



by Karen Stephens

## Parenting Tips: Just Follow the ABCs

“Children  
can't succeed  
without your  
support and  
guidance.”

**A is for Accountability:** Give children responsibilities so they feel competent and needed.

Teach accountability by enforcing reasonable, age-appropriate consequences.

**B is for Boundaries:** Set specific boundaries for behavior and explain reasons for limits.

Identify consequences of obeying as well as ignoring boundaries.

**C is for Caring Consistency:** Maintain predictable, stable moods. Be consistent in caregiving, daily routines (meals, hygiene, sleep schedule), discipline, family rituals and, in the cases of divorce, regular visitation with both parents and their extended families.

**D is for Discipline:** Discipline to teach and obtain constructive results, not to demean, humiliate or frighten. Take a firm and respectful stand with children to guide behavior. Don't be gullible or become a pushover for kids who test your limits. Keep a strong backbone, but be flexible when circumstances warrant it. Exceptions are acceptable, just not often.

**E is for Ethical Example:** Your example of life with dignity (or shame) is, and will always be, your children's most influential guide and teacher. Practice what you preach.

**F is for Forgiveness:** Forgive with gentleness and sincerity. This teaches children to be compassionate and patient with their own shortcomings, as well those of others.

**G is for Giving:** Give children opportunities to help others. Encourage them to enjoy the intrinsic reward of contributing to the well being of others.

**H is for Humor:** Never miss the chance to laugh with children — but never laugh at them. Keep perspective by maintaining a sense of humor. Laugh in wacky situations parents invariably encounter. Remember, you aren't the first parent to be stumped and perplexed beyond belief, and you won't be the last. It's an occupational hazard of being a mom or dad.

**I is for Imagination:** Fully enjoy parenting by encouraging and taking delight in kids' imaginations. Perk up humdrum life by doing creative things just for the fun of it. Be spontaneous. Occasional pillow fights in the morning or water fights while washing the car make boring routines memorable!

**J is for Justice:** Be fair with children and your spouse. Avoid acts of favoritism. Admit mistakes made in the heat of anger. Avoid being judgmental about trivial matters. Strive for equity, rather than rigid equality, as you extend privileges and enforce consequences according to each child's age, abilities, experience and maturation level.

**K is for Knowing:** Know the people your child interacts with regularly — neighborhood families, child care or school classmates and their parents, caregivers and teachers. Spend time with them, invite them into your home and visit their homes. Model your values and beliefs.

**L is for Listening:** Take time to listen to children daily. Listen for feelings as well as facts. Turn the radio and TV off and give undivided concentration to mutual dialogue. Respond thoughtfully rather than giving condescending nods or “uh-huhs.”

**M is for Move Together:** Couch potatoes rot; so, MOVE! Together, take walks, ride bikes, dance, hike woodland paths, rollerblade trails, rake leaves, fish, fly kites, play tag, wrestle, play catch, hunt for bullfrogs, chase fireflies. Get my drift?

**N is for No:** Say it, mean it, don't apologize for it. No matter what kids say, other parents say “no,” too. And you're not in a parent popularity contest. Trust your instincts to keep kids safe; they depend on your wisdom. Because they're just learning to stand up to peers and to be loyal to personal beliefs, kids often need you to say “no” for them. It gives them a sense of support and security. Saying “yes” to *anything and everything* abandons kids; leaving them to struggle, even drown, in rough waters that are always part of growing up.

**O is for Optimistic:** Always look for the best in kids, not the worst. Focus on good things that can happen, rather than doom and gloom. Let kids know you have faith they can build a wonderful life for themselves.

- P is for Playful:** Take time to have fun together! Spend time playing indoors and out. Read and sing together, go swimming, dawdle in mud puddles, catch lightning bugs, invite tickle attacks. Let work become play by gardening or building bird houses together.
- Q is for Questions:** Be an *askable parent* by giving kids time for questions, no matter how unexpected they are. Listen carefully to understand what is really on a child's mind. Ask open-ended questions to help kids cope with and understand life experiences: "What do you think happened?" Gear your answers to your child's age and ability to understand.
- R is for Respect and Reverence:** Children are a sacred expression of life's continuity. Respect and cherish them accordingly and they will return the sentiment. Encourage children's sense of wonder; take time to dally in awe and amazement. It will teach them to be reverent of all living things. Share your faith, beliefs and values. Demonstrate them through private and public actions, no matter how small.
- S is for Standards:** Set high but reasonable standards for children's behavior and achievement. Encourage performance with sincere interest and involvement in children's activities. Coach, mentor and tutor children to facilitate accomplishment. Avoid pressuring through constant competition or comparison with others. Instead encourage children to consistently improve on their own personal best.
- T is for Trust:** Remind children often that you trust them to do the right thing. Until blatantly proven otherwise, assure children you trust their honesty. When kids fail to meet expectations, assure them you trust they'll do better next time.

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- U is for Understanding Uniqueness:** Don't expect children to be carbon copies of you or their siblings. Avoid unflattering comparisons. Rather than resent differences, enjoy and capitalize on them. Accept all family members' temperament and personality with kindness. Monitor your attitude so you don't subtly value one child more than another.
- V is for Voicing Appreciation:** Don't pass up on the chance to say something good. With words and hugs, acknowledge and praise consideration and cooperation.
- W is for Keeping Your Word:** Keep your word by *walking your talk* and keeping promises, otherwise trust is undermined. If you break a promise, explain why, express regret and make amends. Choose words wisely; just like stick and stones, they can hurt.
- X is for eXpectations:** Set realistic expectations for everyone, including you. Perfection is unattainable. When behavior is disappointing, be respectful and patient. Take a deep breath, tell yourself to hang in there, and try to prevent reoccurrence.
- Y is for You:** You are children's safety net. They can't succeed without your support and guidance. To deal with the demands parenting puts on your mind and energy, keep yourself physically and emotionally fit. Your happiness is important to the kids, share it.
- Z is for Zest:** In spite of its inevitable ups and downs, approach family life with zest and enthusiasm. Live each day together as if it could be your last. Never let a day go by without giving your child a hug or casually saying that all so important, "Love you." They'll be grown, and on to building a family of their own before you know it.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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