

The 5 absolute truths I've learned in 10 years as a parenting editor

Plus 16 years as a parent



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(Illustration by Charlotte Ager for The Washington Post)

When I started editing On Parenting about a decade ago, I knew we had to cover parenting in a very real way. Parents felt alone, that they weren't sure how to do this. Essentially, I felt that caregivers wanted what I wanted: to learn and to be understood.

Thankfully, it seemed to fill a need, and On Parenting took off. What a fun time we've had.

This piece marks the end of my tenure not just with On Parenting, but my 28 years at The Washington Post. I was fortunate enough to do many interesting

things as a writer, reporter and editor. But by far, my favorite was parenting — the beat I cared about the most.

How lucky I've been to learn how to be a parent in a way few people can: by reporting stories, editing essays, talking to amazing minds, experts, academics and, of course, other parents. I wanted to understand it all. But here's the thing about parenting: We will never understand it all. Nor will we do everything right, not even close. I know that's not possible, especially in a country where child care is unaffordable, where there is no universal paid leave for new parents, where health care is impossibly expensive and where people are discriminated against when they are pregnant and when they become mothers.

And yet, we continue to try to understand.

So what *have* I learned? Here are the five absolute parenting truths I leaned as my sons grew from babies into teens, and as I grew from the new mom and On Parenting editor into, well, me.

Boundaries are good, and your influence matters

"If there's anything we've confirmed over and over in the research literature is that children thrive when they have both warmth and structure," Lisa Damour, author of "Untangled" and the "Emotional Lives of Teenagers," told me recently. People say children will see how far they can go and we must "nip it in the bud." It's true that they push the limits — begging for another cookie, staying out past curfew, playing on devices too long. The key, though, is not to "nip" anything, but to have a loving relationship so you can say "You know you can only have one" or "You're past your time limit, turn it off."

These boundaries and structure aren't always clear immediately. But when you take the time to truly know your children, you will better know what they need. (Bedtimes, for instance, have always been pretty defined in my house because we know our boys need their sleep or they don't function well.)

Not only have boundaries and rules changed as my children have, but so have we as parents. Damour once told me she had to learn not to take anything too personally. "One of the challenges of raising teenagers is it is their job to seek independence, which often means pushing us away," Damour says. "And it's the job of the parents to not take this as a personal rejection, to recognize this

as a sign of healthy development.” Because a teen who is prickly one minute is often seeking our comfort the next, she says. And if we’re holding a grudge, we’ll miss out on being able to support them when they need it.

As much as children push back, they are comforted to know those rules are there, that “things will not be allowed to spin out of control,” Damour says. Recently, I found myself apologizing for holding strong on some rules I can’t recall now — maybe it was the no phones in bedrooms line we drew. My older son stopped and said, “It’s okay Mom, you’re the parent.” It doesn’t always go that smoothly, but if ever there was a moment where I understood what he needed, it was then. Thanks for that reminder, kid.

Kindness and empathy are learned

One of the most-read stories we’ve had at On Parenting published in July 2014: “Are you raising nice kids? A Harvard psychologist gives 5 ways to raise them to be kind.”

The subject of that piece, Richard Weissbourd, director of the Making Caring Common Project at Harvard, suggests that we forget to (or simply don’t) prioritize caring for others. In his research, 80 percent of youths interviewed said their parents were more concerned with their achievement or happiness than whether they cared for others.

Children are not born understanding how to help their community. They need parents to model that for them: being kind to strangers, to bus drivers and to wait staff; asking your small children who they were kind to today and why. Piece by piece, you are helping them build their moral fabric.

“It’s about having the motivation to care about other people,” Weissbourd said to me recently. “But it’s also about having the skills to listen to other people.”

How to help children find awe, our most undervalued emotion

Let them learn for themselves

I remember watching my son grasp a plastic shape with his chubby baby fingers and try to force it into the wrong hole. It was so hard to sit on my hands and not do it for him. And yet when I did just watch and encourage him, he

twisted it and pushed it until he found what worked. That shape sorter is a rite of baby passage. That urge to help a little too much is a part of parenthood.

There have been times, of course, where I was impatient and couldn't keep my hands off, assuming I was showing my sons how to do it better. Or maybe I wanted to swoop in because I hated to see them struggle — with school, with friends, with teachers, with disappointment. But I also have had to learn this is exactly how they learn to live, to cope and to thrive.

As Jessica Lahey, author of "The Gift of Failure," said to me recently: "Do I want them to be able to do it perfectly today, the way I want it done? Or do I want them to be able to just do it themselves next time?"

