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the ILM

Practical Parenting Newsletter

Dr. E. Adriana Wilson, MD, Psychiatrist
www.InspiredLivingMedical.com



Consistency: Over-rated or Understated?

As parents we are constantly pulled in many directions. Most of us work or volunteer, and many of us are part of the sandwich generation where we are also caring for aging parents. This makes consistently eating lunch difficult, much less staying on top of our children's behavior and emotional development!

Yet, these days no conversation about parenting can happen without the issue of consistency coming up. So what is the truth about consistency? Is it just the buzzword of this parenting generation? Or is there actually something more to it?

In short, **CONSISTENCY REALLY IS KEY BECAUSE IT CREATES SAFETY** through creating a predictable environment. As humans, we need this sense of safety in order to form **SECURE ATTACHMENTS** with caregivers and this has a multitude of benefits.

Take the test!

Rate the following items between 1-5.

1 = low or not at all
5 = high or very much

1. I am confident with my parenting abilities
2. I enjoy my family life most of the time
3. My partner and I are on the same page with regard to parenting
4. I am consistent with the messages I teach my kids
5. I am consciously teaching my child accountability





They are more mentally and physically healthy throughout life

There are hundreds of research studies showing the negative effects of chronic activation of the fight or flight system on mental and physical health.

This is especially true when we learn to interpret the activation of the stress response as being negative. For a summary, see **Kelly McGonigal**: How to make stress your friend TED talk (15 min) on YouTube.

They are more successful at school and work

We need to feel safe in order to learn and process information.

When we feel like there is a lion in the room with us, we simply do not dedicate resources towards learning new information or even paying attention to information other than the perceived threat. This is part of why children's grades often drop when they are being bullied and why people's job performance often drops when they feel their job is threatened or they feel unsupported in the workplace.

They have healthier peer groups and more successful close and intimate relationships. They consequently report higher degrees of life satisfaction and fulfillment on quality of life measures.

Benefits for Children with Secure Attachments:

They regulate their emotions better

It makes sense that when we feel safe we feel we have more of a buffer to deal with things. When we feel safe, we are also able to use more of the frontal lobe of our brain. This is the part of the brain responsible for planning, brainstorming, and problem solving.

When we feel threatened, the frontal lobe of the brain gets less resources because they are diverted to the fight/ flight response so we can get away from the perceived lion in the room

For a great 5 min video explaining this, see **Daniel Siegel's** Hand Model of the brain on YouTube (3 min)



How it works

Research in the late 1990's identified a **two-stage process of threat appraisal that applies to all of us, through all stages of life**. This is why it is ok for a toddler to not know how to prepare food, as long as they have access to someone who does. They can be perfectly content until there are no adults in the house, and then they become very upset (aka emotionally dysregulated). Unconsciously we ask -

1. **Do I have the resources to deal with this situation?**
2. **Do I have ACCESS to the resources to deal with this situation?**

Think of a time at school or work when you didn't know how to do something important, but you had access to someone who could help you, compared to times you didn't- notice how these were different.

So how does this all tie in with consistency? Well, **when a child can frequently sway and change the outcome of what a parent has said,**

whether it is that they can't have any more screen time or how late they get to stay up or what they eat...this **sends the meta-message that the child is in control, they are the final decision maker**. This in turn means that they DO NOT have someone who can take care of big things they cannot deal with. **The answer to the second question becomes NO!**

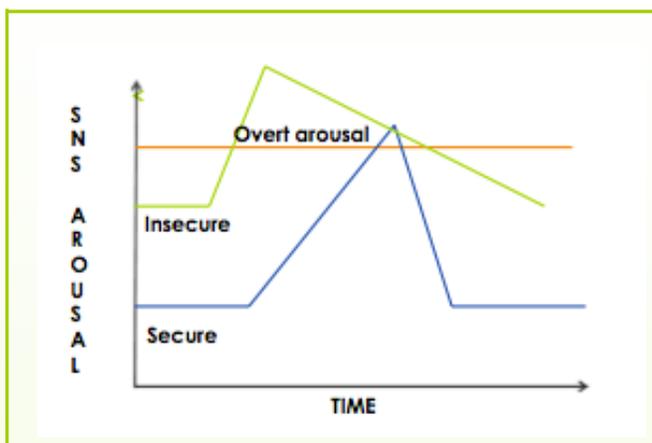
Here is an example

Let's think of it in terms of our legal system.

