

Mireille's Tips From 25 Years at Little Wonders

In her book, Becoming the Parent You Want to Be, Janis Keyser shares, “When we first become parents our whole life changes, priorities are reordered, family relationships shift, and our world view is permanently altered. Values are re-examined, vulnerabilities come to the surface and at the same time we feel more love than we could ever imagine...” That truly resonated with me and I’m sure it does with you. Now as they grow into toddlerhood, things begin to change, and we often feel more anger, frustration, and emotional fatigue than we could’ve ever imagined.

These first three years are truly exciting yet incredibly challenging. For our little ones these are critical years for their brain development. There is rapid cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional, and motor development. As attentive parents and caregivers you facilitate this developmental growth by providing opportunities for your children to have many varied experiences; seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and feeling a variety of safe things. Through these sensory experiences they will build the foundation for all future learning. Each time a child has an opportunity like this, they build the neural connections in the brain. New experiences repeated many times help make new connections and this repeated exposure strengthens all the connections which shapes a child’s brain.

Parents often ask what they can do to promote healthy development and help their child. In my opinion, the answer is simple—parents and caregivers should focus on nurturing a close relationship while allowing a diversity of experiences, which is helping to nourish your little ones’ growing brain. Each one of you is doing this. Through meeting a baby’s needs—singing, playing with, reading or telling a story, sharing love, and basically spending TIME—sharing affection in all these simple ways you are connecting and nurturing your relationship. Young babies need a lot of care and attention. In those early months they are completely dependent on you to meet their needs and when you meet those needs with warmth and affection, you are strengthening your relationship and helping them to grow a healthy brain. Their emotional development is dependent on the security and trust developed through your bonding, affecting a broad range of abilities to use and build upon throughout life. These include ability to learn, be self-confident, have healthy self-esteem, develop a sense of empathy, and have successful relationships in later years.

As parents you have been enjoying a chance to look at the world through new eyes. Your toddlers remind you to notice the small things in life—a sow bug on the sidewalk, a rainbow in the sky, a bird chirping and even a smile. They teach you to slow down and offer new ways to look at things and even give you new perspectives on our own emotions.

As a child’s brain develops, so does their emotional capacity. They begin exhibiting a wide range of emotions, which are real and powerful as many of you are very familiar with!!! Those can certainly challenge your ability to remain calm, patient and understanding. Children can become frustrated/angry for a myriad of reasons, typically if they are unable to do or get something they want. They are sometimes frightened of strangers, new situations, or the dark. How all of us, as parents and caregivers, respond to our children’s big feelings can determine their future well-being. When we can respond with patience and empathy, acknowledge feelings, and help our children with appropriate ways for them to share these feelings, children can grow up happy, secure, and well-balanced.

You should all feel good about making the time to be part of a program like this and for attending our parent education evenings. This is our laboratory for observing our little ones and sharing ideas and learning how we can be the best parents we can be! Not perfect...but rather good enough!

You are among the many parents today spending more time with your kids than moms and dads did 50 years ago. That seems counter-intuitive, especially here with the climbing home prices and both parents working, **but if you are guilt-ridden, take heart!**

A 2016 UC Irvine study found that mothers and fathers across most western countries are spending more time with their children than their parents did in the mid-60’s. They also found that time spent with children is highest among better-educated parents. The link to this study is added at the end of this document. I believe we know so much more about the importance of parents and caregivers being available and engaging and attentive to their children and we ARE doing this! Your availability and engagement with your children has a positive outcome on cognitive, behavioral and academic success with our children and I believe that is why parents are taking note. We all want what is best for our children and the trends sure do change. The pendulum has swung from having children be seen but not heard, to over-indulging our children where they become the center of the universe and it is changing even now. It is confusing and often new parents are not sure what to do! There are MANY different philosophies on child-rearing, and it can be

overwhelming to know exactly what to do. We hope that at Little Wonders we can share ideas and support your journey through these early years.

After over 30 years of working with young children and families and now having my own grown children, I have seen and heard so many different philosophies. My husband and I did not have the ideal childhoods and upbringings and decided we wanted to do things differently. Even with a conscious intention to be better role models and remain positive, supportive and engaged we often faltered and made plenty of mistakes. But another great point for you all to remember is that children are resilient and can bounce back and be ok as long as a few things are constant.

I'd like to share my thoughts on a handful of points I feel are most important in raising our little ones. These early years are vital for our children's brain development along with building and maintaining connection, and setting our children on the path of empathy, kindness and feeling loved.

This is my 25th year of teaching, which means that some of the children I had are now college graduates. I still maintain connections with many families and am often reminded that what they learned here is still relevant! The 5 points I'm going to share are among the top things I, and others here, are often thanked for sharing with our families.

1. Probably the most important thing we can all begin doing NOW is begin creating a **parent-centered family**—where we as individuals and partners take care of ourselves FIRST. This may be the most important part of raising children and yet one of the most challenging concepts. How do we ever find time amidst all the things there are to do to take care of ourselves? Our lists are long, and we are always at the end. I'm suggesting we put ourselves first. Start small with something that renews your energy each day. For me it is a walk every morning. I've heard others share that they switch-off for gym time, take a bath after kids are in bed, or read a trashy novel.

