Why raising kind kids builds happiness and resilience

WORDS Dr Jenny Brockis
Being kind to other people is good for the ‘giver’ as well as the receiver. Jenny Brockis argues that teaching our kids to be good to others can play a big part in setting them up for a healthy and happy life.

As the eldest of three siblings, there were many occasions in my growing up when two was company and three a crowd. We weren’t always very nice to each other. Sometimes we were downright mean. Overall, though, we got on and despite the rough and tumble of everyday life we learned to deal with the good, the bad and the ugly of family and school life.

Other kids we knew had a tougher time. Some were bullied, or worse still ostracised. Some battled it through whilst others struggled. Some became angry or anxious, depressed even. Some developed eating disorders, others behavioural problems. The overall problem was in many instances that they could not cope with the challenges they faced and were inherently unhappy.

As a parent, what mattered the most to us for our own kids was – and is – for them to be happy and healthy. Happy, healthy kids are more resilient, more open and more positive in seeking solutions to problems and overcoming adversity. To help all kids achieve this, the greatest gift we can bestow on them, in addition to our love, is to teach them to be kind.

Fostering kindness matters, especially in today’s complex world where kids may be exposed to bullying, friendship issues, taunts and put-downs. It’s not simply about wrapping them up in cotton wool to protect them from all evil. It’s about fostering awareness of how kindness generates greater happiness and resilience in coping with the world’s nastier side.

**HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE OUR KIDS TO BE KINDER TO EACH OTHER?**

**Show them how it’s done**

The first thing is to be a role model for our kids. Our kids observe and mimic our behaviour from just a few weeks of age. How gallant is it when you hear your own offspring using your language and actions when frustrated or angry? While it’s unrealistic to expect to be a perfect parent, and I certainly don’t claim to be one, choosing to consciously show generous and kind behaviour to others is then encoded by our kids as a good way to behave.

That can get reflected back on us too. If my kids hear me speaking out of turn they will (in addition to telling me to “take a chill pill Mum!”) offer advice on how I could respond differently!

Demonstrating kindness to others has been shown to enhance kindness and cooperation between even young children. For example, a toddler witnessing an adult who drops an item and is seen struggling to pick it back up will move over to them and attempt to help.

**Reward the behaviour not the expectation**

When we see our kids help someone else it’s important to ensure that any reward comes from the act of stepping up to help; it’s better to avoid creating a learnt or expected response with the expectation of a reward such as candy or money. Driving this intrinsic motivation to help others is what fosters an open mindset. Encouraging your child to seek out opportunities to be of use on their own volition, because they can, not because they were asked to or expected to is what makes the difference.

**Encourage gratitude**

Encourage your children to be grateful for what they have. We live in a materialistic world where clever advertising entices us (and especially our kids!) to believe we need the latest gadgets, gizmos and toys. Reminding them that there is a difference between a want and a need helps them to realise there are others who may not be as fortunate. They might have expressed a desire for the latest Converse shoes, because “everyone” has them, but encouraging them to think about being grateful for what they already have helps build awareness that not everyone owns even one pair of shoes.

Counting our blessings has been shown to increase personal happiness and strengthen the bond we feel towards a particular person. Older kids can keep a gratitude journal writing down three to five things that they are grateful for every day. This simple act promotes a more positive mood and social connection to others around us.

One mother I know has a regular clean out every six months of no longer wanted clothes and toys, which are then donated to charity. She now encourages her kids to also choose a toy that they still use because, as she tells them, it’s important to give away good things, not just those items that are a bit tattered and torn.

Studies have shown how toddlers who share a toy are happier than those who simply play with it. Taking this one step further it has also been shown how children who have been encouraged to either give a treat to another child or share one of their own were happiest when giving away something of their own. We are socially hardened to be selfless and we find prosocial behaviour rewarding at all ages.

When we give, the area of the brain associated with reward is activated along with the release of endorphins that makes us feel good. That’s what leads to that nice warm glow we experience when we do something good for someone else.

**Being kind keeps us healthy**

Helping others keeps us well. Studies have shown that altruism reduces the stress we experience on a daily basis, which is why doing something for someone else, (especially if you are feeling a bit stressed) can make all the difference. Research has identified a physiological benefit of lower blood pressure and overall improved health. Kids who are kinder tend to be happier, have a stronger immune system and be more capable of fighting off illness.

So as the saying goes, it really is a case of it being better to give than to receive.

