



Parent Traps

Do you frequently feel exasperated, ashamed, or embarrassed by your child's behaviour? Do you find that your child often irritates you? Do you have to threaten and shout to get your child to cooperate? Do you frequently argue with your partner about how to handle your child's behaviour?

If the answer to some of these questions is yes, then you might have become caught in what I call a parent trap.

Parent traps are consistent ways of interacting with your children, your partner, or your own inner thoughts that actually make the difficult job of raising children even harder. They add to the everyday burden of stress that many parents experience and weaken the effectiveness of dealing with your child's problem behaviour.

A lot of work in our parenting program is done with parents to help them out of these traps and into a strategy of guiding children's behaviour without resorting to constant yelling, stressful conflict and frustration. This involves learning how to motivate children positively through encouragement when they are behaving well and working as a team with your partner on parenting issues.

The result of such a positive approach is to ease parents' burden and put more fun and satisfaction back into family life.

So what are some parent traps that you might recognise in your own family?

The criticism trap involves becoming locked into frequent and unnecessary power struggles with your child typically resulting in the parent reacting to misbehaviour with escalating criticism ("Robert, leave your brother alone"), threats ("If you do that one more time you're in big trouble"), yelling and finally hitting. This type of discipline often backfires, with the parent's rapidly building anger serving to lead to resentment and further hostility between parent and child. If these kinds of battles take place frequently, it's time to try a new way of handling the situation.

The leave them alone trap occurs in combination with the criticism trap and involves the parent simply ignoring their child when they are behaving well or playing quietly. If good behaviour is taken for granted and not actively encouraged it will occur less often in the future and is likely to be replaced with the misbehaviour that receives so much attention. A basic principle of positive parenting is the praising and rewarding of behaviours you would like to see more often.

The for the sake of the children trap occurs when parents are in unhappy marriages and rather than learning new ways to resolve their constant marital conflict and frustrations they stick doggedly to the same marriage routines believing the sake of the children is more important. Research shows time and again that children who live in families where there is a lot of conflict and stress between the parenting partners develop more emotional and behavioural problems than those raised in stable families regardless of whether that stable family is a one- or two-parent family.

The perfect parent trap is the result of the human desire to be perfect rather than just competent. There is no such thing as a perfect parent and aspiring to become one will only lead to disappointment, resentment, guilt, and feelings of inadequacy. Rather it is better to realise that parenting has elements of both a learned skill and an ongoing loving relationship between individuals.

The martyr trap is one where parents become so over-involved in the task of parenting that they begin to neglect their own needs for intimacy, companionship, recreation, privacy and fun. In these cases a parent's relationship with their partner will suffer and they may end up feeling dissatisfied and resentful. Quality parenting takes place when adults have their own lives in balance.