Time together as a couple is also of great importance and can be doable even without a babysitter. Making a plan to have 1-2 nights a week where you can connect after kids are in bed, sit on the couch, share a glass of wine or movie, or read each other the paper. Even just having time for that uninterrupted conversation. Setting this example for your children has great value as we know they learn from what we do, and they too will learn to value this. You and your partner are the glue that holds your family together and when you are not healthy, no one else is either! I can say that as Tom and I experienced our challenges and a therapist was able to help us make some needed adjustments, that changed our relationship and in turn our family dynamics. Our children, after reaching adulthood, thanked us for modeling what it meant to truly be committed and how to work on a relationship. My hope is that will only serve to strengthen their future relationships.

2. **PLAY = TIME = LOVE.** Our theme this year is *Building Community Through Play*. We are truly doing that here at Little Wonders and through play and time with our little ones, we are sharing LOVE and building connection not only with our children, but also with each other. Attachment between parents and babies is virtually instinctual, but it does get complicated as our children become more active and verbal. As our children get older and more vocal, they tend to always want us, they want to interact with us when we have other things to attend to, they want to interact with us when we simply don't feel like interacting with anyone!!! Regardless of whether we are in a good or bad mood, they want to play with us. This can arouse an intensity of mixed emotions within us.

If we are taking care of ourselves and meeting our own needs, this may be easier to handle. We do not need to be constantly playing with our children or meet every single desire. But playing—joining children in their world, focusing on connection, giggling, reversing roles so you follow your child's lead—all help toward building connection and helping children deal with their volatile emotions. For our children, **PLAY IS THE ESSENCE OF LIFE.** Play is where our children show us their inner feelings and experiences. They don't come home and say, "Gee I had a hard day at school." Rather they say, "Daddy, play with me" and in that play, they may begin sharing their feelings and experiences. Again, our lives are busy, but making some time to truly connect with our children through play will help create that lasting connection with your children. All that is needed is your true **PRESENCE** with your child...being there with them emotionally and physically. This leads to a strong emotional bond.

3. The third, most important point, is to **SEE the CHILD in front of YOU!** Know where they are **developmentally** and understand **WHO** they are **temperamentally**. Understanding these two things can only lead to reasonable expectations, which helps everyone be most successful. Knowing that understanding development contributed immensely in having reasonable expectations was one of the driving forces that led me to this work. I've always maintained that reasonable expectations can contribute to an easier path in raising our children and was delighted and gratified to be able to help parents with this throughout the last 25 years.

In planning this topic, I asked my kids to share what they appreciated most about how we showed up as parents. BOTH responded that we truly seemed to understand their individual differences, allowing them to be who they were, and loving them unconditionally. This doesn't always come naturally, but the more we can understand who the child is in front of us, the more we can help them feel good in their skin. I firmly believe this is one of our roles as parents ...to help our children feel good about WHO they are, rather than trying to mold them into someone they are NOT. All of us want to be loved and children basically want to please us and do the right thing.

4. Remember to **ask for and model what we want**. Children do what we do. Children often need to hear WHAT we want. Staying positive, calm and practicing empathy with our little ones will go further than we can even comprehend. We started out 2020 by having a discussion on developing your family vision with our older classes. This is something we can all benefit from thinking about...what kind of a parent do I want to be, what do we want our family to stand for, what qualities would like to continue working on and what qualities would I like to see in my grown children? Remember we don't need to be perfect, but rather striving for our personal best! It is very important for our children to see that we are imperfect and that is ok. All we are modeling affects our little ones. If we make a mistake, apologizing can go a long way for everyone. Every mistake is an opportunity to talk about a solution!
5. Along with all the love, time, and modeling we give our children, they also benefit from **firm and consistent boundaries**. This may be one of the most difficult aspects of being a parent. We want to please our little ones, we want them to be happy, sometimes we are so tired we want to avoid a conflict or the tantrum. There are many reasons why we struggle as parents to set firm and consistent boundaries. We should take a good look at this and choose a few important rules we will remain vigilant about enforcing. All children test to find out where there are boundaries and they are made to feel more secure when they can count on consistent limits. We will continue to explore the many ways parents can use positive discipline. This does mean **teaching, rather than punishment** and the more we can teach our children what is expected, the more they want to follow the rules. Innately a child that is loved and attended to, that feels good about himself, basically wants to do what is right. I truly feel that if we are doing the other four things, our need for firm and consistent boundaries might be easier to maintain.

In the end, relationships and connection are most important. Remember we are in this for the long haul. Continuing to work on connection is lifelong! We continue to work with and learn from our children and each other. I honestly feel that having children has helped me become a better person and I'm so grateful for that opportunity and this opportunity to share with all of YOU.

<https://news.uci.edu/2016/09/28/todays-parents-spend-more-time-with-their-kids-than-moms-and-dads-did-50-years-ago/>