---

**Dr. Jenny Brockis**, the Brain Fitness Doctor and mum to two young adult children is the founder and director of Brain Fit. She helps educators create a brain friendly working environment to nurture and develop all brains at work. She works as an international speaker, author, and mentor. Her FREE online program on overcoming procrastination can be found at [www.drjennybrockis.com](http://www.drjennybrockis.com)
Boyfriends, girlfriends, just friends?
With the early sexualisation of kids comes the possibility of attraction and an ensuing relationship. But what constitutes a ‘relationship’ and when is the most appropriate time to embark on one? Lakshmi Singh explores the concept of younger kids having a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Is it a case of taking on too much too soon, or are kids of today ready to handle boyfriend/girlfriend relationships at a younger age?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the answer to this question depends on the family. In some families, it is ‘acceptable’ to start a relationship as soon as childhood ‘puppy love’ kicks in. In others, relationships aren’t acceptable until the late teens – or even the thirties!

The research is also mixed. While some research suggests that relationships between younger adolescents involve more costs than benefits, there is also evidence that tween and early-teen relationships can be useful.

THE RIGHT AGE

The ‘right age’ depends on what the young person feels constitutes a romantic relationship and what having a boy/girlfriend actually means for them says Jocelyn Brewer, registered psychologist at www.jocelynbrewer.com.

“In upper-primary school and early-high school this can simply mean a recognition of mutual ‘liking’ (and I don’t mean liking on Facebook!) and a sense of awareness of having ‘feelings’ towards someone, who kids then communicate this to and may choose to give each other a title of boy/girlfriend."

In older years, these relationships tend to take on a more ‘serious’ nature and begin to embrace some of the concepts central to adult relationships, including intimacy, sexual exploration, trust and sharing, she says.

Knowing when it’s okay to start a relationship and go on ‘real dates’ can be tricky, particularly for a young person who is going out with someone older than them, says Wendy Protheroe, General Manager at Kids Helpline.

“If they start going on dates too early, they might find themselves in sticky situations, such as their date wanting to start having sexual contact that they are not ready for,” she says.

Parents may be tempted to impose a blanket ban on dating on hearing of such possible consequences. However, when parents understand that developmentally-appropriate relationships can assist in emotion management, improved communication skills and interpersonal skills, they can help accept and support the onset of the dating stage.

In addition, parents can feel a sense of ‘safety’ by implementing some stepping stones and taking advantage of technology. For instance, instant communication and video calls may be used to supplement interactions – they need to be limited to long-distance relationships.

While these kinds of early relationships might not encompass the full range of experiences a ‘real-life’ relationship might entail, they can be useful for kids who are shy or introverted, says Brewer.

However, interactions based on technology alone may change the dynamic of these sorts of relationships, making them somewhat like real life. Brewer warns that such relationships can lack depth and that a child’s ability to gauge whether they know someone deeply can be flawed.

Regardless of the form of any of these relationships, Protheroe says that there really isn’t a ‘right’ time to start dating.

“The main thing is not to feel pressured to start going out before they are ready.”

FACTORS DETERMINING ‘READINESS’

Maturity, parental attitudes, culture and self-determination are some major factors in determining whether a child is ready to start a relationship, says Brewer. “Many children of migrants are restricted from having relationships for various reasons. In some Asian families it might be that there is an expectation of school success and focus. In some Middle-Eastern families it might be around cultural and religious expectations of how men and women relate and interact and the trajectory of relationships (quite quickly to marriage).”

A family’s openness and previous experience with youngsters in relationships (e.g. siblings or other family members) can also influence both the parents’ and the child’s readiness.

“[Other family members’] values can be useful to reflect on and to use when working out what fits with the family’s values and expectations,” says Brewer.

Sometimes a child’s motivation for a relationship may not be driven by their feelings, but be affected by their reaction to family rules (revealing a rebellious streak) or a desire to achieve a particular status amongst peers.

“Sometimes [the relationship is about achieving] a ‘trophy’ title – kids want to know that they can get someone to declare a union or connection more than actually knowing how to be in a relationship.”

The gender of the child can also sometimes contribute to how ready they feel. Brewer says she has worked with several young women who have a self-imposed ‘no relationships’ rule.
"They recognise the time and emotional investment which can be required to have a ‘romantic other’ and have a sense of wanting to prioritise their study over what is sometimes seen as very emotionally turbulent and unknown."

