

Building Rugged Families that Last

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'Grit' is the new buzz word to define that quality that gives people the edge in life – that strength and courage to push through tough times, to bounce back from adversity and to thrive. We can instill resilience into our children, more than that we can build grit into our whole family dynamics. In this article we look at 10 things parents can do to make it happen.

1. Care about atmosphere

The atmosphere is how your home 'feels'. I grew up as the youngest member of a large family in a shambolic house on a West Auckland orchard. The house was always full of family and friends and orchard workers. Cups of tea and parties were a priority. Animals ran through the place (just cats and dogs, not cattle – though I did once find a sheep on our sofa but that was unusual even at our place.) The place was never tidy – it probably wasn't even hygienic – but I tell you: the atmosphere in that home was superb! It felt good. My parents were lovely but they were far from perfect; I've concluded that if the atmosphere in the home is right then it is amazing what else you can get wrong! If your kids feel loved and they enjoy being in your home, then you are probably 80% of the way there as a parent.

Beware of what stinks up the place: busyness, moods, tension between parents, chaos (stressful chaos, not the benign bedlam I was raised in), harshness, grudges and a spirit of 'try harder!'.

So have a sniff – what's the atmosphere like at your place? Do you need to warm it up with some cuddles and smiles? Does the temperature need to be brought down with some reconciliation or quiet activities. If it's a bit stinky, sweeten it up with fun: make some hot chocolates or turn the lights down and the music up and have a disco in the lounge. And if it's a bit rural, check there isn't a sheep on your sofa.

2. Set rules

My free-spirited inner-hippy is a little offended by the fact that rules work so well. Anarchy might be more fun (and I should know) but with it comes opportunities for genuine danger. In an ordered home with rules, not only are they safer, they feel safer as well. Children with looser rules around them feel less cared for. Good rules protect kids from each other, too. Rules about how to treat each other provide useful buffers when brotherly (and sisterly) love runs thin.

Rules can be difficult to instil and tedious to enforce, but see them as temporary scaffolding while something wonderful is being erected: your child's character. The rules provide the template for his or her morals: eventually they won't want hurt others, damage things or neglect their duties, the rules have become not just habits but guiding inner principles. But this only happens when our rules are reasonable, well understood and enforced fairly; niggling nit-picking rules-for-the-sake-of-rules might just have the exact opposite effect.

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3. Communicate

David Attenborough wrote a charming piece about eyebrows claiming that, first and foremost, they are communication devices. We are signalling to each other constantly with eyebrow semaphore, messages flickering between us without our conscious selves even being aware of it. This is one more reason to believe communication is much more than words! Every parenting book I have ever seen emphasizes the need to communicate with kids but most then just explain it terms of talking. Talk, yes, but realise that you are sending messages to your kids in a thousand ways:

- *The way your eyes light up when you see them, or the way they flicker back to the TV while they are talking.*
- *The slight pause to think before you answer them, or the way you talk over them.*
- *Your hand resting on theirs, or the way you pull away.*
- *Your presence on the rugby sideline, or your absence... it's all communication.*

Here's a thought: if your kids are around, you are communicating to them anyway, even if you are silent and withdrawn, so you may as well turn it in to a positive communication time. Get into the habit of muting the TV during ads and talking about what you've been watching. Banish toys and gadgets from the mealtime and chat. Have a rule about no earphones when other people are around. Sit closer to them on the sofa. Touse their hair, catch their eye, smile: it's all communication. Post-It notes, texting and chalk-boards are great for busy families, or to reopen communication channels that have got clogged with emotion and hormones. The most important communication tool of all is... (dramatic pause) ... listening.

One of the phrases I have probably used in every parenting talk I have ever given is "Listening is so much like being loved most people can't tell the difference". Often, the most valuable, intelligent thing a parent can say to a child is just "Hmmm" with a slightly-constipated, concerned look on your face. It is really saying, "I hear you and I care". Of course we are bursting with advice, but unless they feel heard and cared for, they wouldn't hear what you are saying anyway.

Final communication tip: don't over-pluck your eyebrows.

