

PARENTING PRIMER

A Handbook of Tips
for Parents of
Children 6 – 12 Years

ABOUT PENNSYLVANIA FAMILY SUPPORT ALLIANCE

Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PFSA) has been strengthening families in Pennsylvania for more than thirty years and is a vital partner in the prevention, intervention, and treatment of child abuse and neglect. Our mission is to give children a safe environment by educating parents, providing support services for families, and training professionals.

PFSA provides a wide range of services, including materials, training, and technical assistance, to affiliated agencies in our statewide network. With strong support from our organization, community-based member agencies offer services such as our parenting curriculum, "Building Your Family," or our Family Support Program with childcare provided (in most communities). Services are also provided to professionals who receive training on recognizing, reporting and responding to child abuse and neglect in order to fulfill their obligation as mandated reporters under the Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law.

If you are parenting a child or working with children, Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance has services to help you – call our office today or visit our website for more information.

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

There are two keys to being a good parent – one is information and the other is support. This booklet gives general information about a variety of topics of interest to parents and encourages its readers to find support through Family Support Programs in their local communities. Neither information nor support can solve all parenting problems, and we encourage readers to get professional help whenever it is warranted; no book can take the place of a doctor, counselor, or other professional.

To avoid the awkwardness of "he/she," we have used "he" or "she" interchangeably – each applies to all children.

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Pennsylvania
Family Support Alliance™

Protecting children from abuse



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TOP TEN TIPS FOR PARENTS OF KIDS 6-12

Children don't come with an instruction manual, but the more you learn about positive parenting and how to communicate with your child, the more enjoyable your job as a parent will be!

- Make your rules fair and consistent. If you allow your child to break the rules, you send the message that rules are made to be broken.
- Your child needs your time, love and guidance, even when she acts as if she doesn't care what you do or say. Spend time with your child. Take her to the grocery store, make dinner together and talk about what she's watching on TV.
- Preteen kids are all about contradiction. Their bodies may be maturing but they are still capable of having temper tantrums and need parents to remind them to take a bath.
- Children at this stage are concerned about justice and following rules. They see the world in black-and-white terms. There are no gray areas!
- Peer pressure becomes very important during these years. Don't downplay your child's wish to "fit in." Get to know your child's friends and their parents, and keep tabs on where your child goes when he leaves the house.
- Help your child manage emotions and control his anger. It will be an important skill for success later in life.
- Preteen kids can drive parents crazy by saying "I forgot" to almost every request. They get sidetracked easily and often lack skills for organization.
- Offer lots of alternatives to TV and video games – board games, books, sports, cooking, bike rides – to get kids outside and active. Praise kids when they choose these activities.
- Once your child is in school, he will be exposed to lots of different people and experiences. Teach your child how to be safe in the outside world and how to ask for help when she encounters problems at school or in the community.
- Don't wait for your child to learn about sexuality and drugs in school. Educate yourself, and your child, about the changes taking place in his body and how to resist peer pressure to use drugs or have sex. Don't be afraid to share your values with your child and let him know what is important to you.



CHORE WARS

Few children like helping out around the house, but kids who do chores have higher self-esteem and feel more connected to their family.

- Model what you want your child to do by following your own routine and completing your own chores without complaining.
- Make sure the chores you assign your child are appropriate for his age and developmental level. Take his interests into consideration as well, and don't always assign the same chores to each child. Allow your child some choice of what his chores will be, if possible.
- Don't assume your child knows how to complete the task. Spend some time teaching and showing your child what to do before you expect him to do it alone. Make written reminders or post notes where your child can see them.
- Establish rules for completing chores; for example, chores must be finished before the child can go out with friends. Rules must be consistent and followed by everyone. Discuss consequences for not following the rules and enforce the consequences when needed.
- Create routines for chores by doing them on the same day each week. Make sure your child has all the "tools" he needs to do the job. Take away distractions while the chores are being done. Some parents set a timer so the child knows how long he has to complete a job.
- Remind your child when it is time to complete chores, but don't nag. Let your child receive the consequences for not following through. Make sure your child sees the connection between not doing the chore and the consequences he receives.
- Reward children for following rules. See page 6 for ideas. You can also give your child a chance to earn money or privileges after doing some basic chores.

