

PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

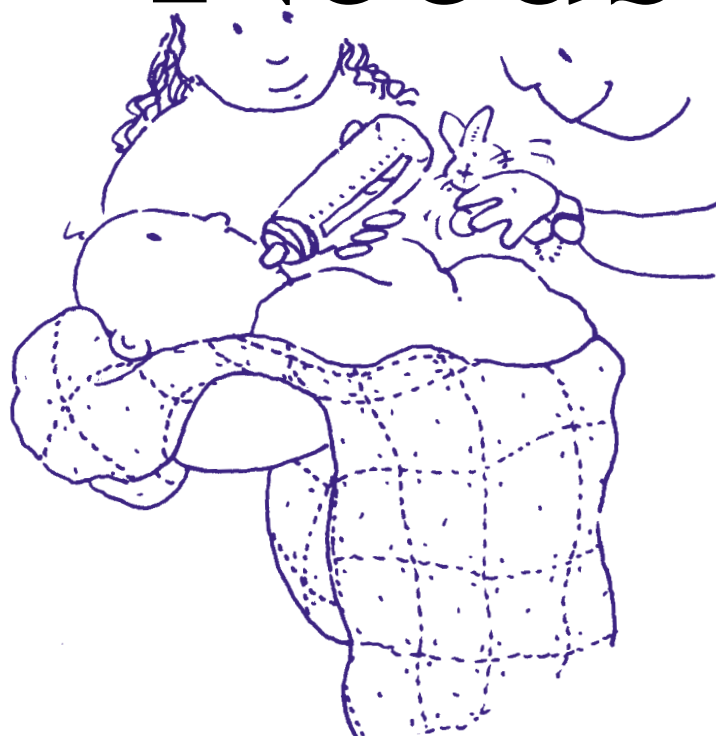
Meeting Children's Needs



Children make many demands on their parents. The way parents respond to the children's demands teaches children about the kind of world they live in. Children learn to trust or mistrust, to feel safe or afraid, to feel loved or unloved based on the way people, especially their parents, respond to them.

When a baby cries because of a dirty diaper and Mom or Dad gently changes the diaper while talking to the baby, the child learns that the world is safe and caring. If a baby cries because of a dirty diaper and parents ignore or yell at the child, the child comes to feel that the world is frightening and unsafe.

A school-age child gets the feeling of safety when people listen to what she says and when they take an interest in what she does. Teenagers feel loved when parents discuss decisions with them and listen to their opinions.



When we as parents show caring and love in meeting our children's needs, we help our children grow up to be strong and caring people.

Understanding and meeting children's needs sometimes seems impossible.

Understanding children's needs and taking care of those needs can be very difficult for parents. One reason is that as parents we are more aware of our own needs than of our children's. For instance, we may get upset when a child gets sick (or has to go to the bathroom) just as we are going to work or to a meeting. It is natural to feel upset at the untimely demand. We may ask, "Why does this child always do this to me?" But children don't plan their sicknesses to bother us. They are just trying to take care of their needs. And sometimes their needs come into conflict with our needs.

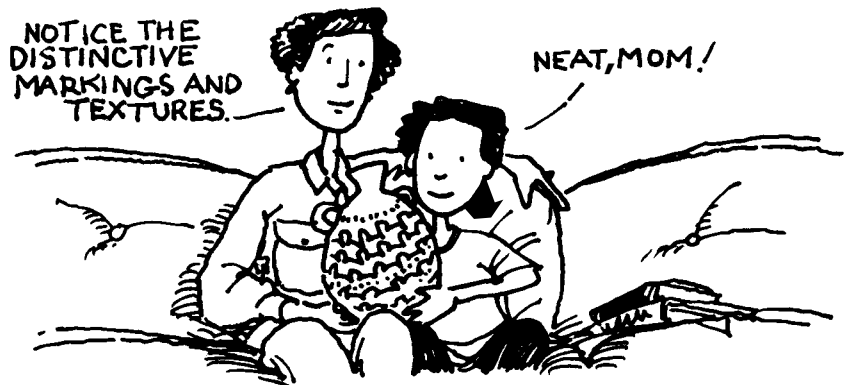
For example, think of a child with colic who seems to cry no matter what you do. A parent may feel angry and helpless. Getting angry at the child for having colic does not help. What can the parent do? First, check with the doctor to find out if the child has a serious problem. If the doctor does not find a medical problem, the parent can simply provide comforting activity such as rocking the child or carrying the child close in a pouch. After trying everything else, the parent can let the baby cry himself to sleep when he is tired. The parent who gets awakened in the night should be sure to get a nap during the day to catch up on sleep. If you become very angry and fear that you will hurt the child, you should call a friend, family member, or nurse. For most babies colic ends by three months of age.