4. Discipline

Discipline is deliberately number four on this list of dos, because if you have got the first three right (atmosphere, rules and communication) then you actually already have discipline.

There are lots of discipline techniques – most are variations of time-out and consequences – and you would be very lucky if just one technique suited all your children on every occasion right through their childhood. More important than the specific techniques are the underlying principles. Whatever you do, realise that discipline has nothing to do with shouting, whacking and making kids feel bad. My idea of discipline is something that is not focussed back on their misdemeanours but rather looks forwards into the future, with the goal that kids will be able to make better decisions next time. Discipline is all about training, so think of your role as being a coach, not a policeman. Discipline is not something you do to your child because you are angry but something you do for your child because you love them. In fact, if you try to do discipline while you are angry it is probably not discipline at all – it is revenge! They made you feel upset and so you are going to make them feel upset.

Whatever techniques you decide to utilise just make sure you do it fairly and consistently. Discipline is never the favourite part of the job for any parent but it is ultimately so important. In the short term, your home will be more peaceful and orderly and, in the long run, your external discipline will compost down into good internal controls. Good discipline creates self-controlled adults who can think for themselves.

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5. Let kids know you love them

I know you love your kids. You wouldn't be reading this if you didn't. That makes this tip easy – just follow your love-compass. There will be lots of times in your parenting journey when you won't be able to recall what some article said or what some expert suggested; in those times tune into your instincts and do the loving thing. 95% of the time (a totally made-up statistic) you will be doing the absolutely best thing; the remaining 5% of the time, if you were really motivated by love, you won't be too far wrong.

So, I don't doubt your love, but wouldn't it be a pity if your kids didn't. Here are some tips to make sure they feel loved.

1. Spend lots of time with them- Honestly, I didn't write that just to make you feel bad, but if you are typical twenty-first century parent, you are very, very busy. If this is a very old magazine and you are a typical twenty-second century parent, I hope you are managing this aspect of family life better than we are in our era, because our busy-ness is probably the single biggest enemy to our families. A well worn but still true phrase is, "Love for children is spelt T – I – M – E." If you can't salvage more time, then at least make intelligent and creative use of the time you do have with them.
1. Watch your tone- Does your love for your children soften your vocal chords and lift the corners of your mouth? Allow it to.
1. There are many ways to show love, but don't forget to actually just say it.
2. We get shy, even in our own homes, and sometimes things have been soured up with tensions and fights, but it is never a dumb thing to say "I love you" (to your kids, anyway. Saying it to colleagues at work may at times verge on a being a dumb thing).

6. Adjust to your kids

Make friends with your kids over and over again. You knew her so well when she was seven, but now she is a big nine-year-old... take time to get to know her all over again. You know your 'at-home' son, but what is he like at school with his mates? Better volunteer to help on the class trip – you may discover he is a completely different boy in that different context. The biggest changes happen when the hormones kick in at puberty – don't let them become strangers!

Your rules need to change as well as they grow. They become more mature and can handle risks and situations increasingly well. They love it when you notice their increasing maturity and respond to it by loosening restrictions, giving them more liberty and more choices. There is no fixed timetable for this, as kids of the same age can vary in their maturity incredibly.

Two things will astound you about your children: one is when you see aspects of your own personality mirrored back to you. The other astounding thing will be how different they are from you and (if you have more than one child) how different they are from each other. How can such different children spring from the same loins? ('Springing from loins' might be antique language but it conjures up an intriguing mental image). Handling that difference well is part of the art of parenting. There are all sorts of ways to test and describe personalities but the most important thing is just to realise there are very few 'one-size-fits-all' parenting techniques and that you do need to rejig your rules and parenting techniques to suit each child. They will have different fears and motivations, interests and strengths. Don't be a 'one trick pony', invariably using the same parenting technique and expecting similar results with very different children.