Most of us feel generally safe believing that if someone broke into our house, the legal system would protect us. Consequently, most of us wouldn't dream of arguing with, interrupting, or ignoring a judge or their orders. We take a certain amount of comfort in knowing there is system in place that can handle those sorts of big things when they happen.

Now, what if we didn't hold that belief? We would constantly be in a heightened state of fear because we would **feel like we have to fend for ourselves and our families in situations we are not appropriately equipped to manage**.

That is exactly what happens with kids who do not have consistent primary caregivers. They end up learning that they have to figure things out on their own, which is a HUGE responsibility for a kid. So they end up in a **chronically activated state at baseline** (edgy, agitated, snarky or anxious, fussy). As a result, they have **less of a buffer before they become emotionally dysregulated** (more easily upset) **compared to kids who have consistent parents**.



Let's talk Survival Maps

Inconsistent parenting in turn informs the child's **SURVIVAL MAPS**- *how they learned the world works and how they can have their needs met within it*. Some of us learn to be really outgoing, others to blend in with the surroundings to avoid being hurt or picked on. Some of us learn we are safest when being aggressive or when we are very academically successful. Some may learn to never back down, others to always put others needs first.

Survival maps are part of how we learn to be resilient and get our needs met as much as possible regardless of our environment.

These are usually established by around age 5 and are created primarily through an *interaction between our temperament and our early life experiences with caregivers*.



The Problem With Survival Maps

Once established, our survival maps **create a filter**, a type of mental **short cut** that makes our brain **selectively notice the times these beliefs and behaviors are validated and rewarded, while ignoring or devaluing the times they are not**.

This is why once they are in place, they **become very difficult to change without conscious intervention**.

How to be CONSISTENT

1. **Self-care**- everyone suffers when we, as parents, are not on our game!
2. Start with a **maximum of 2** behaviors you want to be consistent with- we want to set ourselves up for success
3. Talk with other parents to problem solve- **weekly Parent or Family Meetings** can be invaluable!

This is a familiar challenge particularly for post-adoption and foster families.

We **continue to use the survival maps** we learned early in life, even in new environments because **we generalize them**.

They are also **especially likely to kick in when we are faced with situations that are new or uncertain, or that remind us of people or situations from the past**. This is part of why we tend to act differently when we are with our parents even as adults, compared to when we are with our adult friends. We fall back to old patterns of interacting. It is automatic.

Consistency is important because it **creates a safe and predictable baseline** for children to:

- Form secure attachments & healthy relationships
- Self-regulation skills
- The ability to learn and problem solve more easily

For more information about attachment and survival maps, please go to www.InspiredLivingMedical.com and follow the Parenting tab.

Teaching Accountability

People complain a lot about kids being entitled these days.

Some researchers think the current “*Crisis of Entitlement*” is in part because **parents are torn in more directions today than parents of the past**. This is attributed to the increase in both parents working, often due to financial need. The changes in compositions of families (ie. Single-parent households, blended families etc), which often come with increased need for adjustments in dealing with behavioral or emotional issues *within* families is also a contributing factor. Finally, it is also suspected that not having a dedicated care-giver at home (whether a parent or extended family member) who knows what is going on with the kids consistently (theoretically at least) and who can follow through on consistently teaching the family values plays a part.

All of the social shifts noted above of course have their perks as well, but it does mean that **parents are often feeling pulled in a million different directions**. The situation becomes even more dire once we add in extra-curricular activities and play-dates. In short...

Stressed Parents = Inconsistent Parents

Parents are humans too and there is only so much we can do when we just have too many balls in the air! *Our society has been a proponent of multitasking, but research actually shows that it is **time and presence that creates healthy relationships.***

So how do you currently teach your kids accountability?