Can you list other demands that children make on us that may make us angry? What are effective ways to deal with them?

As parents we find it very challenging to adjust to the needs of children. But if we learn to expect some difficulties, care about our children's needs, and plan ahead to meet those needs, we can make a very big difference in helping our children.

Another reason that meeting children's needs is difficult is that children are dependent and untrained. Sometimes it is very inconvenient to have to feed, protect, carry, comfort, and teach children. Sometimes children do silly things. Sometimes they break things. If we learn to be patient and teach them rather than get angry, we will be more helpful.

Sara wanted to look at a vase. But the vase was very breakable. Nancy could have told Sara to leave it alone until she was older. Instead, she asked Sara to sit on the couch and she would bring her the vase. Sara sat on the couch. Nancy brought her the vase. They talked about it together. When Sara was tired of looking at the vase, Nancy said, "Anytime you want to look at the vase, come and get me. We'll look at it together."



Nancy is a wise mother who knew that a small child might break a vase but that if she were sitting on the sofa with her mother she could probably enjoy the vase safely.

Another reason that meeting children's needs is difficult is that children are so different. They are different at different ages. They are different from each other. And they are different in different circumstances. And they may be different from what we expect. We may wonder why Susie is so mean these days when she used to be such a nice child. We may wonder why Tommy is so messy when Marcus is so tidy. We may wonder why Sara is so happy at home but so bashful at school. Most of this publication will talk about these differences.

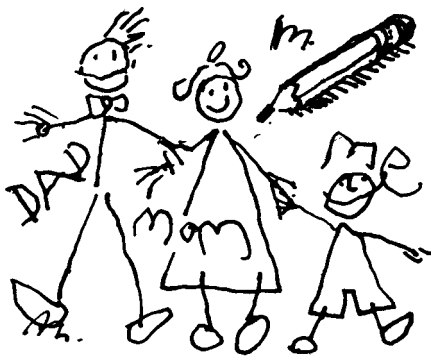
Children are different at different ages.

A new baby is very dependent. We must feed her, clothe her, and protect her. But as a child becomes older she becomes more independent. You have probably heard of the "terrible twos." About the time a child turns two she starts to become more independent. She is more likely to want to do things for herself. This may bother us because she is not very good at doing things. But it is very important to help her learn to do things by herself.

A wise parent of a child who is learning independence will give the child many opportunities to make decisions. "Would you like me to tuck you into bed or would you like to climb in by yourself?" "Would you rather have me read you a bed-time story or sing you a song?" "Would you like your peanut butter on bread or on celery?" "Would you like to play with the pans or with clay?"

If a child starts an activity that is not safe, it usually works better to distract the child than to yell at him or jerk something away from him.

Karl was about to write in a library book. His dad held his hand and asked him, "Would you like to draw? We don't draw in books but I can get you some paper. Or would you like to finish looking at the book?" Dad found a kind way to give Karl a choice.



We should let a child do many things for herself. But we should give her tasks where she is likely to be successful. Maybe she can help set plastic cups on the table for dinner but should not be trusted with glass plates. The wise parent will distract a child from a task where she is likely to have trouble and direct her to a task where she is likely to be successful.

When Jessie wanted to help her mother set the table, Mother was tempted to say, "You're not old enough. You'll break everything." But instead she said, "Why don't I put on the plates while you place the napkins." Then Mom showed her how to place the napkin next to the plate. They talked together while they set the table. When they were finished, Mom said, "Look how nice the table looks. Thank you for your help."

