

Simplified Parenting

Why Less Means More Happiness

by Deborah Shouse



Parents wishing to simplify child-raising seek less stress and more fun; less scheduling and more casual time; less “shoulds” and more “want-tos” less second-guessing and more confidence.

For a happier family life, experts encourage parents to stay true to their own values, strengths and sense of family purpose, focusing on the wonders of their children instead of endless daily tasks. It begins with each child feeling loved.

Learn Love Languages

For Gary Chapman, Ph. D., author of *The 5 Love Languages of Children: The Secret to Loving Children Effectively*, understanding each child’s particular needs for touch, affirming words, quality time, gifts or acts of service is foundational to parenting success. “Other than security, a child’s deepest need is to feel loved,” says Chapman, of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. “If their love tank is full, children grow up emotionally healthy. Knowing a child’s preferred language helps parents effectively communicate their feelings. The question is not, ‘Do you love your children?’ It’s, ‘Do your children feel loved?’”

As Chapman arrives home, his son rushes to hug him, grinning while his dad tousles his hair. Chapman’s daughter often

calls out, “Dad, come into my room. I want to show you something.” This is how he communicates with each child in their primary love language.

Parents learn their children’s preferred communication style by observing their behavior, noticing how they express love and listening to them. They can also offer options and track results. For example:

- Would you like to take the dog to the park (quality time) or for me to help you study for a test (acts of service)?
- Would you like to wrestle (touch) or shop for your new shoes (gift)?

“Ideally, we offer heavy doses of the child’s primary language and sprinkle in the others,” says Chapman. “Children who feel loved respond better to suggestions and discipline. They also learn how to

express their feelings.”

Avoid Unreal Idealizing

Some parents carry a mental snapshot of their ideal child, perhaps envisioning a kid that is into sports or even-tempered or academically gifted. Often, that picture is very different from the actual child.

The first step to truly accepting the child is to allow ourselves to feel whatever authentic feelings pop up. The parent might think, “I love my son, but am struggling; I adore sports and may never get to share that with him.”

“Give yourself time to process disappointment,” advises Susan Stiffelman, a Los Angeles marriage and family therapist, mother of one and author of *Parenting Without Power Struggles: Raising Joyful, Resilient Kids While Staying Cool, Calm and Connected*. “Then identify the things you love about your kids and share those with them.” As just one example, we might convey that we love the sound of their voice and how gentle they are with the baby.

Simply Raising Children Resources

A Fine Parent, blog, Sumitha Bhandarkar, AFineParent.com/blog

Edit Your Life, podcast, Asha Dornfest, EditYourLifeShow.com

The book *Parent Hacks: 134 Genius Shortcuts for Life with Kids*, by Asha Dornfest

“Appreciating our children as they are is one way to keep our hearts open,” says Stiffelman.

Focus on the Good

When Barbara Unell, a parent educator and author of *Discipline With Love and Limits: Calm, Practical Solutions to the 43 Most Common Childhood Behavior Problems*, birthed twins, she was initially daunted by the work of caring for them. Then she began simplifying by focusing on the “wow” factors.

“Being a parent speaks to the core of our humanity. Experiencing the growth and development of a human being is miraculous. I started looking at parenting through that lens,” says Unell, who lives in the Leawood, Kansas, area.

Asha Dornfest, of Portland, Oregon, a podcaster, co-author of *Minimalist Parenting: Enjoy Modern Family Life More by Doing Less* and mother of two, relates, “I paid more attention to my values and my family’s unique needs and was less influenced by parenting experts, social pressures and well-meaning peers.”

Dornfest explored her own values by asking, “What did I learn from my parents?” and, “How do I want my family to be different?” She also practiced trusting her intuition. “Even when I’m not certain I’m right, I know I love my children, I’m doing my best, and I’ll make adjustments if necessary,” she says.

Create Rhythm and Rituals

Rhythmic activities ease the anxiety of family transitions and furnish warm solidarity, consistency and connectedness. “Increasing the predictability of meals, bedtime and other rituals also improves family life,” says Davina Muse, a mental health counselor and mother of two from Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

Muse serves as training director for Simplicity Parenting, a program based on Kim John Payne’s book *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids* that offers a connective ritual families can merge with mealtimes. Each person describes a “rose” (one good thing from the day) or a “thorn” (one challenging thing) and a “bud” (one thing they’re anticipating).

Such sharing builds a family connection and helps kids discuss difficult issues, notes Muse. Also, “Describing the bud lifts everyone’s mood.”

Every Friday evening, the Dornfests share a Sabbath dinner, a low-key way for them to gather and talk. “This ritual adds a rhythm to our week and anchors us,” says Dornfest.

Elect De-Stress Over Distress

Everyone can sometimes become over-scheduled and overwhelmed; a balance between scheduled time and downtime is necessary to well-being. In her daily check-in, Dornfest confers with herself and her husband, inquiring, “How are things going? Are they too hectic? Is our schedule energizing or draining?”

