



Parenting young children can feel a lot like surfing: One moment we’re in calm waters, enjoying a harmonious moment with our kids; the next we’re turned topsy-turvy by the wave of a child’s meltdown crashing over him or her. We parents have to be nimble and fast-acting to stay upright in family waters.

When parents feel the family’s shifting currents, it can be helpful to take a Meta-Moment, breathe, and picture your best self as a parent. You may have your own idea of what that best self is...and you may also be interested to know that researchers who study families find that there isn’t one single “parenting style” that is best. In fact, researchers who reviewed many, many parenting studies conclude that there are five important parenting skills for parents to offer children at different times:

1. Protection and comfort. When a child feels afraid or is deeply troubled, comforting him or her not only soothes the child’s neurobiology, it’s an investment in their future. Children who are soothed effectively when they are young, cope better with stress, are more empathic to others’ distress, and have better relationships with their parents later in life.

2. Control. Sometimes a parent has to exert power to enforce some discipline, but it is crucially important that it be matched carefully to the misdeed (e.g., was it intentional?), and the child him - or herself (their temperament, mood, skill level, self-image, etc). When discipline is well-crafted, children grow to do the right thing on their own, even overriding impulses to do otherwise.

3. Reciprocity. Sometimes it’s wonderful for parents to comply with their children’s reasonable requests. We know from studies that when children feel respected and valued, they want to cooperate and work together more. In one study, mothers who had equal give-and-take with their sons had less conflict with them.

4. Guided learning. Sometimes being a good parent is being a good teacher, whether it’s training a youngster to tie shoes, use the potty, solve sticky social situations, or learn about feelings. Just like in these other areas, studies show that children whose parents talk with them about feelings—including details, interpretations, and feedback—develop greater emotional competence.

5. Group participation. Children--and parents--need to know who their “tribes” are. Participating in extended family or neighborhood or church groups helps give kids (and us!) a sense of belonging and a social identity, and it helps them develop skills of how to behave in public situations.

In reality, there are probably more best selves as a parent, but knowing when to shift parenting approaches can help us parents improve our effectiveness — and help our families to stay upright and balanced through all kinds of waters.

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