**HOW SHOULD PARENTS SPEAK TO KIDS ABOUT THESE RELATIONSHIPS?**

Kids need to be given the space to work out how their own personal values and feelings fit in with the rest of the world. As such, the framing of conversations about relationships is important, says Brewer.

“If there is a specific ‘serious’ message that parents want to deliver – and ensure it’s received with appropriate listening – then setting a specific time to meet and having a bit more of a formal chat is something I recommend. Parents shouldn’t spring these ‘big chats’ on kids in the hallway or when they’re sleeping in on a Saturday morning.”

More general conversations can be initiated using examples from real life, the media and in relation to the young person’s situation, she says.

Knowing what young kids may be curious about with regards to relationships can also help start conversations. Protheroe says that kids call Kids Helpline to talk about all sorts of relationship issues: seeking information about relationships; concern for a friend’s relationship; advice on when to start dating; wanting to start a relationship; how to tell someone that they like them; and questions about relationship maintenance and closure.

Sometimes, kids don’t or can’t talk to their parents about these issues and that is where approaching a counselling service can provide extra support.

“Having a private place where young people can talk through their concerns with someone who doesn’t know them personally, but is a qualified counsellor, is what Kids Helpline is all about,” she says.

With or without the knowledge and support of their parents, a counsellor can reflect a young person’s feelings, normalise them as appropriate and validate the challenges of navigating relationships.

The advice given by counsellors involves running through options and possible consequences, exploring the resources and support the young person has, as well as helping them tap into their inherent beliefs and values, she says.

**BREWER’S TIPS ON WHAT KEY MESSAGES KIDS SHOULD RECEIVE FROM PARENTS:**

- Relationships are/should be safe places to share feelings and experience trust.
- Good/solid relationships require communication and agreement, and sometimes a level of compromise to make them long lasting.
- Sometimes, despite best efforts/intentions, relationships don’t always work out, and sometimes that’s nothing to do with you not being worthy/valuable/lovable/good enough.
- Communicating your needs in a relationship is very important. It is important to establish what your expectations are and what you are seeking – and this conversation might require revisions and ongoing work as a relationship develops and grows.
- Sometimes relationships are an emotional storm for young people and you might need guidance on how to navigate the emotions, expectations and interactions.
- When conflict occurs in adult relationships it’s important not to hide it away from kids. Demonstrating how to resolve conflicts can empower kids to do so in their own relationships.

**Sources:**

Adolescent Romantic Relationships – Why are they important? And should they be encouraged or avoided? Accessed 6 October online at http://www.headspace.org.au/media/326676/romanticrelationships_adolescent_romantic_relationships_why_are_they_important_headspace_evsu.pdf

The Upside of Being a Kid in Love accessed 6 October online at http://tweenparenting.about.com/od/socialdevelopment/a/Kid-in-Love.htm
Parenting just got easier!

Get 24 hour access to expert parenting advice organised by age and topic so help is just a click away.

Download these great posters and guides!

Poster #9

Parentingideas Club Guide #1: Pocket Money
How to use pocket money to promote good money habits and develop greater

Parentingideas Club Guide #2: Sleep
How to make sure your kids get the sleep they need for good health, wellbeing and learning

Get girls outside to build their confidence.

Help girls work out what’s worth worrying about and what’s not.

Praise girls for what they do. NOT how they look.

Get fathers involved to help girls feel comfortable and safe.

Assist girls to build relationships and avoid cliques.

Expose girls to the wisdom of older women so they can learn from their wisdom.

Help girls face their fears rather than avoid them or be overwhelmed.

Assist girls to build relationships and avoid cliques.

Praise girls for what they do. NOT how they look.

Get fathers involved to help girls feel comfortable and safe.

Tick each strategy as you put it into practice.

7 ways to raise GREAT GIRLS

1. Help girls face their fears rather than avoid them or be overwhelmed.

2. Get girls outside to build their confidence.

3. Praise girls for what they do. NOT how they look.

4. Help girls work out what’s worth worrying about and what’s not.

5. Assist girls to build relationships and avoid cliques.

6. Get fathers involved to help girls feel comfortable and safe.

7. Expose girls to the wisdom of older women so they can learn from their wisdom.

For posters, guides and many more inspirational ideas go to parentingideasclub.com.au
It’s easy to think that the imperfections in our families and our kids are the result of our own mistakes as parents. Maggie Dent cautions against being too hard on ourselves. Tempering your expectations from the start might be the wise way to go.
Recently I read an article about the positive and negative impacts of labelling children, particularly in relation to learning difficulties.

