

[Home](#) > [Raising Children](#) > [Lesson 10: Mistakes Parents often make](#) > 6. Humiliating a child in front of others

Lesson 10: Mistakes Parents often make

Many parents have frustrated and angry relationships with their children. Even very young children sometimes become a source of annoyance with their constant demands, whining, and disobedience. Family life is supposed to be joyous and fulfilling but reality is often very different in many cases. However, a lot of the heartache and pain of child rearing is quite unnecessary.

If parents would take a little time and effort to improve their ways, realize their mistakes, and devise new strategies and plans, the dividends would be great. A small change in attitude and/or behavior would make life much happier for both parent and child.

Below are some common mistakes that parents often make.

1. Making children dependent

Some parents believe that to love children means to do their work. They take excessive pity on the child and feel that as a parent it is their duty to do things for him. So at six years old a child is still be dressed by the parents. He is considered too young to tie his own shoes, or comb his hair. Such constant fussing over the child does not instill confidence and independence in the child. A ten year old who never cleans his room, and lets mum or dad do it, will learn to always depend on others. This may also foster laziness, sloppiness and a lack of initiative.

A wise parent knows that the best way to help a child is not do things for him, but to show him how to do them. Learning the skills of carrying out personal and household chores are an achievement often appreciated during the early years. A child who is not taught to do them when young, will be very unwilling to do them when older. Parents should help their children learn to do their own work, using the physical and mental powers the Almighty has blessed them with.

2. Quarreling in front of the children

It is natural for couples to have occasional arguments, sometimes even heated and bitter ones. However it is very damaging to carry these out in front of children. Children do not understand that this is not a cause of worry, and may begin to imagine the worst.

To them it could be a sign that the parents do not love each other, that they may even divorce and destroy his world.

This causes depression and loss of security among children. Worse, it could have damaging effects as the child grows. He could look upon the conflicting relationship of his parents as a normal relationship for married couples and this could have a major effect on his own relationships.

Some parents even try to make the children take sides. If a wife feels her husband is treating her unfairly, she may talk to the children and make them see her side. She would like to turn them against the husband, at least to a certain degree. What she fails to realize is that the husband is a father to her children. They would like to respect and love him.

By poisoning them against him she is doing them a great injustice. She could be damaging a relationship that has the potential to bring the child great good. This also applies to those who try to turn children against their grandparents, or other relatives. Because of a conflict with in-laws, children are told of how unfair and oppressive the family is.

To deprive the children of love and respect for their extended family is also a great wrong. Parents should not let their own quarrels keep their children away from enjoying the special love of grandparents and other relatives.

The best thing parents can do to a child is present a loving and harmonious relationship among themselves. It boosts the child both mentally and emotionally and helps him form loving relationships in his own life. It is true that arguments cannot always be dismissed. But they must be done in private, away from the child who cannot understand or bear fighting among his parents.

3. Expecting too much of children

Some parents would like their children to behave totally like adults. They don't want them to run around, to play, to talk loudly, even to touch things around the house. What they should understand is that all these activities are part of growing up. To be a healthy adult, children need to have passed through various stages, each of which is a building block in his character.

In Hadith al-Mufazzal, our sixth Imam describes the wisdom behind the childish behavior which some adults dislike. He says:

If a child had been born with mature intellect, he would have been astounded on opening his eyes and seeing such varied assortment, different kinds of forms and distinctive images of unity and disunity. For a long time he would not understand where he had come from and where he has arrived, and whether all that he was seeing was in a state of dreams or waking.

If he had been born with mature intellect he would have felt disgusted and degraded on finding himself being carried about in the lap, fed with milk, wrapped in bandages.

There would not have been, if they had been born with mature intellect, that sweetness, nor that consideration for infants in the minds of the adults which comes from fondling the untutored children. Their artlessness creates a particular attraction. As such he is born into the world without an understanding for anything, quite unaware of the world and what lies therein. He views all these things with his undeveloped brain and inadequate understanding, and so does not feel perplexed.