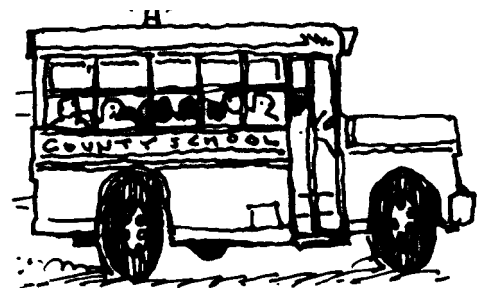
When we allow children to try things they want to do (while directing them toward jobs where they are likely to be safe and successful), they develop their skills and confidence. Often we expect children to do things that they are not yet able to do.

When Emily was four or five, she asked me to help her draw a circle. Because Emily is smart I was sure she could do it on her own. I told her just to draw the shape of a cookie. She whimpered that she couldn't. It was just a few days later that I read that children usually can't draw a full circle until they are five or six.

It's good to be patient with our children as they learn.

Children often face challenges that they don't know how to handle. We can help them by being patient and, when they are ready, by teaching them skills.

Mary came home angry. She told her mother that the children at the bus stop picked on her. She also admitted that she got mad at them and called them names. Mother felt angry at the mean children. But she decided that the best way to help her daughter was to teach her how to deal with the children. After Mary had talked about her bad experience, Mom said: "It's very painful when people are mean to us. I wonder if we can think of ways to make them into friends." They talked about different ideas and decided to invite one of the children over to play with Mary on Saturday. Mary could develop a friendship and maybe walk to the bus stop with her new friend.



When parents reason with their children, they can help them think of good solutions. Parents can also teach their children skills to deal with difficult situations. (See also Extension Circular HE-682 in this series, "Being Understanding: A Key To Developing Healthy Children," for ideas on how to help children deal with their feelings.)

There are a few things that all children need. All children need to feel safe and protected. All children need encouragement.

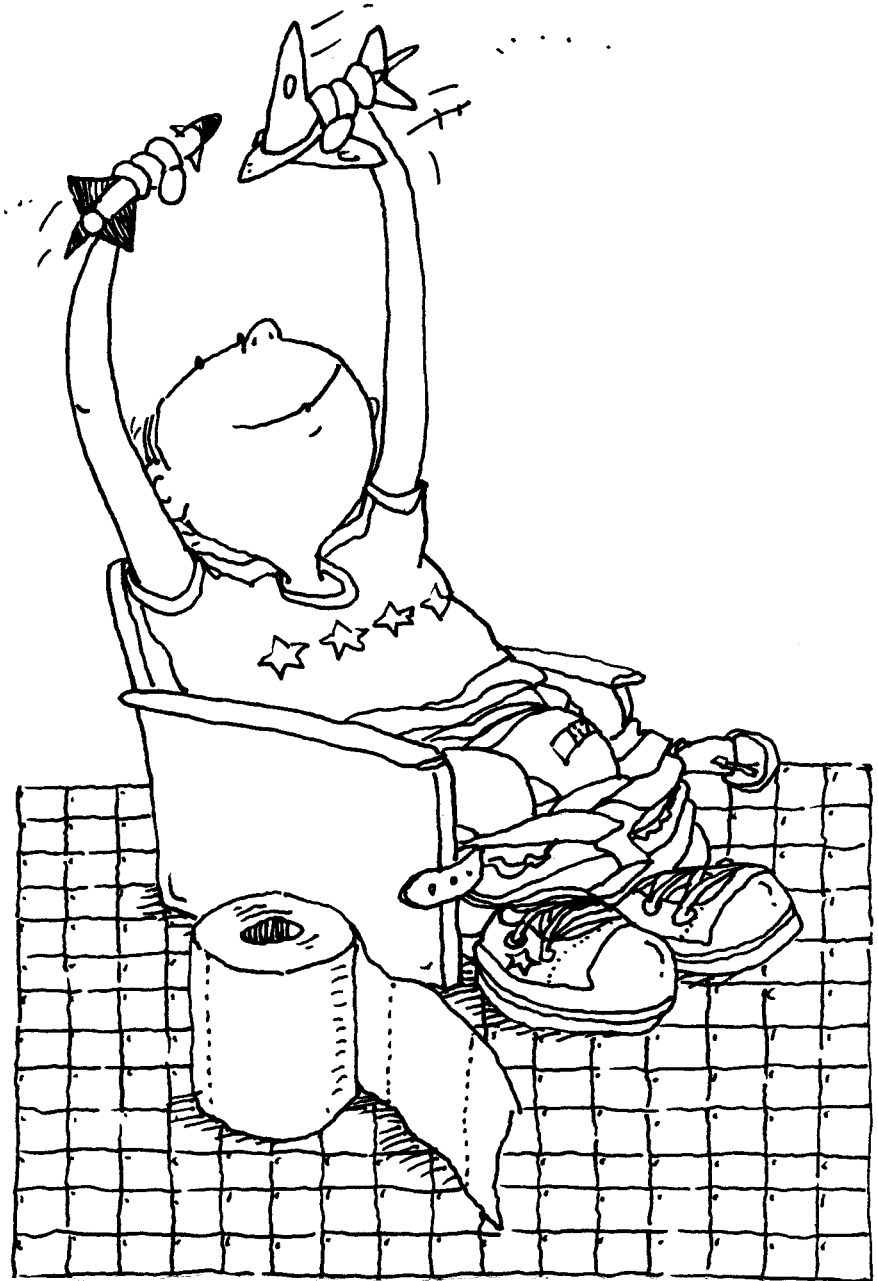
Sometimes we think that our children know that we are proud of them. Often they do not. We should tell them often about the things they do that we enjoy. They need to know that we appreciate them and care about them.