CO-PARENTING

Divorce or separation is hard on everyone in the family. Honest communication and setting aside your angry feelings for the sake of your child will help this stressful situation.

- If possible, both parents should talk to the child about the divorce (“divorce” applies to never-married couples as well) together. Children need to know that both parents love them and will stay involved in their lives.
- Tell the kids the divorce is not their fault. Children often feel they are to blame.
- Put aside your anger and do not say nasty things about the other parent, his family, or new partner. Your child wants to be loyal to both parents.
- Tell the child where the other parent will be living and when each parent will spend time with him.
- Explain that divorce is final – some children spend a lot of time hoping their parents will live together again.
- Watch for signs of trouble – younger children may regress to earlier behavior; there may be more fighting between siblings; older kids may become moody or depressed. Talk to your kids – often – and get counseling help if things don’t get better.
- Have fun. Spend time with your children doing things you both enjoy. Encourage grandparents and friends to see the children more often.
- Don’t turn your kids into friends. You need someone to vent to, cry with, and lean on – but it shouldn’t be your kids.
- Keep the lines of communication with the other parent open. Let him know about health issues, school progress, and other important matters. Remember – your child needs both of you!



THE ABSENT PARENT

Having one parent who is not involved with the child can cause a lot of hurt. There is no easy way to handle it.

- Answer your child's questions as honestly as possible, taking the age of the child into consideration.
- Avoid saying negative things about the other parent. You can comment on his behavior ("Daddy would see you if he could, but it can't happen right now. He is too sick to be safe around you," for example) but don't make a judgment about the parent.
- Find other role models of the opposite sex for your child – this is important for children of both genders. An uncle or aunt, neighbor or teacher may be able to fill this role.
- Take care of yourself so you can care for your child. Pay attention to your own need for proper nutrition, exercise, rest, and adult companionship.
- Be careful about introducing new partners to your child; make sure the relationship is truly long-term before you bring a new person into your child's life.
- Remember that even though the other parent may not be seeing the child, he or she is obligated to pay child support and medical expenses. Get legal help if you are not receiving this support.



POSSIBLE HOME REWARDS FOR CHILDREN

Giving your child a reward doesn't have to mean money. Most children respond to praise and attention from their parents, as well as material things and special privileges. Don't use rewards as bribes - they should be given after the child behaves appropriately. Be careful not to promise a reward you can't deliver.

- Taking a trip to the park
- Playing with friends
- Playing on the swing set
- Spending the night with friends or grandparents
- Eating out
- Going someplace alone with dad or mom
- Choosing a TV program
- Taking time off from chores
- Playing a favorite tape or CD
- Going to the library
- Staying up late
- Having a bedtime story
- Going to the movies, especially with a friend
- Riding in the front seat
- Choosing the menu for a meal
- Ordering pizza
- Buying something
- Riding a bike
- Sitting in the front seat
- Putting up schoolwork on the refrigerator door
- Making a special craft with mom or dad
- Doing a jigsaw puzzle
- Having a special treat in their school lunch
- Sleeping in a different place in the house
- Decorating his own room
- Having a special after-school snack, breakfast or dessert
- Playing a game with parents
- Computer time
- Playing a video game
- Watching a video
- Going for a walk
- Extra time at the playground
- A magazine subscription



SUCCESS AT SCHOOL

School is the biggest influence on your child's life, next to you. Your child spends a lot of time in school and there are ways you can help him succeed in his education.

- Work with your child's teachers. Participate in parents' nights and school conferences. Talk with teachers about school problems or successes, and ask questions. Show respect for school staff and teach your child to respect them also.
- Show your child that education is important to you. Hang his test scores on the refrigerator, let him hear you tell your friends and family about his hard work, and continue to learn more yourself.
- Read to, and with, your children. Take your children to the library. Skill in reading is needed for success in any school subject.
- Provide your child with a quiet space to do homework and supplies he needs for school. Turn off TV, music and other distractions so he can concentrate on schoolwork. Make rules about when homework must be done (for example, finish homework before playing video games).
- See that your child gets enough rest by making bed times consistent and reasonable (see page 11 for ideas). Make sure your child has a nutritious breakfast, or eats breakfast at school, before starting the school day.
- Praise your child's attempts at school, even when she gets a lower grade than expected. Offer suggestions for improvement with support and encouragement. Take an interest in your child's work and talk to him about what he is learning.



