



LETTING GO OF THE SHOULD'S FOR MORE SUCCESSFUL PARENTING

Debra Wesselmann, MS, LIMHP

If you're a parent, you may have said something like these statements at one time or another. (I know I have!)

"My child 'should' be able to entertain himself."

"My adolescent 'should' know how to be more polite."

"My child 'should' stop throwing fits."

"My child 'should' know how to do this, I've shown her 100 times!"

When we are parents, it's easy to get stuck in the "shoulds" because these statements seem so logical and sensible. After all, isn't every one of those statements true?

Maybe...or maybe not. The fact is, what is right or wrong, true or not true about these "shoulds" does not matter one bit! When it comes to raising children, the only thing that matters is figuring out what works to help them mature, learn, and grow.

Sometimes parents think that if a child "should" know how to do something properly, it is time to give consequences. Naturally, there are times when consequences are effective for setting limits, but there are many times when consequences are not helpful.

For example, Chrissy was born prematurely and suffered from early medical traumas. She struggled with sensory issues and ADHD. Mornings were especially difficult for 8-year-old Chrissy, as medication was not yet working.

Mrs. Green said, "Chrissy is old enough that she should know how to get out of bed, get dressed, brush her teeth, and come to the kitchen for breakfast without prodding from me, so I've started grounding her every time she's late for breakfast."

The family therapist asked, "So has she started doing these things since you began the groundings?"

"Not even once! On top of lollygagging each day, she is now having fits," Mrs. Green began rubbing her temples. "My plan is to double-ground her this week if she doesn't have her act together."

The therapist said, "Hold on. I think I can save you some trouble. You are about to launch into a cycle of escalating consequences. Over the years, I have observed many parents dole out increasingly harsh consequences, with nothing but disastrous results. Instead of thinking about what Chrissy should be

doing, let's put our heads together and figure out what will help her have more success in the mornings."

The short story is that Mrs. Green began waking Chrissy earlier so she could take her medication and then have time to sleep a bit before her alarm. Then, the two took a few minutes for snuggle time before going into the bathroom and brushing their teeth as a "team." Chrissy and Mrs. Green then gathered up Chrissy's clothes so she could dress in the kitchen and chat with her mom while she made breakfast. Mother and daughter felt more connected as they left the house to start their day.

Mrs. Green noticed that focusing on solutions with Chrissy worked a lot better than thinking about the "shoulds," and in addition, they were having more fun together and feeling more connected. Even more interesting was what happened when Mrs. Green applied the strategy to herself. Mrs. Green said, "I was judging myself about PTA, housework, and lots of things. Now, instead of thinking about what I 'should have' or 'shouldn't have' done, I am thinking about what is helpful and effective for my life. Chrissy and I are both feeling a lot better about ourselves."

Are you focusing on "shouldn't haves" and "should haves" in your life?