That helicopter parent thing is real, and it is detrimental. When we get too involved, "we just obliterate any possible obstacle that stands in a kid's way and you don't develop the confidence you can handle hard things," says Ned Johnson, co-author of "The Self-Driven Child." "When we go and put on our cape and rescue our kids, we feel relieved and they do. But we deprive them of feeling like superheroes of their own lives."

I was the parenting editor during the college admissions scandal, when it was discovered that parents had cheated and paid to get their children into colleges. That phrase "helicopter parenting" became synonymous with the scandal. Don't be the helicopter parents. Be the cheerleader. Be the place for your children to fail safely. After all, if you put that triangle in the right hole for your baby, what is gained? A box with some shapes inside and a bored kid who can't figure it out.

Connection is the key

I first heard about Meghan Leahy at a moms group I attended when my boys were little. Someone said they had a "parent coach" who changed their family's life. What did she do that was so magical, we asked. This mother laughed a little and said: "Pretty much showed me why I needed to hug my kids more." I went on to hire Meghan as our parenting advice columnist. And that hugging advice is a bedrock of her parenting philosophy. It's not just about hugs — what she wants us to know is that everything comes down to our connection with our kids. "I don't know why we're here on Earth," she said to me recently, "but we are, and we're built to connect."

We parents can spend a lot of time actively *not* connecting with our kids — I need to get this done, I need to get that done, I have to focus on this other thing, Leahy says. And so when a child looks to be “misbehaving,” we should “shift our focus to ‘My child is trying to connect with me,’” she says.

I recall a time when I was struggling with two small boys, a job, a sick parent, a life. Meghan suggested taking a few minutes to stop what I was doing and look them in the eye, play a game, be silly together. It worked. Whining mostly stopped, we came to love those moments, and I still had time to get all the things done.

When life feels a little off the rails with the teens in my house now, I stop to think about how we’re connecting. Often, I realize we haven’t had a moment in a while. But here’s the thing: I’m not sports obsessed, they’re beyond sporty. I love art, pottery, going on hikes. They ... are the opposite. So I have to find a way in. Sometimes that means me sitting near them as they tell me about *this crazy video* they just watched. We connect in our own ways, and I’ve learned to look for the opportunities to do that, rather than waiting for them to magically appear. And in the meantime, I’ve built this relationship with some really amazing teens.

It goes too fast

I was once told to “love every minute” by an older man while I was wrangling two toddlers in a hardware store. I looked up, after jimmying one of the boys into the shopping cart and begging the other to hold my hand, and, well, you can imagine what I wanted to tell that man at the time. And here I am, years later, remembering every detail of that fuzzy blue hat on my boy, the innocent trust they had in their mother, saying it went too fast.

So here is my advice: Write it down. Take pictures. Notice things in the moment — like when they put their head on your shoulder. When they say something wise. When they do something kind. When they are funny. And when they want to talk to you, try to give them that minute. When they beg you to sit with them at bedtime and you’re exhausted? Give them the time.

Because it does go fast. That’s why you look at photos of them on your phone at night after they are finally asleep. That’s why you already miss them and they still live in your house. That’s why you tear up when you give their outgrown Halloween costume away.

I guess this is what I really learned, while raising two boys: I learned about these two people who live in my house, who grew up with a mother who was a parenting editor, who sometimes hated that I knew “so much,” and who are their very own, self-propelled, amazing individuals. Despite me, despite the very little I know.

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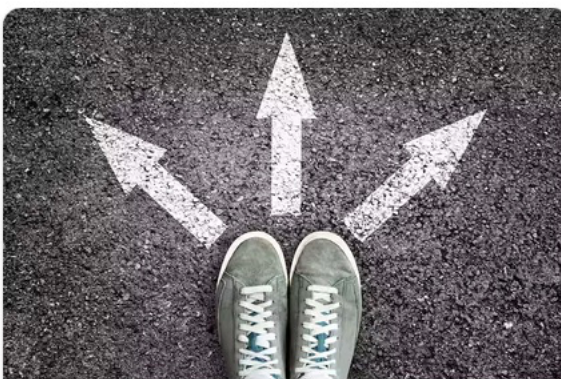


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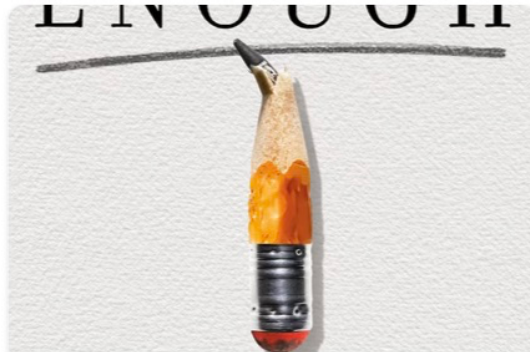
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