With our more shy and serious kids, give them space, time and sensitivity. Warn them ahead of time of changes and events, let them think things out and talk it over. With your dominant, powerful children, give them opportunities to make decisions and to have adventures, but always monitor that they are treating others in their world (friends, siblings, you) kindly and respectfully. Some of you are blessed with a clown or two: gregarious, talkative, funny and creative. Relax and enjoy them – they love having you as an audience for their antics and humour – but don't relax too much because fun and mischief often come in the same package! And for the lovely kids who care about others? These children are a delight, but teach them assertiveness – passive children can be bruised in rough-and-tumble of childhood friendships.



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7. Care about their self esteem

Kids who know their abilities, who can solve problems, who know that they have secure 'home-base' where they are loved and accepted – these kids soar! A child who is not sure if he is likeable may sacrifice his character to win acceptance from a group: join a gang in shoplifting or bullying, or act like a clown or a flirt or a show-off. Adolescence is especially perilous for kids who don't like themselves and are not sure if anyone else likes them either. Everything that you do to enhance their self-esteem increases their safe and respectful behaviour.

Children are carefully watching feedback from us to discover what we think of them. If they get the impression that we think they are incompetent or a nuisance or naughty, they tend to take that judgement very seriously and then they live up to the low expectations they think we have of them. A great antidote to that is to use positive 'labels': "You're a real artist!"; "You're such a kind big brother"; "Thanks for being such a helper". Those labels – artist, kind person, helper – stick to their hearts and change their impression of themselves.

Self-esteem soars when a child discovers they have 'islands of competency' – a special skill or ability. They may not be gifted in the classroom or sports field, but they get a real self-esteem boost from their ability to sing. Every child is a gifted child, but sometimes the area of gifting is a mystery until they have tried something for a while. Allow your school-age children to experiment with a wide range of hobbies, sports and subjects: some they may have no talent or interest in, but others, after they get the hang of it, might take off and they excel.

8. Create a family culture

How old was your child when they became aware of brands like MacDonaldis? Three? Four? Let them know they have a 'brand' – your family. They are a Smith or a Jones or a Pichaironnarongsongkram (a fine Thai name). Kids love to belong to something bigger than themselves and come to appreciate that your family does things in certain ways – it's their culture.

Having meals together is one of the key ways of defining your culture. Mix it up: sometimes formal, sometimes more relaxed. The key thing about your culture is not so much the routine but the way you talk, listen, have fun and respect each other. Celebration is lovely thing to stir into home life. When you honour someone with a little award or speech, it makes it very clear what characters and behaviours are valued in your home.

Your rules are clear expression of your family's values. Use the formula "In our family, we..." to express your rules. "In our family, we help each other." "In our family, we let visitors go first" etc. It gives an idea that these qualities and values are even bigger than Mum and Dad, they belong to 'the family'. An old motto of this magazine was, 'Give children roots and wings'. 'Roots' come from knowing your family story – not just digging through photo albums and family trees but also letting them know the people you were before they became their parents. And 'wings': your confidence in them to flourish and eventually fly!

9. Work together

If you are doing your parenting on your own I want you to know that you can do a fantastic job of raising whole, awesome kids. You will be the first to admit that it is tougher, covering all the bases on your own when it would be easier to share the load, but you can do it. But if you are parenting as a team, a couple, then realise the quality of your relationship and the way you work your parenting in with each other will have a huge impact on our kids.

Back each other up, automatically. Of course you won't always agree on decisions and opinions but usually you can work a strategy where you support each other in front of the kids and work your differences out in private. Kids can be unsettled by differences in standards and by apparent disharmony.

If you are both good at working out your differences in a mature and respectful way, let your kids see you solving problems together – that's a fantastic example to set for them. However, if this is still a goal you are working towards and your discussions are sometimes a bit loud and emotional, maybe it would be best of you retreated to the bedroom!

10. Routinize

The more of your family life that can 'run on rails' the better, especially if you have 'tricky kids' with challenging issues. It saves energy because you (and the kids) do not have to constantly think up what to do next. Routines don't kill creativity and fun – they actually allow you to get through the stuff that has to be done more quickly and with less fuss so that there is more time and energy for the better parts of family life. Set up routines to cover chores and study but also fun times as well. Mum dates and Dad dates – times when one child gets to go out with one parent – should be on your wall planner.

"Give children roots and wings"



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