**Ruining Your Kid Without Knowing It.**

The notion of “parenting skills” was probably non-existent when I was growing up. My parents worked multiple shifts, days, nights, with one goal to feed and clothe their children and hopefully send us to college one day. I can’t imagine my mother reading books or articles on parenting, gaining some insight and perspective from sources other than her own experience. I also don’t recall her chatting with a friend over coffee about the struggles of parenting, comparing techniques (actually I don’t remember her chatting with a friend over coffee ever). The style of our parents’ parenting was reactive: bad grade – grounded, didn’t clean the room – grounded (or spanked and then grounded), good piano performance – ice cream. Rather simple formula. Without any deep analysis of how successful (or not) their parenting was, I am lucky I turned out the way I am (there are people who are willing to live with me and love me, and that’s already huge).

Today parents have more time on their hands (due to improved life conditions) to actually reflect on their parenting style. Should parenting be impromptu, chaotic, random, and reactive? Can it be proactive and planned? Don’t we have enough shared practice and experience to prepare ourselves for challenges and see how we can parent our kids intentionally and not ruin them with our “good” but unexamined intentions? Are there things that parents do, that are not in the child’s best interest? Do parents do things that may lead to child’s low self-esteem, development of the victim or bully identity (in bully-victim relationship), even health problems? Working with children and their parents for over 15 years, I have observed that there are certain things that parents do that could be avoided, and luckily these things are not hard to change.