A label can help a child understand why they might feel a certain way and receive support that they otherwise might not have found or had access to. Conversely, a label can carry a stigma and cause children to be bullied or marginalised.

Beyond this, labels can become self-fulfilling prophecies; a negative label can disguise the natural strengths of our precious children.

If you tell a child she’s “clumsy” then she is very likely to notice every time she drops something or trips, but she probably won’t notice all the times she didn’t. She may also get so nervous about being clumsy that she becomes more accident prone.

If you label a child “shy”, he is likely to live up to that expectation, holding back when he feels exuberant because “I’m shy”.

To make this issue even more complex, what if that boy isn’t shy but rather suffers from selective mutism, which is a childhood anxiety disorder that finds people unable to speak in certain situations?

It is important for us not to be too casual in labelling our children at either end of the label spectrum because we can miss seeing the whole picture … this beautiful unique human being we’ve been gifted to parent. I think a lot of what lies behind our need to label comes from our own expectations of children, and of ourselves as parents.

Expectations are really interesting things when you think about them. Quite often we don’t even know that we consciously have expectations and yet we behave in accordance with them all the time.

I remember reading an article written by the mother of a boy who was diagnosed with autism. She’d written a poem capturing the expectation she’d had before her child was born. Simply put, she thought she was “going on a holiday to Hawaii, however she ended up going on a holiday to Holland”. When real parenthood happened, she needed to adjust her expectations.

There is no question that as humans, it is important we have high, positive expectations. However, we need to temper them with realism.

For example, it’s not realistic for most new mums to expect that they will look like the done-up, slender mums we see on the covers of parenting magazines holding perfect, happy babies. Plenty of real mums of newborns would be more likely to be photographed looking exhausted, sporting a mono-brow and a slight paunch, with a bit of sick on their shirt as decoration.

Another area of unrealistic expectations is that of creating a happy family. I’ve heard parents express deep disappointment when they’ve experienced conflict in challenging moments with their children. Because they experienced unsettling and unpleasant experiences in their own childhoods, they had planned and expected to create a “perfect” family in which there was never a cross word spoken, nor a door slammed. Clearly an unrealistic expectation!

Humans and human behaviour are incredibly unpredictable and when you put young children into the mix, with their undeveloped prefrontal cortex, a lousy night’s sleep, a sore tummy or a tooth coming, a perfectly happy child is not realistic. The overload of the brain chemical cortisol will ensure that they will be unhappy and in need of comfort.

As adults, we all experience moments of not being the best person we can be, especially when tired or overwhelmed – and this can result in challenging family moments.

Remember; every time we make a mistake, we are giving our children a golden opportunity to learn how to be capable and resilient. If we go by the 80/20 rule, which cuts us some slack 20% of the time as we aim to get it right just 80% of the time, then we’re probably doing just fine.

Rather than seek perfection, I encourage parents to embrace parenthood by seeing it as a journey whereby they will be given the gift of a miracle of life – a complete unknown – and that they will simply do the best they can to take care of this helpless little being.

They will do this with the best intentions of being able to lovingly, gently and patiently meet the needs of their miracle so that one day they can find the spark within their being that brings them alive, and their children can then share that spark with the world to make it a better place.

The what, the how and everything in between is the shared sacred interaction of human beings. If we have this expectation when we become a parent, we may experience less disappointment when the perfect child we imagined does not manifest.

As for labels, I think we all need to start with one: imperfect (and proud of it).
Discipline is a necessary part of parenting, yet it is often misunderstood. It is usually associated with punishment – smacking, humiliation and other types of censuring action. However, effective discipline teaches children about appropriate behaviour; it encourages them to take responsibility for their own actions. Good discipline doesn’t involve physical harm or verbal put-downs. It requires firmness and a willingness to treat children with respect, even if they don’t always respond to us in kind.

Use the ESCAPE method when dealing with children’s misbehaviour:

1. **Establish** clear limits and boundaries for children. Rules need to be clear and specific. “Be home by six o’clock” is more effective than “Don’t be late”.

2. **Stop**, think and go against your first impulse when children misbehave. If you feel like your are losing your cool with your children, take a walk, phone a friend or even count to ten before interacting with them.

3. **Cue** children once when giving instructions or directions. Repeated requests or threats only encourage ‘parent deafness’ in children.

4. **Act** when children don’t stick to the limits or they refuse to cooperate. Rather than nag or coax children into doing the right thing implement a consequence that is related to their misbehaviour. For instance, children who constantly come home late can stay home next time and toddlers who leave toys around can lose them for a while.