How do you teach them that **they have responsibility and there are consequences** (*positive or negative*) **depending on whether or not they meet these expectations?**

How consistent are you in teaching these lessons?

If you are not sure what or how you are doing some of this, below are some ideas for age appropriate ways to teach accountability. Some will just validate what you are already doing, and others give you some ideas.

3 Reasons to teach Accountability

- 1. Our goal as parents is to set our children up to be as successful at life as possible by teaching them what they need to know.** It is helpful to think of parenting as **COACHING**. Teaching accountability is **how we give children graduated responsibility** so they can be successful adults.
- 2. The outside world will not be as tolerant or kind towards our child when they haven't learned the basics**
 - i.e., Manners (saying please and thank you routinely)- in some research has been found to be the social code required to gain access to more pro-social and both physically and emotionally safe peer groups.
- 3. We are hard-wired to need PURPOSE** (have something to do) and **MASTERY** (to feel like we can influence the outcome, be good at something).

Teaching Accountability

(continued)

When we don't get these needs met in socially constructive ways at home, we find other ways to meet them.

Many of these children fall into socially destructive ways of meeting these needs when they don't have the appropriate guidance. Some become drawn towards bullying as a way of getting a sense of mastery, or engaging in delinquent behavior like shoplifting or damaging property, graffiti, etc. as a way to find purpose.

Remember, **these are suggestions, not fixed recommendations.**

Some families will *do more or less* at a particular stage. These are **guidelines** to help you **consider what will be best for your family.**

IDEAS for AGES 1-3 yo

- Coaching and cueing to **clean up after themselves** (i.e., Clean up song)
- Using language of **WHEN-THEN** or **IF-THEN** (i.e., *When you clean up, then we can go to the park*)
- Using language of **CHOICE** whenever appropriate or possible (i.e., Child acting out and you cue to say "it is your choice to throw that toy, but then you loose it for a day. Do you want to scream in a pillow instead?")
- **Only engage child when they use manners and praise when they do.** Cue and coach them to use manners when they do not, including with interrupting
- **Give extra praise for "Good listening" and "Good waiting"** (some people also intermittently offer an extra reward like a bonus bedtime story or going for a walk or to a playground, a special cartoon)

IDEAS for AGES 1-3 yo *(continued)*

- **Cue them to ASK FOR WHAT THEY WANT or NEED**
 - This means not guessing when they are being fussy, instead asking them to use their words and stating you can't help them until they do. Initially you will be coaching this more, later just cueing for it
- **Toys left lying around are removed until next day (2 yo +)**
 - Some families place them on fridge or in a special basket in parents' closet. It is often helpful to frame this explicitly as "you are showing us you don't value this toy, so we are putting it away for the rest of the day and you will have another chance to show us you can take care of it tomorrow"

IDEAS for AGES 4-5 yo

Note: Items from previous stage carry forward

- Introduce **CHORES as the way THEY CONTRIBUTE to the FAMILY** (see article for tips about introducing chores)
- **Making their bed daily**
- **Cleaning up after themselves** (also they don't get to move onto next activity until this is done- this works best when it becomes habit!)
- **Wiping kitchen table or kitchen counters**
- **Loading dishwasher**
- **Wiping bathroom counters**
- **Sorting their own laundry** (finding their own clothes and making a pile)
- **Sweeping 1 floor**
- **Watering indoor or outdoor plants**
- **Preparing own breakfast and bedtime snack**
 - Ideally, provide coaching about including 4 food groups
 - i.e., they do not have a second bowl of oatmeal until they have had one of each other food group first, like fruit or yogurt, peanut butter or a hard boiled egg etc.