**You are probably ruining your child if you do the following things:**

1. **You do homework for them.** Some parents literally write student essays, and some parents in elementary grades do their worksheets.
2. **You don’t trust them with chores or you don’t assign enough.** They don’t vacuum the way you like or they don’t mow the lawn the way you like, so you tell them, “It’s okay. Enough. I will finish.” Some students are not assigned any chores at all, and that’s a crime.
3. **You don’t teach them to keep a calendar and schedule**. Many parents are very high-tech: my schedule is on my phone. Ok, I get it. But where does your 6 year old write his own agenda items? A kitchen calendar for the whole family is helpful for kids to organize their events and activities.
4. **You let your child experiment with appearance.** If your high schooler gets an orange spray tan over the weekend, on Monday he/she will hear “Man, you look orange.” You run to the school’s office and say that your child is bullied. Or, your child dyes hair green or pink, and after your child is told “Wow, what a color?” you run to the office to complain. Children point at the obvious. Note, they didn’t say “it was wrong or stupid.” They simply pointed out what they observed. Any drastic changes in appearance call attention. Make sure your child is ready to have these tough conversations, or say no to green hair for now.
5. **You are scared (or simply reluctant) to confront your child’s hygiene.** Who should do it if not a parent? No parent wants his kid be called “a smelly kid.” Put a deodorant in your child’s backpack, in the car glove compartment, in the child’s locker. Make sure your child washes his/her hair. These things are so minor and silly, but they make such a difference in the acceptance of your child by the group. Who wants to look back at school years and say “Oh, that’s the girl with the greasy hair, I remember.” I pity the kids who tell me in 8th grade that they are wearing the same shirt because “their laundry was not done,” and I have an issue with their parents. It is really not that hard to teach your kids do laundry. As early as 1st grade (because they can read), students can have a note card with step-by-step instructions on how to do their own laundry. And they *love* doing it and take pride in it.
6. **You bring your kids late to school.** In most grades, the goal is to fit in, be a friend, and be liked. Whether we like it or not, that’s their priority. Anything you do as a family that singles your children out, harms their status. The worst you can do is to bring him/her late by 30 minutes *and* buy him/her a cup of Starbucks. Morning routines are almost sacred in school. Children are more confident when they are in school on time or even 5 minutes early. No one wants to enter the room when everyone is taking a test or the teacher is in the middle of a lesson, and you walk through isles dragging your backpack, hitting chairs. No one likes this type of attention. Remember, when your kids don’t drive, it’s on you.
7. **You disregard the school’s schedule.** You pick him up earlier from school without a reason or a notice. Some parents literally pull their children from class because it’s a convenient time for them to pick them up. Everyone notices it. This may be viewed as disrespect to the teacher and the school’s guidelines, but also the child may experience the feelings of anxiety (“I wonder if they did anything fun after I left”; “I wonder if they were talking about me when I left”; “I hope the teacher is not mad at me that my mom took me out from school without a warning”). Yes, parents believe that they have the right to the schedule of their child. But even things like picking up your child early, or even missing a day from school can be done properly. Give enough notice. Communicate your reasons in a polite manner to the teacher. Give child enough time to even discuss it with classmates. Communication gains schoolmates’ trust and support. We have many students who go on vacations during school year. No one is shocked when this happens, when parents give enough notice, request class and home work ahead of time, communicate with the teacher. We assure kids that nothing major is going to happen while they are gone, and they should not worry. And what a cute moment it is when children come back from the trip and bring treats or some memorable items from that trip to share with the class and the teacher. Basically there is a right way to miss school, and there is a wrong way. Be a wise parent. Don’t be prideful. Be courteous, as it ultimately serves your child.
8. **You don’t find school events important.** Some parents decide that concerts, competitions, plays, athletic events, fundraising events, spelling bee, park picnics, field trips, retreats are not important. That’s not academics, so why bother. This is a crucial mistake in parenting. More than anything else, the school teaches social skills, team work, leadership, responsibility, accountability, community building, project management, and conflict resolution. All of these most valuable skills kids gain when they are not in the classroom, when they work on something together, when they compete as a team against another team, when they build fire together in a forest, when they cook a meal together, when they sing a song together. Since early age, children should be told “This is your team, your class, and you can’t fail them. You have to do your part.” Anything different is interpreted in the child’s head is “I am important, my mama is important, and they are not.” But to the class it is interpreted as betrayal. During my trips with different classes, we had students who would not show up for a soccer match because it rained and parents let him sleep in. I also had students would not show up for a play in which they played a solo part because they could not wake up on time and parents didn’t think it was *that* important. Thank God for students who could think on the spot, regroup, memorize the lines of a missing actor, and still give a strong performance. Just imagine the feelings of the class the following day. I do everything in my power to ensure that my own children are never in the situation of “you let the team down.”