Each child is different.

You have probably heard a parent brag that his child began to walk early. Some parents may believe that a child who begins to walk at 8 months is more talented and smarter than a child who begins to walk at 12 months. The fact is that children are just different. The child who begins walking later may grow up to be a better athlete than the child who starts to walk at a younger age.

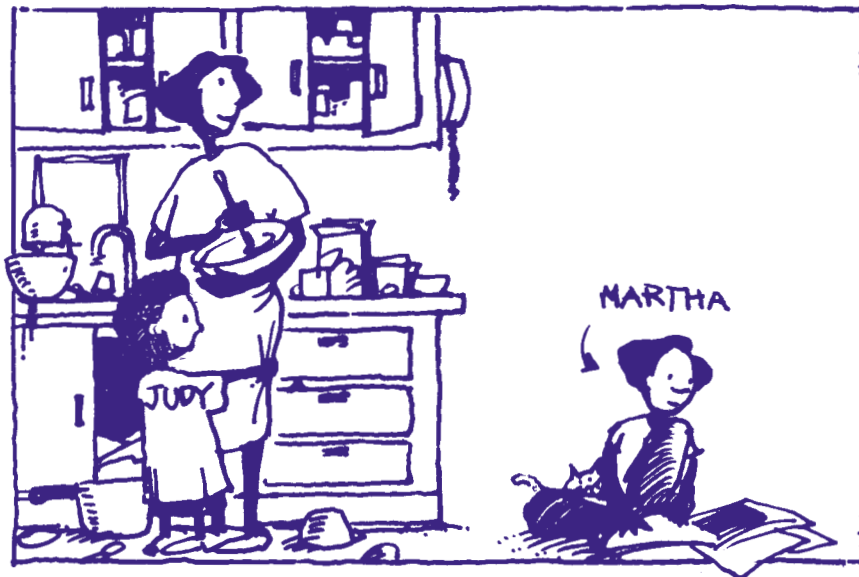
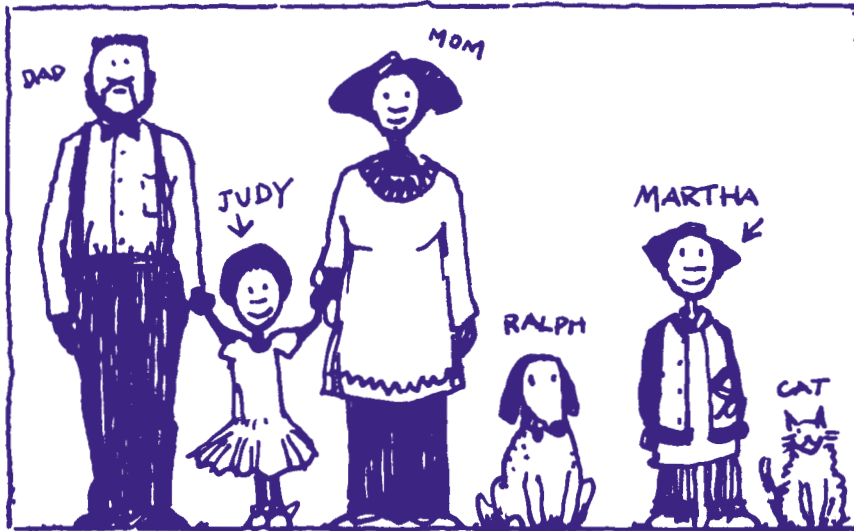
No two children are the same. It is unwise to rush children in their development or to try to get them to be like some other child. The helpful parent will help children develop as they are ready.