IDEAS for Ages 4-5 yo (continued)

- **If they don't finish their food, it is the first thing they have to eat at their next meal**
 - i.e., Didn't finish bagel at breakfast, so it is first thing they have to finish at lunch time or left over lunch is incorporated into dinner
 - This **should not carry over into the next day** and is **not always appropriate for kids with health issues** who are underweight
 - **Picky eaters** are ideally included in the decision of what to eat and meal preparation when possible
 - Can frame as **value of not being wasteful**
 - If on token economy (reward system), they can gain a sticker or reward for finishing meals or lose one when they do depending on the approach used)
 - Alternatively, child is not allowed to serve themselves at the next meal without supervision or loses the privilege of choice at the next meal

IDEAS for AGES 6-8 yo

- **Remembering their school supplies** (agenda, lunch bag, mittens, hats, jackets, homework if applicable etc.)
- **Bathroom counter, mirror and toilet** (add as they get older)
- **Loading and unloading the dishwasher**
- **Sorting and folding own laundry** (with coaching initially)
- **Making own lunch for school using 4 food groups** (Coach and check)
- **Washing 1 floor, or sweeping multiple floors**
- **Help clean the car (coaching)**
- **Taking out garbage, blue bin and green bin** (initially just gathering garbage from house and progress with age)
- **Assisting with putting groceries away**

IDEAS for Ages 9-12 yo

- **Vacuum a level** of the house
- **Caring for a pet**, like walking the dog, changing the kitty litter, making sure they have food and water, cleaning a gerbil cage etc.
- **Coaching younger siblings with their chores**
- **Washing floors**
- **Mowing** part or all of lawn
- **Chopping wood** (with supervision)
- **Assisting with basic meal preparation** (by now they should be able to make basic things like omelets, bacon, soup or potatoes)
- **Putting groceries away**
- **Cleaning and vacuuming the car(s)**

IDEAS for AGES 13-16 yo

- **Combine chores- you can assign multiple chores, depending on age and developmental level**
 - i.e., One bathroom including counters, toilet, mirror, floor, re-stocking toilet paper and garbages
 - vacuuming all levels of the house AND mowing the lawn every second week and cleaning the car on rotating weeks
- **Doing own laundry** (actually washing it), sorting and folding it (also on designated day/ week)
- **Responsibility for maintaining certain average or behavioral outcomes at school** (ie. Attendance or minimum average of 70%)
- Some families encourage child to begin some form of weekly **volunteer work** in addition to previous chores (either because community contribution is part of their family values, or to help build the child's resume for when they are older)
- **Some families encourage children to look for part-time work in the neighborhood** in addition to previous chores
 - babysitting, mowing lawns, shoveling driveways, helping elderly neighbors with gardening, etc

Introducing Chores

This is best framed as the way **THEY** (the child) **get to** (framed as a privilege and a positive) **CONTRIBUTE** to the family (provides some sense of meaning and purpose). This does not mean they will thank you for it, but it will go smoother than many other approaches.

Chores are not necessarily for an allowance. When associated with an allowance, it is helpful to state that the parents **“will HELP the child have a good attitude during chores by offering an allowance/ reward for completing their age-appropriate responsibilities with a good attitude”**.

NOTE: This does not mean their chores are the only times they contribute, but these are the non-negotiable ways and times they do with the pre-determined consequences (positive and negative).

There can still be expectations in place that require them to help out when necessary. This will vary with the family culture.

How much families contribute when they are using an allowance varies significantly by family.

- Some conservative averages would be around \$2 for 6 yo, \$3 for 8 yo, \$4 for 10 yo etc,
- I have seen 6 year olds getting \$10/ week and 10 yo getting \$20.
- *It will be important for you to consider what works best for your family and how it fits with your family values*



Tips with Allowance

If an allowance is in place, it will be important that the children have a **regular opportunity to SPEND their allowance if they choose to**. It will also be important that **at least part of what they earn is available to be spent how THEY want** (ie. It can't all automatically go into savings or to charity, by the parent's choice).

Otherwise, **even money loses its value**. Ideally, there should not be a delay of more than 2 weeks at a time where they are not able to access opportunities to spend their money in order to avoid this pitfall.

Some families creatively buy **iTunes cards** with money on them so kids can **use their money for in-game app purchases**. Others have a **designated day to be able to go to the store**.

It is also helpful to have a **rule that they only get to spend their money on the designated day**. Some families apply this to in-app purchases also, so they are not being bombarded by requests to approve games through the week. **This avoids frequent asking to go to the store** during busy family times and getting upset **and power struggles when parents say no**.