INSTEAD OF SPANKING

Disciplining children means teaching them, not punishing them. It's an ongoing process of helping kids understand what behavior is acceptable with what you – and the world – expect.

- It's always easier to prevent misbehavior than it is to correct it later on. Think about the things your child does that “push your buttons” and try to figure out a way to prevent them from happening. Keeping a short journal of your child's behavior for a few days can help this process.
- Make sure you have your child's attention before you talk to him. Say his name, touch him, and look him in the eye before you give instructions.
- Spend time with your children. They need undivided, personal attention on a regular basis.
- Use more “do's” than “don'ts.” Tell your child what you want him to do. Speak in a clear voice and don't keep talking once you have said what you need to say.
- Make a few rules, and make them count. Rules should be reasonable and appropriate for your child's age, and they should be enforced all the time.
- Set a good example. Children imitate what they see around them.
- Give choices when you can – we all want some control of our lives, kids included. Let your child decide on clothes, room decoration and things that don't impact him long-term.
- Nobody's perfect; don't sweat the small stuff. Decide which issues are really important to you and work with your child to correct those behaviors.
- Be careful about issuing threats. If you can't carry it out, don't threaten it!
- Make consequences for your child's misbehavior – especially, consequences that “fit the crime.” For example, if he leaves his bike outside, take the bike away for a few days. Be sure to enforce the consequences every time the behavior happens.
- Agree on rules with your spouse, partner, or anyone living in the home with the child. A united front is always best.
- Make a commitment to not hit your child. Learn more about alternatives and anger management. Give yourself a “time out” when you feel angry, and walk away for a few minutes while you calm down.

STRESS REDUCTION TIPS

Being a parent is the most demanding job in the world, and we learn “on the job.” With so many demands on our time and energy, we often get stressed out.

- Try some tension relievers when you are feeling overwhelmed. Some simple ways to reduce stress are: call a friend and talk, spend some quiet time alone, sing or listen to music, get outdoors for a while, take a nap, help someone else, tell someone “I love you,” see your child’s point of view.
- Take care of yourself! Pay attention to your need for physical exercise, sleep, and proper food.
- Prevent stress by changing your daily routine. For example, drive to work in a different way or plan a special mid-week event with your children.
- Know when to ask for help. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. If you feel out of control more than you would like, if you see no way out of your frustration, or if you feel you can’t talk to your kids without yelling or hitting – it may be time for some help. Join a support group, take a parenting class, or seek counseling to help you deal with the many demands you face.
- Get a book or video about managing stress, controlling anger, or parenting skills; most libraries have lots to choose from. Watch TV programs about parenting and emotional health.
- Enjoy humor. Watch a comedy movie, read, or listen to jokes; stress decreases if you can find something to laugh about.
- Avoid alcohol or drugs for stress relief. You may feel better in the short term, but it’s not a solution for very long. Find healthy ways to deal with stress and feel better.



STAYING HOME ALONE

There is no magic age when a child can stay home alone; your child must be able to handle responsibility. Help your child feel comfortable and capable when home alone.

- Begin with a few short times alone. Discuss safety risks with your child and responsibilities he will have – things like not allowing anyone in the house without your permission and not telling callers there are no adults in the house.
- Consider your child’s age, in relationship to his growth, behavior and judgment, before leaving her home alone.
- Remove fire hazards and practice a fire drill with your child; teach your child basic first aid and make sure he knows where your first aid supplies are kept.
- Establish a plan with a neighbor or friend who is willing to be called for advice if your child has a “small emergency.”
- Make sure your home address and phone number are posted near your phone. Let your child know where she can reach you and who else to call in an emergency.
- Create a routine for your child if he is home after school. Have your child call you when he gets home, insist that he does homework shortly after he gets home. Give him things to do and a nutritious snack.
- Set up ground rules to avoid arguments about what you expect. Have a clear understanding about using appliances, having friends visit, and other boundaries.
- Praise your child for doing a good job when he assumes responsibility.
- Remember – children need maturity to be responsible for younger siblings. Don’t expect children to care for other children.