We expected our son to be toilet trained as young as his sister had been. But the more we pressured him the worse he did. We finally relaxed and allowed him to decide when he was ready. It wasn't long before he was ready, and he learned very quickly.



Someone once said that every child wears a banner. On that banner she tells you how much love she needs, how much discipline she needs, how much hugging she needs, how much attention she needs. Unfortunately, children do not have a banner that is easily read. We have to "read" their behavior.

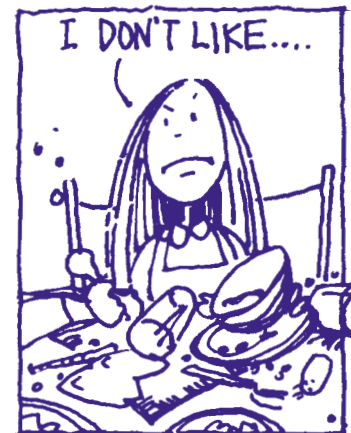
Judy has always wanted more of our attention than her sister Martha. We assumed that she would outgrow it. She has not. We finally realized that she is just different from her sister. Martha is very independent. Judy likes attention from her parents. So we allow Martha her independence. And we take extra time with Judy.



No two children are the same. We should treat each as an individual, observe and respect her differences, and help her grow. With a child who is very sensitive we may need to give messages in a gentle way. A child who is easily distracted may need us to give undivided attention when we talk to him. If we notice each child's individual differences, we can be more helpful.

Children are different at different times.

Emily normally has a pleasant, cheerful disposition. But many days at dinner time she becomes cross and cranky. We finally realized that by dinner time little Emily was tired and hungry. We have learned to get her a snack in the afternoon and, at dinnertime, not to fuss with her. We get her started on dinner right away so that her blood sugar will pick up.



When our child acts cross, we may not realize that she has had a bad day. Maybe a friend was mean to her. Maybe she felt like a failure at school. If we get mad about her bad mood, we may make it worse.

What can we do? We can take time to understand what our child is feeling. We can also look for a sensible solution, as in the story above about Emily.

Get more information when you need it.

There will probably be times when your child does things that you do not understand. At such times it may be a good idea to talk to a friend who is an experienced (and caring) parent, a doctor, or a counselor. It is also a good idea for every parent to take a class or read a good book on child development. Your community college may offer a class.

Dr. Spock's Baby And Child Care is a good book to help you learn how to deal with children's physical needs. Additional books on parenting are listed below. Also the other publications in this series can give you many ideas about how to show understanding with your children. See especially the one mentioned earlier, HE-682, "Being Understanding: A Key To Developing Healthy Children."

There are a few things to remember about meetings children's needs:

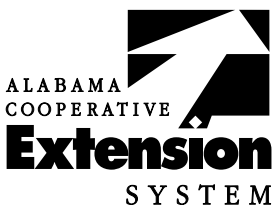
- All children need certain things: safety, encouragement, and love.
- Each child is different from any other. We should pay attention to his or her behavior so that we know how much attention, discipline, and guidance each child needs.
- We should be careful not to expect our children to be able to

do things that they are not old enough to be able to do.

- As we deal with our children we should make allowances for the challenges they face.
- Responding promptly and helpfully to children helps them develop into healthy adults.
- Being patient with our children shows them that we care.
- Our children need us to teach them how to handle difficult situations.

If you want to learn more . . .

- Faber, Adele, and Mazlish, Elaine (1980). *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen And Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York: Avon.
- Ginott, Haim (1956). *Between Parent And Child*. New York: Avon.
- Ginott, Haim (1969). *Between Parent And Teen*. New York: Avon.
- Parenting* (magazine). Subscription Dept, Box 52424, Boulder, CO 80321-2424
- Spock, Benjamin (1985). *Dr. Spock's Baby And Child Care*. New York: E. P. Dutton.



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