5. **Pinpoint** the reason for the children’s behaviour. As much of their misbehaviour is to get their parents’ attention, our initial reaction often encourages it further. If you constantly nag children at bedtime, coax attention-seekers to cooperate and argue with determined teenagers – try changing the way you respond.

6. **Encourage** children at every opportunity. Children who are difficult to deal with generally lack self-confidence and doubt their self-worth so they need constant encouragement.

Consistency rather than severity is the key to effective discipline.

**Disappointment**

One of the keys to functioning socially and emotionally is the ability to deal with disappointment and rejection.

Most children experience some type of rejection from their peers occasionally throughout childhood. One study found that even popular children were rejected about one quarter of the time when they approached other children in school.

Paradoxically, children’s experience of rejection and disappointment at school is good for them, as long as it’s balanced with successful experiences too. They learn that they can cope and solve problems in their own way and that bad experiences don’t last forever.

And they learn that sadness and disappointment can be managed too, which is an important lesson to take into adolescence and beyond, when life will be full of ups and downs.

One way to help children deal with rejection and disappointment is to talk through problems or difficulties, recognising and accepting their feelings. Talk about various scenarios, discussing possible outcomes. The age of your child will determine the amount of detail. Keep things simple and avoid burdening a younger child with concepts he or she doesn’t understand.

Your attitude as a parent can make a huge...
difference to how a child reacts. If you see rejection or disappointments as problems then your child will be hamstrung by this view. See them as challenges then your child will, in all likelihood, pick up on your upbeat view and deal with their own disappointments more easily. After all, confidence is catching!

To help children handle disappointment and rejection try the following four strategies:

1. **Model optimism.** Watch how you present the world to your children, as they will pick up your view.

2. **Tell** children how you handle disappointment and rejection. Not only is it reassuring for children to know that their parents understand how they feel but they can learn a great deal from how their parents handle situations.

3. **Help** children recognise times in the past when they bounced back from disappointment. Help them recognise those same strategies can be used again.

4. **Laugh together.** Humour is a great coping mechanism. It helps put disappointment in perspective. It helps them understand that things will get better. They always do.

The stronger the wind the stronger the trees’ is the notion here. Supporting kids to handle life’s hurdles helps them to develop a lasting sense of resilience, which is essential for good mental and emotional health.

**DECISION MAKING**

Decision making, like anything, requires practice. Some children want to have a say about everything that involves them. They have no problem letting parents know what they want and how life should be. Other children, often last borns, will avoid making decisions and will happily sit back and follow the lead of others in anything from fashion to food.

Most parents these days are keen to involve children in family decision-making processes. It is smart management to get children’s input as they are more likely to stick to decisions when they have had a say.

It is challenging for parents to know when to make decisions for children and when to stand back and allow them to decide. **Decision making is broken into three areas:**

1. **Parents rule:** these are decisions where there is no negotiation, e.g. going to school, bedtime.

2. **Parents and kids work things out together:** these are areas where you and your child negotiate outcome, e.g. when to come home from an outing, TV programs.

3. **Kids Decide:** give your children full authority in some areas, e.g. choose the sport they play, or their school activities.

Each of these areas will vary according to parental values, the age of children and even individual temperament. Some parents use a family meeting format to share decisions with kids, although usually it’s done on an informal basis.

As children grow and show more ability to make sensible decisions, allow them more authority over their lives. Increasing, independence involves greater freedom to choose, which demonstrates trust and faith in their ability to make good decisions. But greater freedom to choose needs to be accompanied by an increase in responsibility and also a willingness for them to experience the consequences of their decisions.

All decisions that children make have consequences – whether positive or negative. A child can use the following three questions to help him or herself assess the consequences of a decision they may make:

- Is this behaviour safe for me?
- Is this behaviour fair to others?
- Is this behaviour smart and in my long-term best interests?

Children can’t see the long-term consequences of their decisions so it’s useful to give them information to help them make smart choices.

Also, some children leap before they look. They need to be reminded to slow down and consider some of the possible consequences of their actions.

Decision making is hard work for parents who are always treading a fine line between being too protective and promoting independence. If children are to learn how to make smart choices, adults need to equip them with the knowledge and skills, as well as opportunities, to make their own decisions.
Calming the chaos

As another silly season fast approaches, Sarah Wayland has some tips on how to make this year’s celebrations more peaceful and less stressful than the last.

