

Can you be the perfect parent?

All parents want their children to be happy and healthy and to grow up to become well-adjusted, financially stable and productive adults. Whew! What a task. It's enough to overwhelm even the most confident parent. How can you be a perfect parent? Very simply – you can't. No one can be a perfect parent, and there's no one "right" way to rear children. But you can be a good parent.

Good parents don't just happen; they work hard at that role. Being a parent is a tremendous responsibility, but it's also one of the most rewarding experiences a person can have. According to Dr. Kevin Ryan of Boston University, rearing "good" children – children of character – demands time and attention. And it's not always an easy role in today's complicated life.

To be a successful parent, Ryan says, parenting must be a priority in your life. "This is hard to do in a world with so many competing demands. Good parents consciously plan and devote time to parenting," he says. He suggests reviewing the amount of time you spend with your children and weaving your lives together.

Children are like sponges – they learn from everything they see, hear and do. And they learn from every person they meet – from grandparents, siblings and friends to teachers and doctors. But most importantly, they learn from their parents.

Because children are sponges, make sure what they're absorbing from you is what

you want them to absorb. "You can't avoid being an example to your children, whether good or bad," Ryan says. Being a good example, then, is probably your most important job.

But your children are absorbing from other people and circumstances. Parents have to be aware of

what influences could be impacting their children. Even babies and toddlers will mimic undesirable behavior they encounter.

Older children are influenced by books, songs, TV, the Internet and movies that might deliver an unfavorable message. If you don't know what messages your children are encountering, you cannot know what impact those messages are making on their minds.

One very important way for parents to know what is influencing their children is to listen to them. It's easy to tune out what might seem like idle chatter from a child, but not only is their

talk important to them, it's a review of what they're thinking and experiencing. Just listening may be the most important strategy a parent can use for successful child-rearing.

Here are some tools from the American Academy of Family Physicians to ensure that your children grow up to be healthy and happy.

◆ Show your love. Every day, tell your children: "I love you. You're special to me." Give lots of hugs and kisses.

◆ Make your children feel safe. Comfort them when they're scared. Show them you've taken steps to protect them.



◆ Provide order in their lives. Keep a regular schedule of meals, naps and bedtimes. If you have to change the schedule, tell them about the changes ahead of time.

◆ Praise your children. When your children learn something new or behave well, tell them you're proud of them.

◆ Criticize the behavior, not the child. When your child makes a mistake, don't say, "You were bad." Instead, explain what the child did wrong. For example, say: "Running into the street without looking isn't safe." Then tell the child what to do instead: "First, look both ways for cars."

◆ Be consistent. Your rules don't have to be the same ones other parents have, but they do need to be clear and consistent. Consistent means the rules are the same all the time. If two parents are rearing a child, both need to use the same rules. Babysitters and relatives also must know – and follow – your family rules.

◆ Spend time with your children. Do things together, like reading, walking, playing and cleaning house. What children want most is your attention. Bad behavior is usually their way of getting your attention.

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◆ Provide memories. Adults of all ages can tell you what experiences made the most impact on them as children and as adults.

It's easy to think that money is the key and that you don't have enough money to provide the experiences that other parents might be giving their children. But memorable experiences don't have a price tag. Children don't have to have elaborate parties with ponies or unlimited toys. What your children might remember most 20 years from now could be that you read to or with them every night, that you provided one-on-one time with each child, that the family enjoyed activities together.

◆ Take time for yourself. If you're not taking care of yourself, you cannot take care of your children. Many parents of babies complain of too little sleep, but when interrupted sleep lasts indefinitely, parents can become both physically and emotionally exhausted. Parents also can become burned out when they never have "me time" or adult time.

◆ Take advantage of community programs designed to help parents become the best parents they can be.