MORNING AND EVENING ROUTINES

Children thrive on routines, and it's especially important to get the day off to a good start and ended with as little stress as possible. Teaching your child how to get out of the house in the morning, and how to get to sleep at night, will help him later in life.

- Set a good example by getting up on time and keeping to a morning routine yourself. Get up before your children so you can make sure they are on the right track.
- Post the morning and bedtime schedule somewhere that everyone can see it. Discuss the plan with your children and make sure they understand what time they will go to bed and get up each day. Keep the schedule consistent, even on the weekends and school holidays.
- Help your child be responsible for getting up in the morning by providing him an alarm clock and showing him how to use it – no snooze alarm!
- Make the time before bed peaceful by not allowing your child to get into activities that will make him “wound up,” not drinking sugary or caffeinated drinks, or not watching scary or disturbing movies or TV shows. Have some “quiet time” before bed so your child can calm down and prepare for sleep.
- Don't let your child have his TV, computer or cell phone on while he is in bed trying to sleep. Keep the TV turned off in the morning.
- Many children don't get enough sleep. Children between 7 and 12 years old need 10 hours of sleep per night; adjust your child's bedtime so he gets enough sleep.
- All children appreciate their parents' attention at the end of the day. Find a few minutes to talk with each child before bed – praise them, hug them and let them know how much you appreciate them
- Reading to children helps them settle down and improves their school grades as well as their behavior. It's a great way to give positive attention.



TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT DRUGS

Drugs are easily available in any community, and it's important to educate your child about them. Using drugs can hinder brain development and lead a child into addiction and serious consequences in the future.

- Media and friends have a big impact on your child, but parents still have the greatest influence. Provide a supportive and nonthreatening environment so your child feels able to talk to you about drugs.
- Start talking with your child about drugs at age 5 or 6. For example, when he is sick talk about legal and illegal drugs and how drugs can be helpful when used correctly. As your child matures, give him more information and listen to his questions and concerns.
- Do your homework and know your facts ahead of time. There are lots of good sources of information on the internet and in government programs.
- Role play situations where your child may be exposed to drugs (including alcohol) and help him come up with some ideas for not using when he is pressured to. Point out that making the smart decision is not always popular.
- Know the signs of drug and alcohol use and abuse and find out where to get help for your child if needed. Drugs have changed a lot since you were a teenager and you need to be informed. Prevention offices can also give you referrals for services if there is a problem.

TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT SEX

Many parents are not comfortable talking with their children about sex, but kids need good information – plus their parents' values – in order to make healthy decisions.

- Answer questions honestly and accurately, with words your child can understand. Visit the library or ask your doctor for information if you are unsure what to say.
- Encourage your child to ask questions. If your child is old enough to ask the question, he is old enough to get an answer.
- Talk with your child about birth control and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as reasons to say no to sex without commitment.
- Discuss sexual situations you see on television and movies; older children tend to romanticize sex and may not understand its dangers.
- Talk about peer pressure to have sex and help your child develop skills to resist peers who are sexually active.

FIGHTING WITH SIBLINGS

It's hard to know when to step in when children are fighting. Parents feel helpless to stop this behavior that can quickly become out of control.

- Kids are more likely to fight when you compare them to each other or when they feel bad about themselves in other areas. Don't compare your children, and work hard to improve their self-esteem. Avoid setting kids up to behave in certain ways; kids are likely to do what you expect, so make sure they know you expect good things.
- Try to ignore fighting as much as possible. If no one is getting hurt, let kids work out their own solutions. Let them know you have confidence they can work it out.
- Separate the fighters for a while without determining who started the fight – each child will blame the other and the fight will continue. Protect them from hurting each other!
- Let kids talk about their feelings; it's one thing to say they hate their brother and another to hit out of angry feelings.
- Insist on respect among all family members. Establish and enforce rules for all family members about how to interact. For example, a “no name-calling rule,” which applies to parents and kids, shows respect and models the behavior you want.
- As with many situations, praise for good behavior and modeling what you want from your children will help. Kids need to have conflicts in order to learn how to handle them well.