Kelly Exeter’s top tips for calming the chaos:

Don’t send Christmas Cards – send ‘Happy New Year’ cards.

Take a load off and wait until those quiet times to connect with the people you care about.

Make sure you move your body every day. This benefits your emotional health as well as counterbalancing those accidental overindulgences! You only need 30 minutes a day, and get your children involved too.

Ditch the guilt – just be mindful about what you are doing. You can’t be everything to everyone. Work out what is doable for you and your family, and stick to it.

Minimise options: keep it simple!
The aisles of the supermarket are already starting to fill up with mince tarts and festive gift-wrap despite the sensation that the last Christmas holidays were only yesterday. As we near the end of the year the busy-ness of the season begins to consume our lives. Presentation ceremonies, speech nights, school concerts, graduations, dance concerts, sports awards. They have the capacity to unhinge even the most organised of families. So how can you deliberately slide towards the end of 2014 with your sanity intact?

A 2012 study by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that just over 70% of Australians report low levels of psychological distress at some point throughout the year, with women reporting higher scores than men. Time constraints aside, the festive season can be a challenging time for many: blended families juggling time with kids, a family’s first Christmas without a loved one, or separation by distance (be it physical or psychological) can decrease a person’s energy as they near the end of the year. Given all the demands that come with end-of-year celebrations and activities, a focus on wellbeing and opportunities to organise ourselves seems not just practical but a bonus for our emotional health as well.

Kelly Exeter, author of Your Best Year Yet, has made a career out of sharing the advice she gathered when she chose to turn her back on busy. As a focused career woman with two children along for the ride, she actively seeks out ways to not get caught up in a frantic lifestyle. “You don’t have to catch up with everyone before Christmas. This is a highly mythical line in the sand!” she explains. “Catch up with everyone in January when the kids are on holidays and you’re not all so frazzled. In the meantime, keep your pre-Christmas catch ups to no more than one per day on the weekends. Do not – I repeat DO NOT – spend every weekend in November and December going from one function to another or else you will risk finding yourself limping into Christmas day without a skerrick of festival cheer left in your body”.

Managing the busy is Victoria Stevens catch cry. As the mum of three boys – 14, 11 and eight – she focuses on optimism and organisation to keep her family happy and healthy as the end of the year approaches. “The last term is our busiest, but if we get ourselves in a good space, it can also be our best,” she explains. With her eldest beginning high school in 2013 she found that the end of year exams were stressful for the whole family. “If together we create a work plan with exam dates and what he’s studying each day on a weekly calendar this can provide focus. It breaks his study down into manageable chunks.” Learning what can be let go also provides a chance to take a breath “In term 4, I reduce the activities that I have to force the kids to” she laughs, but the goal of simplifying their life works. “Loads of sleep, fresh air and good routines are what works for my family. And personally, I try and make sure that when school finishing time rolls around, I’m in a good, relaxed state. I find that my boys mirror my emotions so it’s my responsibility to ensure that I’m in a good place, so everyone else is too”.

Organising families is not the work of just one. It’s a team effort focused on communication, taking regular breaks and reminding each other that this time of year can actually be a positive one, given that most of our weeks rarely factor in time to come together and enjoy the people we have in our lives. Keeping calm and carrying on can allow you the chance to enjoy those moments watching your kids on stage, laughing at a dance recital or simply sharing a meal. Knowing what time you have and letting go of the things you can’t get to creates a win for everyone.

Kelly Exeter’s top tips for calming the chaos:

1. **Ditch the guilt** – just be mindful about what you are doing.
2. **Dress** – send ‘Happy New Year’ cards. Take a load off and wait until those quiet times to care about.
3. **Get your body every day**. This benefits your emotional health as well as counterbalancing stress! You only need 30 minutes a day, and get your children involved too.
4. **Mindful about what you are doing**. You can’t be everything to everyone. Work out our family, and stick to it.
5. **Simple!** Too many options equals too many decisions and too many decisions make us
The online world provides endless access to inappropriate content for our kids. Filters can play a part, but as Catherine Gerhardt describes, it’s much better to have a fully rounded approach to tackling the issue.

Help your kids build their own firewall against online nasties.

