

5 Mistakes Parents Make

5 Mistakes Parents Make

And Other Modern Parenting
Challenges

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 juggernaut

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*To my parents, Alka and Anil Dhal –
my reason for Being, Belonging and Becoming . . .*

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Author's Note

The word 'parenting' comes from the Latin verb '*parere*', which means to bring forth. As parents, we continuously strive to bring forth positive experiences into our child's life so that s/he may thrive and become successful in all arenas of life. In this quest for success, parents often develop the 'Fear of Messing Up' (FOMU) and start seeking reassurance through comparisons with other parents and children. These comparisons become an albatross around the necks of both parents and children over time and foster a feeling of 'not being good enough'. Viewing parenting through the monochromatic lens of 'good' or 'bad' is restrictive and rigid as there is no perfect parent or child or 'perfect way to parent a child'. On the contrary, parenting is the confluence of the unique sets of abilities and experiences that parents and children continually bring forth over the years. The success of parenting lies in accepting that mistakes are a part of the

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process and viewing them as a springboard for growth.

With globalization pervading every aspect of our lives, parenting has also become a melting pot of a variety of practices borrowed from across cultures. The modern Indian parent seeks to imbibe best practices from across the globe and tailor them to his/her needs and circumstances. A balanced approach to parenting involves keeping the traditional cultural practices and value systems as the foundation, and building on it with new blocks of knowledge derived from parenting practices from different cultures. These blocks can be replaced and readjusted as the toddler grows into a young child, who in turn blossoms into an adolescent and then into a young adult.

Parents today are constantly multitasking on many fronts and seek crisp and concise pointers for their concerns. This book has been put together with the aim to provide simple and practical tips that can be easily understood and implemented. It draws from my experiences as a clinical psychologist and a mother of two. The parenting strategies suggested in this book help to improve the ABC central to the holistic and healthy development of a child. 'A' refers to helping parents and the child learn how to manage their 'Affect' or emotions effectively. 'B' refers to promoting productive 'Behaviour' and 'C' refers to fostering

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positive 'Cognitions' or thoughts. These three aspects are interlinked and influence one another. For instance, teaching an adolescent to counter negative thoughts can aid him/her in curbing anxiety and becoming more focused on the tasks at hand.

In addition to imparting useful parenting strategies, the book also focuses on addressing the importance of mental health for both parents and children. With stress being an integral part of our lives, it is vital that we prioritize our mental health. Seeking professional help should be seen as a sign of insight and strength, rather than as an indication that there is something wrong with us. Just like one needs a trainer to achieve fitness goals, or a tutor at times to support a child academically, a therapist can teach you ways in which you can help yourself and your child better. Children are vicarious learners and observe the ways in which parents react and respond to others and situations. If you as a parent are aware of your thoughts, feelings and actions, and are committed to learn ways to manage each of them effectively, your child will follow suit. I wish this book will give the reader hope that there is light throughout the parenting tunnel.

Dr Anubha Majithia

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5 Mistakes Parents Make

Regular jobs are easy. They come with a contract which defines the terms and conditions. There are parameters for promotions, perks and bonuses. If at any point you feel it's not your cup of tea, you can always quit and find another. Parenting, on the other hand, is a job like no other. The terms and conditions are subject to change. Appraisals are a daily process and the bosses (the children and society) are difficult to please. Quitting is usually not an option and there is no retirement age. So despite the ante being so high, why do so many take up this job with such fervour?

Wordsworth was on to something when he penned the immortal phrase 'child is the father of man'. Children are a true reflection of their parents and, most often, the parenting experience. As parents, caught up in the

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web of time, desires and obligations, we find ourselves trapped in the maze of challenges posed to us by our children. Using the age-old method of trial and error, we keep banging against the walls of the maze, only to wonder ‘where did we go wrong?’ or ‘why me?’

I recently attended a school admissions orientation at my daughter’s preschool in Noida. The admissions here are based on a blend of background (family income check, degrees check), responsiveness of the child (move over Einstein, my two-year-old can parrot a nursery rhyme, ace logical reasoning and take only one sweet offered by the teacher) and parenting strategy (all those lies about how I don’t show my child the screen). So here I was, a second-time parent in the admissions game. I have experienced it all. I represent the minority in the sea of anxious parents, eagerly tuned into the pearls of wisdom being shared by the principal. The thing that amuses me most in the principal’s lecture and gets the maximum inter-parent nudging are the questions posed by the school to parents. They range from ‘what qualities would you want to inculcate in your child?’ to ‘what is your parenting mantra?’. While enjoying the admissions circus, I wonder to myself, if only we would reflect on these questions from an introspective lens rather than a materialistic one, we would ace the parenting maze with ease.

Realizing that introspection may be a utopian concept in the age of ‘click it to get it’, I wonder if we can ace the maze without banging against the walls or giving up. I have my aha moment as I help my six-year-old-son solve a maze. He has a habit of starting the maze and then getting frustrated each time he hits a dead end, to the point of giving up. So I tell him about the secret to cracking any maze – start from the finish line and trace your finger back to the start. The smile on his face as he drags his pencil across the finish line is priceless. If we apply the same logic to the parenting maze, the finish line at any stage is simply a happy child who is able to adapt well to people and circumstances. The walls or dead ends in the maze are akin to the challenges that parents face and the mistakes they make.