DISHONESTY (LYING AND STEALING)

Honesty is important to most parents, and they get upset when their children lie or steal. Younger kids may not know they are lying and older children lie out of fear; they're afraid of being punished if they tell the truth. Many children steal something at least once in their lives. Parents have trouble trusting their child when he steals. They feel angry and disappointed.

- Be clear and reasonable in your expectations. Children make mistakes, just like you do. If you have unreasonable expectations, they may lie to you when they don't live up to them.
- Model good behavior. Does your child hear you call in sick when you really aren't? Do you steal things, even "little things"? They learn more by what you do than what you say.
- Don't set them up to lie. If you know they broke a rule, don't ask them "did you do it?" Just decide on the consequence and follow through; if you're not sure who broke a rule, all the possible suspects can be required to "do the consequence."
- Sometimes you can skip the consequences if a child tells the truth and make telling the truth a positive thing for the child.
- Younger children often don't understand the concept of ownership; older children often steal as a result of peer pressure or to "be cool." Avoid telling them things like "I better not catch you stealing," because it encourages them to lie about the stealing.
- If a child steals something, make him return it. If it cannot be returned (like an eaten candy bar) make him pay for it.
- Teach children to ask for what they want and understand why they can't have everything they want. Give them a chance to earn money and save it for what they want.
- Forgive. This does not mean pretending that the bad behavior is okay. It means moving on without holding on to the offense.
- If lies or stealing continue or increase, there may be serious problems that require professional help. Seek out counseling with a professional who has experience working with children.

AVOIDING ARGUMENTS

When children engage in arguments with parents, both can end up frustrated and angry. Try to handle your differences without arguing by communicating clearly and respectfully.

- Establish ground rules for your home that are followed by everyone. They should be consistent and fair. Talk about your rules with your child before there is a problem and make sure they understand the rules.
- Reward your child when he does not argue when told to do something. See page 6 for some possible rewards.
- Figure out a schedule for your child and let him know in advance what will be happening. Take away as many “gray areas” as you can, so he has less to argue about. Don’t surprise your child with additional chores or expectations.
- Don’t argue! Treat your child with respect and talk in calm, clear way. If you give in to arguing, it will continue to be a way for your child to get what he wants.
- If your child begins to argue with you (for example, when you ask him to do something), explain exactly what he is doing wrong, what he should do and why. For example, you ask your child to take out the trash and he begins to argue. Stop your child and say “You are arguing with me. I asked you to take out the trash and that’s what you need to do.” Then walk away.
- Give your child directions in a supportive way rather than a threatening way. “Please take out the trash” works better than “You better take out that trash or else!” You can also try giving an incentive “When you take the trash out, you will be allowed to play the video game.”
- Give your child choices whenever possible. “Would you rather take out the trash or wash the dishes?”
- Remember to model good communication and how to appropriately question someone’s decisions.

Be a Better Parent – Take the Pledge!

- **I Pledge to Listen to My Children** – Take time to really hear them. I will look them in the eye and feel what they are saying.
- **I Pledge to Communicate With My Children** – I'll ask them hard questions and get into their business. They won't like it, but it's my responsibility.
- **I Pledge to Teach My Children Right From Wrong** – Since children pay far more attention to my actions than my words, I must practice what you preach.
- **I Pledge to Pay Attention to My Children** – In today's world, I'm often racing against the clock, I must create opportunities to focus on my children and make them the center of my attention.
- **I Pledge to Educate My Children in Mind, Body, and Soul** – As their first teacher, I have the obligation and the opportunity to set the stage for lifelong learning.
- **I Pledge to Work to Provide a Stable Family Life** – Stability is one of the most important factors in a child's well-being. I'll strive to keep as much continuity in my children's lives as possible, and if and when change occurs, think first about their needs and teach them to cope in healthy ways.
- **I Pledge to Vote for Candidates Who Ensure Children Fair Treatment and Opportunity** – I must keep their needs in mind when supporting and selecting political leaders. I'll pay attention to what candidates and representatives do on behalf of children.





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