KIDPROOF MELBOURNE is dedicated to creating safer communities around the world. Looking for a way to compliment your safety education? – keep Kidproof top of mind.

www.kidproofsafety.com.au
FICTION VS. REALITY

One of the biggest concerns I have as a parent at the moment is the relative ease with which children can have access to online pornography. Recent studies revealed that children as young as eight years old have seen it, and most kids have witnessed it before parents have even considered discussing it. For me, it’s about considering what the long-term effects are going to be on our children’s future relationships. With wide access to the internet, including mobile devices and gaming systems, it is too easy for even young children to reach inappropriate content.

Most kids who have seen pornography know immediately that it feels wrong. They can feel ‘strange’ and their personal instincts kick in like an alarm system telling them something is not quite right. They may feel sick, embarrassed, confused. Some kids stumble across it (many porn sites know popular key strokes kids use), and others are exposed to it by friends or family.

IS PORNOGRAPHY REALLY THAT BIG OF A DEAL FOR OUR KIDS? The simple answer is yes. Pornography damages their brains by tricking them into releasing the same pleasure chemicals that drugs do. “A child’s brain is more vulnerable as it is rapidly forming neural connections. Viewing pornography can reprogram a child’s brain and initiate an addiction that is often harder to overcome than drugs or alcohol,” says Kristen Jenson, author of Good Pictures, Bad Pictures.

Pornography Harms Relationships. Youth are being exposed to pornography even before they have had the opportunity to experience a relationship. Teens tell researchers that they don’t like pornography but they feel pressured to watch it, and they even acknowledge that it provides a model for them to follow. When we start to think about kids getting sex education from pornography, we can start to understand why we should be worried about their future relationships. Viewing pornography is setting up unrealistic expectations and desensitizing sexual expectations. Pornography can distort a person’s view of what a healthy relationship should be, and devalues the principles of mutual respect, trust and love we expect our children to experience in the future.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO BUILD THEIR CHILD’S FIREWALL?

Be Proactive, Be Preventative. Like most things it’s helpful for parents to begin the conversation before their child becomes interested in porn. Younger kids are more likely to see the parent as a dependable source of information; by the time they are teenagers peers become the reliable source and peer pressure and curiosity can lead them down a path of unrealistic expectations and perhaps, even addiction.

Be Open. Most kids won’t tell their parents because they know they shouldn’t be looking at that stuff and, worst of all, you might take the technology away from them. Be honest, for many of us that might be our first reaction. But in hindsight it only prevents kids from telling us about their online experiences later on. It’s okay to say, “Thanks for telling me, I’ve had that happen too”, or “Let’s look into that together”.

START BY ASKING YOUR CHILD. Ask whether they have ever seen inappropriate photos online. Let them know that if it happens you expect they will come and tell you, assuring them they will not get into trouble and will not have the device taken away from them. You can suggest your child leaves a note for you if they see something online that makes them feel uncomfortable. This lets you know when they are ready to discuss it and gives you the chance to have a chat with them on the subject when you are ready.

Internet Filters and Porn Blockers. These are important, but they are not a one-stop shop on protecting our kids. They can certainly help by minimising the risk of ‘random’ porn attacks, but they won’t safeguard them either. Even if we feel we have placed adequate measures within our own homes, children must, and do, go out into the wider world where they will have exposure that is beyond our control.

Developing Internal Filters is about getting kids to understand what pornography is, how it affects their brain, and coming up with strategies they can use when they are exposed to it. Children need to be able to make safer choices when they are in situations where content filters or adults are not monitoring their behaviour. It is normal for kids to be curious and as they head into the teenage years that curiosity peaks. As children grow they spend more time online and get exposed to more of the online world, with parents having less control over their viewing habits.

Parenting Responsibility. Websites and governments are taking the minimum responsibility on these issues, so it has to become primarily a parenting responsibility. Children can be protected and harm can be minimised by taking some common sense approaches. Parents need to establish their expectations about children’s viewing; make sure communication devices are used in public places; install net nannies and firewalls where appropriate and don’t be afraid to keep a check on website histories. Investigate how you can protect your children and minimise their exposure by installing a porn site blocker onto your internet connected devices. A quick Google search will provide some options which best suit your family.

Discussions about pornography need to be part of an ongoing conversation within the family. Talking won’t put your kids at increased risk; in fact, it increases their awareness and empowers them to make safer decisions when the time does come. Short, frequent discussions will help your child remember information – rather than one big long lecture. As bestselling author Steve Maraboli advised: “Take action! An inch of movement will bring you closer to your goals than a mile of intention.”
In putting together a presentation called Surviving the Ride on the Adolescent Rollercoaster, I invited mums and dads who have done a Time & Space program to come along to a preview of the talk. The preview was to be Melbourne based but, as Time & Space programs are offered around Australia (and indeed the world now – with sessions happening in the U.K.), emails started coming back from parents of teenagers saying things like, “I would love to come but obviously it is hard to get there from Perth!”