1. One-upmanship

This is the first classic mistake parents make. It begins as early as conception. While parents-to-be start competing with each other about the gynaecologist they are visiting and bragging about normal deliveries, young parents show off the school their child is attending and then his/her academic and co-curricular achievements. Ageing parents find pride in boasting about the job and position their child has achieved. Not to be underestimated, one-

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upmanship is like a plague and afflicts children from a young age. They too start comparing things like cars and holidays with their peers. Just like termites, one-upmanship eats away at the self-esteem and self-worth of children, leaving them feeling stressed. Rather than keeping up with the Joneses, it is important to first realize your strengths so that you don't confuse self-worth with materialism. Children often vicariously model themselves on their parents, and hence, it is important for parents to derive a sense of self-esteem from abilities rather than liabilities. Moreover, if a parent is able to stand apart from the crowd and embrace the life s/he leads with ease, the child will also develop the confidence to take decisions which play on her/his strengths instead of being based on popular opinion.

2. The price of happiness

This is closely associated with one-upmanship. It is the tendency of parents to please the child with material objects. Parents start buying all sorts of experiences for their children – theme birthday parties, holidays and hobby classes. They seldom realize that the message they send out to the children from an early age is 'happiness can be bought at a price' rather than 'the best things in

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life are free'. The child from a young age is brought up like a 'little emperor', who summons the parent genie, who in turn responds with 'your whims are my command'. Since the kids have never heard the word 'no', they often feel rejected and have trouble forming healthy relationships.

This leads to children facing adjustment problems right from the time they enter playschool or formal school to later in life. They derive their sense of self from material objects rather than their abilities, which leaves them feeling adrift each time they aren't able to buy their way through life.

3. Scheduling

We love to ape the West in all aspects, so the third mistake stems from a concept that is celebrated in the West. Scheduling or keeping the child busy all the time is the new fad. Parents start with scheduling the infant's or toddler's feeding and nap times, and then get addicted to the 'scheduling drug' for life. Children as young as twelve to eighteen months are put into structured programmes at playschools, and then into all sorts of hobby classes. The child returns home exhausted and sleeps early, which is a big win for the parent. There are classes for everything from storytelling to learning how to work the hula hoop.

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For some parents, who have long working hours, it is a healthier alternative than keeping the child with a helper. However, for others, it's an excuse for claiming 'me time' or showing off the number of classes the child attends and how talented s/he is to friends and peers (read one-upmanship yet again!).

Whatever the reason, overstimulation and overscheduling are not healthy practices. The definition of intelligence has also been revolutionized and is all about adapting and being flexible (not rigid). Overscheduled children find it difficult to adjust to new situations and get stressed out easily. Too many activities overstimulate the child and shut off the ability to think divergently or creatively. It also feeds into the 'tiger parent' or 'helicopter parent' syndrome, where the parent seeks to control every minute of the child's life, stifling their ability to be independent. While schedules may help in disciplining a child, moderation, flexibility and syncing activities with the child's interests are vital in helping him/her develop into a confident, creative and resilient adult. The child's day needs to have intervals for 'free play' to help her/him become more creative in problem-solving and keeping anxiety at bay.

4. **Quality time**

Closely linked to the concept of scheduling and making every moment count is the fourth mistake of spending quality time. Millennial parents love this term. It pops up in conversations, parenting advice and admission interviews. Parents love to highlight that quality trumps quantity in every aspect of life, including the time they spend with their child. Quality time translates to the time you give your full attention to the child and are engaged in a goal-directed activity. It is the equivalent of comfort food for the guilty parent who doesn't have 'quantity time'.

Time is all that children need. They often find it comforting to just have a parent around them and not necessarily engage with them. Instead of quality time, it is important to have 'silly time' – when you aren't involved in any goal-directed or cerebral activity with the child. Parents will be amazed by how children communicate the most interesting things and also their anxieties while just doodling and talking about random things. Parents often choose activities for their children based on societal opinions. Rarely do they pay attention to what the child may like or have an aptitude for. Silly time

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allows the parent to enter the child's world and learn a lot about him/her. It can provide vital cues about how to communicate with a child in a way that he/she will listen and be more open to. It also sets a foundation for later relationships in a child's life and allows him/her to form open communication channels with the parent, regardless of the age s/he is at.

5. **Negative communication**

Speaking of communication, the fifth mistake is all about negative communication. As young parents, the first important mode of communication is emotion. When parents respond positively, it propels a child to keep repeating a particular behaviour. Instead of harnessing the power of positive communication, parents easily fall into the trap of negative communication. They find themselves saying 'no' more than 'that's great'. They also point out the negatives more than the positives on a daily basis. I often conduct a small experiment when parents bring children and adolescents with behavioural problems for a therapy session. After listening to their vivid description of everything wrong with their child, I ask them about the things

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they feel the child does well. The look on their faces is priceless. As they struggle to think and come up with positives, they learn an important lesson – learn to appreciate before you criticize. Children mostly get attention from parents when they are engaged in negative behaviour as positive behaviour is taken for granted. This encourages kids to engage in negative patterns unconsciously. By shifting the focal point from negative to positive, parents can motivate children to engage in more positive behaviour.

Positive communication as a strategy is not limited to parenting and works wonders with all kinds of relationships – personal or professional.

As we focus on the mistakes we make as parents, it is important to understand that patterns don't break in a day. For any changes that we envisage in our lives and that of our children, we need to be consistent. Another aspect to be mindful of is to forgive yourself each time you make a mistake and own it. More importantly, forgive your child and inculcate patience. Harboring negativity based on one thing through the day is the worst thing you can do to yourself as a parent and to your child, who often doesn't understand why the punishment has extended throughout the day. No matter

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how many times you hit roadblocks or dead ends, you always have an option to take a step back, reflect and chart out another path. If you don't give up on yourself, your child won't give up on you!