9. **You care about their grades too much.** Yes, you care about their grades a little too much. Some parents believe that their child is as good as the grades he gets. Separate your child, his heart, his goodness, from his grades. Sometimes, a straight “A” student is the worst friend. Sometimes parents demand from students to go and beg for extra credit, extra work from a teacher, to get that coveted “A.” What’s important is your child work ethic, his attitude towards studying, his time management skills, his interest in various fields, his creativity. If he/she is doing a good job at being a good student and a good friend, the grade becomes of second importance.
10. **You ask the wrong questions about school.** General basic vague questions like “How was school? What did you do in school?” lead to basic lazy answers “Fine. Nothing.” Really? You do “nothing” in school? Parents, here is a list of possible questions you can ask: “What are you studying in history? What country? What era? What unit did you like the most this quarter? What was it about? What’s the toughest part when it comes to studying history? What are you studying in science? Do you like studying plants, animals, earth, space? Why? What games did you play in PE? What’s your favorite game? What do your friends like playing?” Don’t be lazy. Ask specific questions, and your child won’t shut up about his school day.
11. **You believe your child does not lie.** Expect the worst sometimes. Don’t go easy on them. I once had a mother who told me in the office “Everyone but my child. How dare you tell me these things. I will go up to his room right now and I will ask him in front of everyone if he did it or not.” Bad idea, honestly. The child confessed in front of the entire class to a very unfortunate incident. Teachers and administrators don’t make stuff up. Believe me. We don’t need it. It’s painful for us to tell certain truths about your child. But when a parent tells me “I trust my 5-year old” I almost want to laugh and ask the kid: “Hey, Tim, what did you have for lunch today?” And Tim says, “Nothing.” Clearly a lie.
12. **You believe your child is innocent.** See the paragraph above. Don’t kid yourself. Be on guard and be wise. All the time.
13. **You didn’t teach them to fail.** Children must go through certain failures and losses, so they learn the essence of grit: get up and try again, don’t quit, stick to it, don’t blame anyone, keep going. I have seen poor attitude when students have failed on a test or have lost a soccer game. They were screaming “This teacher taught me nothing, I am dumb, so dumb, “cramping that test into a paper ball, throwing it in the air, or yelling, “The refs supported the other team, they cheated,” and walk out the soccer field. Not good. Teach them to fail gracefully.
14. **You blame the school for your child’s obesity and you don’t teach a grown child to prepare his/her own lunch.** Teach your kid healthy habits. Schools provide lunches, but children make choices what to eat and how much to eat. In our school we have a fabulous lunch program, but this leads to the problem of kids getting seconds, and even thirds sometimes. Some parents have openly asked us “Please tell my daughter to put down the second sandwich and give her broccoli.” Well, how do you expect teachers or lunch ladies to do that without hurting the child? Children who bring their own lunch demonstrate how much thought is given to their diet. Some students bring ramen noodles, hot pockets, sweet tarts, and some bring home-cooked meals in containers or healthy sandwiches and veggies that students prepared themselves. I noticed that if I point out and praise my high schoolers for bringing a healthy lunch, they try harder to keep this habit up. So please, don’t blame the school. Teach them what to pack for lunch.
15. **You are not participating in the school’s events and school life.** Kids love when their parents come to school, help in the classroom, in the lunch room, on field trips. They are so proud of you, they want to show you to everybody in the school. “This is my mom. This is my mom.” These are magical days for them. Some parents, unfortunately, are rather negative (about everything), loud, ill-mannered, may wear inappropriate clothing, and children do not invite them to anything. This is really tragic. Parents should do a healthy self-check whether they are invited by their own kids to school or not, and why.
16. **You don’t care about the opinion of other children of you.** Believe it or not, students discuss us, parents, in class. “Man, your mom is so strict” “My parents don’t care about this or that” “I wish my mom was like yours” etc, etc. They compare. Get off your horse “I am who I am and won’t play by anyone’s rules, you can’t choose parents” and become a parent whose children can be proud of. Get to their childish shallow level, yes. Do something nice for his class. Walk into the classroom. Greet everyone. Smile. Wish them a good day. Get them ice-cream. Try it. It works.
17. **You buy them things when you feel guilty about something.**
18. **You are not apologizing to them when the apology is due.**
19. **You are not teaching your children to say “Good morning” “Hello” “Pease” and “Thank you”**
20. **Be kind**. (Not nice. What does that even mean “nice”? Smiling?)Ask yourself this question, will my children say about me “My mom is kind” or am I pushing my parenting into the mega authoritarian direction that they don’t even think, “I am kind.” They need to know that their parents mean business, they can’t be pushed over, but that they are also fair and kind.

Is this it? Of course not. Parenting is an unending adventure. There is no perfect time when to parent, to talk, to play, to eat ice-cream. When I get enough sleep, then I will be a kinder mom. If I had more time and money, I would do more things with my kids. Maybe one day we will have a routine for doing things as a family. This is not how it works. You don’t become a good parent when you have a perfect routine. You are parent *all the time.* Practice spontaneous parenting. If you can read to your child today, go do it. Even if it’s random, spontaneous, and not every night. You can’t take your child to a park three times a week? But today you got off work early and you have an extra hour? Go to the park. Yes, in heels and suit. It counts. I notice these “spontaneously” playful parents with their suits and briefcases in the park. They didn’t have time to change into shorts. But there is a child, there is a parent, there is a swing, and there is an hour. Spontaneous parenting is exciting for you and your kids. They will always remember the good and unexpected playful times with you. And who knows, maybe such walks in the park, reading time, ice-cream shopping will be become routines one day. But for now, we do what we can.