

The Myth of the Bad Parent

We've all seen it a little girl throwing a fit in the bread aisle or a little boy kicking and screaming in front of the fragrance counter. Most parents have seen their own child behave the same way from time to time. Yet, it's common for people to react to this kind of behavior by blaming the parent.

Being a parent isn't easy, and all parents are bound to make some mistakes. Different parents use different parenting techniques. Some parents try to negotiate. Others use "time-out." Sadly, some parents become so frustrated and embarrassed by their child's behavior that they do resort to slapping, shaking or yelling at the child. Some seem to do nothing.

However, believing that a child's behavior problem is always the result of bad parenting is like believing poor grades are always the result of an ineffective teacher. Even the best teachers have students who get poor grades, and even the best parents can have a child with a behavior problem. The fact is that behavior problems can be a sign of mental and emotional problems.

Some parents simply do not have the knowledge, skills or support they need to help them manage a child's behavior problem. Parents often are dealing with their own issues, such as unemployment, poverty or illness.

In spite of these challenges, all parents have strengths. Most parents know from experience what a child needs most. Parents are committed to both their child and their community. Parents are dedicated to helping children grow healthy and strong. Most of all, parents have a "built-in" motivation to do what's best for their child.

By building on these kinds of strengths, parents can develop better ways to take charge of their lives and to succeed. The key, however, is to find out what those strengths are.

"I don't see dysfunctional families," says Barbara Huff, Executive Director of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health. "I see families that are over-stressed and under-supported."

There are many resources available to parents who have a child with a mental, emotional or behavioral problem. The federal Center for Mental Health Services, a component of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, can tell you about services and support programs in your area. Many of these organizations have mentoring programs, support groups, parenting classes or respite care.

How do we know these kinds of programs work? When you build on child and family strengths," says Huff, "what you get is what kids do best and what families do best."