She advises, “When I feel like I’m riding a runaway train, I slow down.

There seem to be so many ‘shoulds’ in parenting; we instead need to discover what our family loves.”

Before enlisting a child for an activity, Dornfest suggests we ask why it’s important: Are you making up for your own missed opportunities as a child? Are you worried your child will miss out? Do you equate these lessons with being a good and caring parent?

Parenting is more than checking off lists and tasks. It’s about being connected with children. Build in playtime, roughhousing, chase each other around the yard, toss balloons or balls together, blow bubbles and welcome opportunities for laughter.

Soothing Quiet Time

Children that act out or withdraw may not have enough downtime.



True Happy Meals

When there's a little time and energy, use these ideas to connect.

- ♥ Start by smiling upon seeing the kids.
- ♥ Throw together an impromptu picnic and eat on the living room floor, in the yard or at the park.
- ♥ Ask the kids to read aloud while parents cook.
- ♥ Balance a soft item on a spoon held between the teeth and stage a fun race.
- ♥ While cooking, keep kids busy preparing a restaurant-style menu, a place setting with utensils wrapped in paper napkins and a way to take orders.
- ♥ Put on aprons and whip up homemade pizza, cupcakes or something unusual, like BLT pancake sandwiches.
- ♥ Buy write-on, wipe-off place mats and have kids doodle while they wait to eat.
- ♥ Dress up for dinner. Wear old Halloween costumes, put clothes on backwards or eat in pajamas.
- ♥ Share thanks. Everyone shares one thing they are grateful for.

Source: Adapted from 101 Fun Things To Do With Kids To Enjoy Everyday Family Life, by Sumitha Bhandarkar

Take the kids outside to play. "Nature is very soothing," says Muse. "Climbing trees, searching for rocks and pine cones, playing with dirt, sticks, water and leaves all offer healing down time."

To escape from worries and distractions, Stiffelman suggests three or four minutes of meditation or simply designated quiet time. For little ones, lay a stuffed teddy bear on the child's tummy and have them notice how the animal is moving. A parent and child can also be aware of the sounds they are hearing, plus incorporate a little mindful breathing into the bedtime ritual.

Know the Power of Space

Most parents think their children would go crazy if half their toys and books were removed, but this isn't true.

"My trainers and I have

worked with thousands of parents on decluttering, and the results have been powerful," says Muse. The Simplicity Parenting approach encourages parents to discard broken toys, give away anything no longer being played with and attractively store current playthings. She observes, "As you decrease the quantity of toys and clutter, you increase the child's attention and capacity for deep play."

Build Resilience

Simplifying parenting means releasing the notion that children must be happy, well-behaved and delighted with life and their parents at all times. Unell used the daily multitasking challenges with her twins as exercises in developing resilience and modeling these skills for them. If children spill milk, the parent comments, "No big deal. We all spill things." When there's a minor accident, "Let's just get towels and clean it up." A resilient attitude is, "Something goes wrong, we fix it." It's also about being flexible and coping with disappointment.

"To build resilience, parents need to feel comfortable in the presence of an unhappy child," says Stiffelman. "If parents don't allow children to be disappointed, kids can become rigid, lack confidence and struggle with unreasonable expectations."

During meltdowns or disappointments, she recommends sitting quietly, listening, and then empathizing and helping put the children's feelings into words. "This is not the time to lecture or advise," she says. "Upset children can't really listen." Yet, they can be heard—a key way to help them mature.

Parents that learn to simplify happily discover that their children feel calmer and more loved, socially and emotionally adept, and resilient. Concepts focused on creating connections, rather than parenting perfection, are easy to weave into everyday life.

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Connecting in the Land of Dementia: Creative Activities to Explore Together (DementiaJourney.org).

Heart-Strong Parenting

by Deborah Shouse

Incorporating love throughout the day keeps a child's tank full. Consider these tips from love languages expert Gary Chapman.

Physical Touch – Get Close

- ♥ Greet the child with a hug
- ♥ Stroke their hair while they talk about a challenging day
- ♥ Snuggle while watching TV

Affirmations – Encouraging Words

- ♥ Put a positive note in the child's lunch box
- ♥ Appreciate something the child did or said
- ♥ Create an encouragement jar, with praising words to use as needed

Quality Time – Periods of Undivided Attention

- ♥ Ask a specific question about their day that elicits discussion
- ♥ Schedule a date with each child
- ♥ Create something together, like a photo album

Gifts – Tangible Expressions of Love

- ♥ Make a special meal or dessert; maybe do it together
- ♥ Have some small gifts the child can choose from as rewards for positive actions
- ♥ Seek natural gifts, like a special feather, stone or flower

Acts of Service – Volunteer Assistance

- ♥ Ask, "How can I help you today?"
- ♥ Help a child repair a broken toy or resolve a challenge
- ♥ Do a family service project together

