other. Many parents (and people in general) come at you with the stance that they know exactly what they're doing, know the answers. This leaves no room for anything else. It's fundamentalism.
13. **Admit when you're wrong. Apologize. Make it right.** Along those lines, when I think I'm right, and insist on it ... that's often when I'm wrong. And I've been humbled like this so many times. What I've learned is ... instead of continuing to pretend like I'm right, it's so much better to admit that I'm wrong. To humble myself. Actually apologize if I've done anything to hurt them. And do what it takes to make it right.
14. **Let them earn and pay for things early. And teach them about debt.** In our house, we don't have an allowance. We buy them the basics of what they need, but if they want anything beyond that, they have to pay for it themselves. And earn the money through things beyond their basic chores. They might do things for us, or work for my business, or make things or do services for others to earn money. This also teaches them to save for goals. I also talk to them about the dangers of getting into debt, the high cost of credit card debt, and some simple financial truths that I've

learned.

15. **Don't shield them from sex and drugs and technology.** Some parents don't want their children to hear anything about sex or drugs, and shield them from that for as long as possible. This just makes sex (for example) a taboo subject, and gives the kids an unhealthy idea of how bad it is. I've found it much better to speak frankly about it, and if I were going to do it all over again, I'd start that frank talk much earlier. Sex isn't something that should be made dirty or forbidden. It's a natural thing that all adults do. Kids should get that sense from adults, and be helped through that confusing world by their parents rather than having to figure it out through what they hear from friends or happen upon online. I think the same is true of drugs. Another thing that some parents shield their kids from is technology — no devices ever! But that means that kids don't learn a healthy way to deal with technology. It's better to just help them learn to deal with all this stuff, rather than not trust them.
16. **It's OK to hang out without them, and let them have separate time from you.** I love hanging out with my kids. But that doesn't mean it's healthy for them to be with me every second of the day. Sometimes, they can go play by themselves, while my wife and I have alone time. Sometimes, they can have an evening at home while we go on a date (when they're old enough). Other times, we can drop them with a relative and go on a trip by ourselves, or with friends. I think alone time, and time away from parents, is a healthy thing for kids. Give them space. Let them learn to deal with being on their own (again, when appropriate). Give yourself space to replenish yourself, or find romance with your partner, without them.
17. **Parenting ain't over when they reach adulthood.** I used to joke, "If I get my kids to 18 years old alive, I've succeeded as a parent!" Of course, that's absolute bunk. I've learned that parenting is far from over once they reach adulthood. Four of our kids are adults now, and it's a whole new challenging phase of parenting for us. We're trying to teach them how to do adult things, how to be financially self-sufficient, how to get the dream jobs they want, how to deal with relationship stuff, and much more. I love it, but it's not like I can just retire now.
18. **In the end, they will be the person they are. You don't get to decide who that is.** Each kid is already a fully formed person when they're young. They continue to grow every year, of course, but their personalities when they're young continue to be mostly the same as they grow older. We don't shape these kids, they are already themselves. They will choose their own paths, decide what life they want, and grow in the direction they choose. I don't have control over any of that. In the end, that's what we parents need to accept — we don't really control our kids. We just try to guide them when we can. And love them for who they are.

I'm still learning. I still don't know what the hell I'm doing. And yet, I hope some of what I've learned so far will help a few of you.

I love being a dad. It's an incredible privilege, and one of the deepest joys in my life. Thank you kids. And moms.