

The WRONG Stuff

6 EXPERTS SHARE THE BIGGEST MISTAKES PARENTS MAKE IN THE CRITICAL FIRST THREE YEARS

by Vivien Santana Hughes

It could be your worst nightmare. Twenty years from now, the child you so lovingly raised listens raptly to his therapist. “Your problems,” explains the psychiatric expert, “obviously stem from your upbringing.” An ominous fantasy—but can you avoid traditional pitfalls to become a successful parent? The first step is to get past your own history—we usually want to do the complete opposite or the exact same as our parents did when they raised us. Next, educate yourself about child development.

Here, six experts share the biggest mistakes parents make in the critical first three years of children’s lives. But relax, our panel feels that most of us are doing fine. We just try too hard.



Dr. Thomas Armstrong, author of *Awakening Your Child’s Natural Genius: Enhancing Curiosity, Creativity, and Learning Ability* (Tarcher), is a learning specialist and columnist.

The biggest mistake parents make is feeling they have to buy something in order for their children to learn. “Many parents have the idea that the answer to teaching their children will be out there somewhere,” says Armstrong. The best approach, he believes, is to learn together by reading, drawing, playing and pretending with your child. For example, “If your child grabs an oatmeal container and starts banging, don’t rush him to music lessons, just grab a pot and spoon yourself and join him.”

Armstrong feels it’s wrong to pressure your kids to fulfill your own agenda. “Parents are there to provide the spark that can ignite what is already there in the child.” You don’t need flash cards for that.



Co-author of *Time-Out For Toddlers*, with Donna Corwin, (Berkeley), Dr. James Varni’s professional credentials include clinical professor of psychology and pediatrics at the University of Southern California and director of the Behavioral Pediatrics Program at Orthopaedic Hospital in Los Angeles.

Parents don’t understand the nature of children’s cognitive development,” says Varni. They give verbal explanations to the child, but many things don’t get processed because children must reach about 7 years of age to truly understand cause and effect. The next mistake follows: with mounting frustration turning to anger, parents resort to yelling or hitting. Varni challenges parents to “just imagine someone seven-feet, eight-inches tall yelling at *you*. It’s very destructive to a child’s self-esteem.”

His solution is to use time-outs appropriately. The first time an unacceptable behavior occurs, simply say to the child, “Don’t do that again or next time you’ll have a time-out.” If it happens again, *calmly and non-emotionally* take her for a time-out (a few minutes sitting in a chair, or wherever you prefer). Varni stresses that it’s imperative to be consistent—if you threaten without following through, the child will feel the first few times of misbehaving don’t count.



Varni theorizes that proper use of time-outs, besides handling the immediate discipline situation, has an effect on your child’s entire problem-solving style. “When you lose control, you teach your children to handle conflict by yelling or hitting. Time-out teaches kids to handle conflict by stopping and thinking.”

3

Dr. Debora Phillips recently wrote *How to Give Your Child a Great Self-Image: Proven Techniques to Build Confidence From Infancy to Adolescence*, with Fred Bernstein (Plume). She is a behavior therapist in private practice in Beverly Hills.

A parent's biggest mistake is not letting the child make mistakes. Phillips has noticed that, for example, when kids are playing around counting "one, two, four, seven..." or saying "aminal" instead of "animal," parents rush to correct them. They don't let the child just be a child. Many parents believe they have to cram in so much learning, they forget that "kids need the freedom to play—that's what early childhood is all about," says Phillips.

The child will change on her own one day, so you should praise the attempt and the effort instead of the goal (she's singing the ABCs incorrectly—praise her anyway). Phillips notes that if parents counted the number of times they criticize versus the number of times they praise, most would be alarmed at the results. "Sometimes Mister Rogers is the only one telling kids they are special."



4



Dr. Ron Taffel directs family and couples treatment at the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy. He lectures on parenting issues and wrote *Parenting by Heart: How to Connect With Your Kids in the Face of Too Much Advice, Too Many Pressures, and Never Enough Time*, with Melina Blau (AddisonWesley).

Taffel finds that today's parents suffer from a loss of faith and self-confidence. "Some overly therapized and psychologized parents give up on their own instincts

about how their child feels," says Taffel. He uses himself as an example: When he and his wife were expecting their second child, they immediately started reading books about sibling rivalry to their daughter, but she looked puzzled. "We were putting feelings into her that she didn't have yet," he says. Parents question themselves continuously and—instead of learning who the child is from the child—look to outside sources to tell them about their kid. "If we stop listening to ourselves, it follows that we stop listening to the child, also."

Yes, parents *should* be educated in child development, stresses Taffel, but they also must have faith in their own intuition and self-confidence in their parenting abilities.

5

Pediatrician and author Dr. Benjamin Spock has been a household name for six decades. More than 40 million copies of *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*, with Michael B. Rothenberg, M.D., have been sold (Pocket Books). The sixth revised edition debuts in March.

I don't want to blame parents," says Spock when asked to address the the common mistakes of parenting. He feels that parents do the best they can, but admits that many haven't learned how to handle their children tactfully. You can expect some temper tantrums from your 1 to 3 year old but, besides the child's inborn temperament, he finds that the parents' attitude has a direct effect on the *quantity* of tantrums. "Parents have to be ingenious to avoid situations that are likely to lead to clashes," says Spock. One avoidance measure is not to give your child choices—when

there really is no choice. For example, when lunch is ready don't ask, "Do you want to have lunch now?" Instead, tease a little and heighten curiosity about the meal and how good it will be, while you guide your child toward the table.

It's impossible to avoid all tantrums. Once the kicking and screaming begins, "do *not* argue with or shout at the child," he says. To resolve the situation, some parents find the best treatment is to ignore the child, whereas others say the outburst would last forever without a parental gesture of friendliness. Children are amazingly unique and each will react differently to the same situation, Spock claims he has learned most of what he knows about children's behavior just from talking with parents. That's why, he says, after providing information, "I like to leave it to the parent to decide how to proceed."



6

Practicing pediatrician Marianne Neifert has just completed *Dr. Mom's Parenting Guide: Commonsense Guidance for the Life of Your Child* (Dutton). The mother of five is also associate clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado. Her previous book is *Dr. Mom: A Guide to Baby and Child Care*.

Parents expect too much of themselves," says Neifert. "Parenting is giving, giving, giving," yet taking care of yourself and your marital relationship should come first. But this priority makes many parents



uncomfortable. "Guilt is a common denominator," she says. Moms especially have to remember that it's OK to ask for help—your children will benefit. "You nurture from your own emotional overflow," explains Neifert so if you're too run down or have reached the breaking point, you're not able to do the best for your kids.

"Nothing keeps going without being recharged in some way: You have to put gas in you car and batteries in your flashlight." It's not selfish to hire a sitter to watch the kids on a regular basis, she advises. "Consider that a prescription from Dr. Mom."