His intellect and understanding develop by degrees, slowly from time to time, little by little. This introduces him gradually to the things around him and accustoms his brain accordingly.

The child lives in a world quite different from that of the parent. Parents sometimes view the life of the child from an adult perspective, and forget that to the child his little world is very important.

Although they must be kept away from harmful and dangerous things, a child should be allowed to explore things that arouse his curiosity. Let him meddle with things that he is interested in, if the consequences are not very destructive. The house should not be a prison for him, with constant orders to sit down and be quiet.

Allow the child to have a little independence, especially in things that are not greatly significant. The small mistakes that he may make will teach him to do different next time. There is a difference between issues of grave importance that cannot be compromised, and issues in which some flexibility can be allowed. Life should not be so serious that every small thing should be treated like a major issue.

Some parents also make the mistake of expecting too many achievements from their children. A parent should know his child, and his strengths and weaknesses. If a child is not too bright, it is enough to encourage him to work hard and achieve according to his potential. To expect that he must bring perfect marks, and then show disappointment when he cannot, hurts the child and lowers his self-esteem. This is the same for all expectations the parents has from the child. It must be proportionate to the age and ability of the child.

4. Negativity

Life is miserable for those children who have to deal with parents who are constantly negative. Such parents do not forget mistakes, harp on small issues, and are always predicting the worst. “You are not studying hard, you are bound to fail”, Your room is such a mess, I wonder how sloppy your house will be

when you grow up”, “Stop troubling your younger sister, you have no love for her at all” are examples of negative and perhaps destructive comments.

A parent may sometimes say such things in anger, but it is the constant repetition of negative comments that affect a child greatly. A happy home is one in which children know that they will be disciplined when necessary, but do not have to fear a sharp tongue or harsh words.

Some parents also have a very negative attitude on life. They complain of their work, and the people they work with. They blame the world for their troubles and are quick to talk negatively about others. All this is undoubtedly going to have an effect on the child. A child who has heard a lot about how unfair and difficult life is may form a dim view of life in this world. His enthusiasm for life decreases. A great deal of a child’s joy and zest for living stems from what his parents think and say about life. It is always necessary to avoid being too negative when talking in front of children.

5. Being two-faced

Many parents do not realize how observant and absorbing a child is. They will talk in front of him forgetting that he is present, almost as though he is a piece of furniture – deaf and dumb. But a child listens and absorbs, often ponders over and sometimes repeats, what he hears. Thus when a parent says something about a particular thing or person, and then says something different to someone else, the child is introduced to being two-faced.

A parent may rant against someone, and say he dislikes him immensely. Yet when he meets the same person, he is very nice to him and shows no sign of his anger. Although to a certain degree this may be necessary, for we cannot show our disagreements openly, it is not necessary to indulge in hypocritical behavior. A hypocrite is one who will be very sweet to the face, but will stab from the back.

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a) says: *The worst of the servants (of Allah) is one who has two faces and two tongues. He praises his brother-in-faith when he is present, and eats him when he is absent.*

A child should not be exposed to such behavior. He believes that his parent is always right, and to see such two faced behavior is a disillusionment and a wrong message.

6. Humiliating a child in front of others

A child has his own personality and, just like an adult, wants that others should love and respect him. It is thus very difficult for him when he is scolded and derogated in public. Some parents announce to others when the children are present, how well behaved one child is and how naughty the other. Or, if a mistake is made, he is scolded even when there are other people around. A slight reprimand may not matter too much, but a serious one should be done in private. Respect the child’s personality, and you will teach him to respect others.

Parents are human beings and are bound to make mistakes. The aim is not to refrain from ever making mistakes, but to learn from them and gradually decrease them. Parents have been making the same mistakes over the years, and it is time to learn and change. A slight change in attitude and methods of parenting will create vastly improved relationships between parents and children. This in turn produces stronger families, a vital commodity in the struggle to create a progressive *Ummah*.

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