If using an allowance in this way, it is helpful to **introduce rule that they get 2 chances and at 3rd warning about their attitude they loose half of their allowance** (this way they always have something to loose and something to work towards keeping).

General Tips

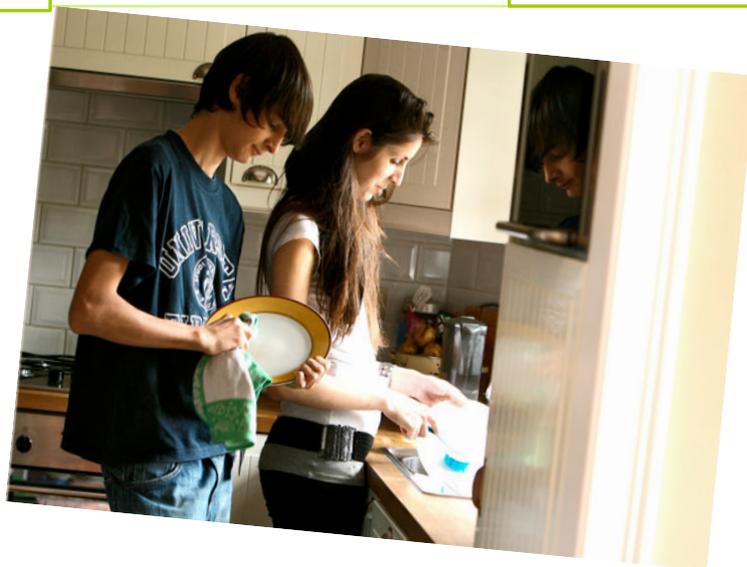
Whether or not an allowance is in place, it is helpful to have a rule that **they do not get to move onto the next activity** (i.e., Screen time, hanging out with friends, going to the park, etc.) **until they complete their chore.**

For older kids, it may be preferred to remove a privilege until it is complete, like access to their phone, the internet or rides to a friend's house or being allowed to have a friend over.

It is also helpful to **emphasize at those times that whether or not they complete their chore is not a choice, the chore is getting done regardless.** **The only thing that is in question is whether or not they are rewarded with an allowance for having a positive attitude about it- and that will be up to them.**

Some families require the child to stay in their room until they are ready to complete their contribution. Ideally, they should not play or engage with others while they decide to do their chore, because it will remove motivation to do it if they are being rewarded despite not doing it.

Ideally there will be **pre-set time and days of the week when chores will be done** and **parents will enforce this consistently**, usually 3x/week for big stuff. This *reduces arguing and resistance* to doing it because it is just how things are done. It also makes it more normal when the whole family is doing it at the same time. There are also *less power struggles* between children and parents about whose time frame they get done on.



You can **make it more enjoyable by allowing them to listen to music** while doing it as long as it is not distracting. Some families also turn it into games where **parents become especially playful** at those times as a reward.

It is important to **COACH them to do it properly** and go over it with them until *they* do. Doing it over after them undermines both their sense of purpose (why bother do it at all if they are not really contributing), and mastery (that they can do a good job). Remember to **CHECK CHORES!**

What Chores?

What is included in their chores will be cumulative with age, just as our responsibilities in society increase with age. This **gives children the opportunity to practice in safe incremental ways**, which **builds mastery and confidence**. It also **helps them feel invested in the family** when everyone is doing their part.

Remembering their school supplies and work can also be included in their "age-related responsibilities" or chores. It is helpful to **frame school** (and their extra-curricular activities for some families) **as their jobs**. Consequently, things like remembering their agenda, lunch bag, mittens, hats, jackets, homework or band instrument, gym clothes are a part of what is expected of them. **Practicing for school related or extra-curricular activities can also be included in this**, such as piano, martial arts or dance practice. If they have an allowance, every time they forget one of these things they would lose half of their allowance, in addition to losing half if they have a poor attitude doing their chore as described earlier.



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Inspired Living Medical

5991 Spring Garden Road, Suite 508
Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 1Y6, Canada

Tel: 902-407-6600

Fax: 902-407-6601

Email: info@InspiredLivingMedical.com

