



McLeod Psychologist Dr. Farrah Hughes: Helping Your Child Thrive With Positive Parenting

Farrah Hughes, Ph.D. | McLeod Family Medicine Center

There are countless sources of parenting advice out there: everything from the latest fad parenting book to the frequent, unsolicited musings of dear Aunt Sally. Moreover, we can easily fall victim to those who prey upon distressed parents to make a buck, for example, by charging an inordinate amount of money for a parenting workshop. How can we discern solid, empirically sound advice from information that is simply someone's opinion?

For me, it all boils down to what works. As a psychologist, I must stay attuned to the research studies demonstrating which approaches are effective and which approaches are, well, not so great. I am here to tell you that decades of research have shown that we can count on a core set of tried-and-true approaches for rearing our children. Fortunately, these approaches are consistent with my own personal and spiritual values, and in my practice, I have found this to be the case with other parents as well.

Let's assume that we have similar goals for our children. I imagine that we all want our children to get along well with others, to effectively manage their emotions, to be good problem-solvers, and to be valuable members of society. Luckily, the positive parenting approach provides us with a set of tools to help us accomplish these objectives. These tools are based on the sound foundation of learning theory. For instance, behaviors that get reinforced tend to increase in frequency, and behaviors that get ignored tend to decrease in frequency. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Well, yes, because it is! The challenging part is being immediate, consistent, and calm in using these tools.

Together, these tools can be described as the "positive parenting" approach, although I have found that way too many people use this term for it to be meaningful. You

will find the approach that I am talking about described in excellent books written by experts like Dr. Alan Kazdin (Yale Parenting Center) and Dr. Rex Forehand (University of Vermont). You also will find it in more systematic interventions like Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT, Dr. Sheila Eyberg and Dr. Cheryl McNeil) and the Triple P: Positive Parenting Program (Dr. Matt Sanders and colleagues).

So, what exactly is positive parenting? Positive parenting encourages us to strengthen our relationships with our children by communicating with them and managing their behavior in healthy, non-hurtful ways. These strategies have been supported in numerous research studies, and, truly, they are things that you and I already know to work! We fall short simply by forgetting to use them in consistent and systematic ways with our children. Here is the most fundamental positive parenting tool, and you can use it right now.

Positive Parenting Tool #1: "Catch 'em being good."

The most effective way to shape our children's behavior is to pay attention to the behaviors we like. For example, if I want my daughter to play quietly while I am on the phone, I need to make certain that I enthusiastically praise her for that specific behavior. "Rylie, THANK YOU for being so quiet while I was on the phone just now! Way to go!" Or, if my son tends to run off in the grocery store, I can "catch him" and reinforce the behavior that I like by saying, "Liam, I LOVE that you are staying close to mommy while we are shopping! Thanks for doing what I asked!" You will find that positive attention increases the frequency of certain behaviors. So, target the behaviors that you like

and shower them with genuine praise. (Reader, thank you SO MUCH for sticking with me this long! I appreciate you giving me a chance!)

You may say, that's all well, good, and fine, but what if my child never does anything "good"? Give him a practice session. Demonstrate for him the behavior that you want, and then help him to practice it ahead of time. When he is successful, jump for joy and give hugs and high fives!

Trust me, your attention is the strongest tool in your parenting toolbox. When children aren't getting positive attention, they will go to great lengths for negative attention. (That explains why they get louder and louder every time you answer a phone call.) There are many empirically-based positive parenting strategies, including effective ways to decrease misbehavior, and I hope that I will have more opportunities in the future to share them with you, because they work.

If you would like more information on positive parenting, some useful websites are:

- The McLeod Parent's Corner page: www.mcleodparentscorner.org
- Triple P: www.triplep-parenting.net
- Alan Kazdin, Ph.D.: www.alankazdin.com and yaleparentingcenter.yale.edu

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