How could these keen parents be included, I wondered.

And then an idea visited. I sent these parents another invitation by email:

“What do you know to be true about ways you can survive on the adolescent rollercoaster?” Here was an opportunity to ask the tribe – the Time & Space community. Responses flooded back. Survival tips from mums and dads and carers going about their everyday efforts, raising their adolescents as well as they could. They were brilliant. So here’s some of the wisdom that flowed back. As you read it, consider what you think your answers are...

FROM KATE CLARK (MELBOURNE)
The best thing I did with my now 19-year-old daughter, to keep the rollercoaster on track, was to head off early with her on a Thursday morning and have breakfast in a cafe on the way to school. We started this when she was having a few wobbles in Year 9 and continued it through to the end of Year 12. I got the idea from a colleague at work who said she used to have dinner with her teenage son every Monday night and that got them through some tough times.

FROM PAUL SHANLEY (MELBOURNE)
Be prepared to be open and vulnerable with your kids – be open about some of the struggles you have been through, how you got through them, what your learnings were. Your children are then more likely to share with you their challenges and issues.

FROM JENNIFER PACIFICO (ADELAIDE)
Be the parent, not the friend... if there are times when my children are unhappy about something I am doing, saying, or restricting – then I tell myself I’m doing a good job.

And... grumpy, moody, stompy, uncommunicative teenagers turn into delightful, loving older human beings – they just get a bit lost for a while.

MELINDA RAU-WIG (GEELONG)
Let’s just say I have used our Maltese Terrier, Angel, to be the ‘go-between’ when times get unbearable...

DAVID PERRY (MELBOURNE)
As a divorced parent, I just try to maintain a dialogue, tell them I love them, teach them resilience by example and have some fun when I see them.

KARMEN KRASIC (GEELONG)
Do something as simple as going for a drive to a destination of their choice, which I always find makes for great conversations as they do not have to make eye contact.
WENDY USHER (PERTH)
There is one thing we never do. I find it most important. Never take fear into a conversation. Especially if you are in a situation where you are worried. If you are stuck in ‘cause and effect’ you won’t be able to step out of your fear and create the optimum thinking, feeling and acting needed.

RICHARD COOK (MELBOURNE)
Friends – quality not quantity.

TIFFANY WINN (ADELAIDE)
I have learned through sheer trial and error that when my son says a boundary isn’t fair, actually, it is usually very fair... and I have to accept being viewed as an unfair parent to be a good parent.

GLEN WAKEFIELD (HOBART)
When things get heated it has been good for us to have some time out for a little while to allow things to cool down... I mean for both parties to give each some space and have a think. When we do come back together we deliberately try and keep the voice volume low and calm and deliberate. Respect each others’ point of view.

MARK FARMER (ADELAIDE)
One-on-one conversations are great. The hard thing is to find a time when they want to talk to me. When that happens I have to be prepared to drop what I am doing and seize the moment – as these opportunities don’t come around often...

KERRI PHILPOTT (HOBART)
I recently put some photos of my two children on the fridge... I change them every week just to remind me of what they were like when they were little. The pictures always give me a smile.

IMPLICIT IN ALL THIS FEEDBACK ARE A FEW COMMON THREADS:

- Wisdom comes from experience. Often we can bunker down in our own little family setting – isn’t there some value in finding ways to share, to ask the tribe? The pool of expertise deepens when we share what works and doesn’t work with each other.

- You won’t agree with everything. That’s good. There are no hard and fast formulas that are guarantees. We can learn about what we value when something grates, when something strikes an “I don’t believe that” chord.

- There are only half the answers here. Who’s missing? Of course, the adolescents themselves. Perhaps you might share this article with them and ask them their best tips for mums and dads surviving the ride on the Adolescent Rollercoaster (hmmm, there’s the idea for a story to come!)

Feel free to share your thoughts with Bill. You can reach him on the contact page of his website...

www.time-space.com.au
Join the Parenting ideas conversation on facebook

Do you have childhood traditions (things YOU loved to do as a child) that you are sharing with your kids? What kinds of things, if so?

What jobs do your kids help with around the house?

And do you give pocket money for chores?

Here’s some really useful advice on handling troubles at school. Tip number five is a really important one.