



# The 7 parenting sins *(and how to avoid them)*

*Are you setting your kids a bad example? Here's how to break your bad habits and change your kids' behaviour for the better*

WORDS Hannah Fox

## 1 Bribery and spoiling

'Bribing children can mean your relationship becomes transactional and your children won't be good unless they get something in return,' says Karen Doherty, co-author of *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting* (Bantam Press, £12.99). 'Similarly, if you spoil your child with constant gifts, you'll be teaching them the wrong values,' says Sue Atkins of Positive Parents & Confident Kids, which offers coaching and support sessions ([www.positive-parents.com](http://www.positive-parents.com)). 'Life doesn't overindulge and you don't always get what you want, so it's important children learn that lesson early on.'

### Break that habit:

Recognise the difference between a bribe and a reward. 'A bribe is given to stop a child doing something bad they are doing or about to do,' says Charlie Taylor, author of *Divas & Dictators* (Vermillion, £10.99). 'A reward is given when a child does something positive that was agreed on in advance.' While the latter will encourage a child to do well, the former may prompt your child to start behaving badly on purpose.

'The best incentive for your child to behave well is the chance to spend time with you. It's worth far more than a bag of sweets or a toy they'll tire of in ten minutes,' adds Doherty. If they play up at bedtime, tell them

they'll have ten minutes longer with you during story-time if they get ready for bed now. They'll relish the extra time you can have together.

## 2 Inconsistency

How many times have you threatened your child that they won't go to the park because they're being naughty, only to go anyway? Being inconsistent with your threats and punishments can very easily backfire, particularly when one parent says 'yes' and the other says 'no'. 'The minute you start threatening consequences you don't enforce, you'll lose the upper hand,' says Doherty.

**Break that habit:**

'If you're inconsistent, your kids will end up feeling unstable and insecure, and won't know where they stand,' says Atkins. 'Always be clear, very specific and be sure to tell your kids of the consequences if they don't do as they are told. For example, say: "If you don't tidy up your toys by the time I've counted to 40, you won't go to the swings." Or give them a time by which they need to clean their room or you'll ban them from attending a party.' She points out the importance of both parents seeing eye to eye. 'Work out about five key rules between you and your partner that you both agree upon, such as how you'll discipline children, or how much TV time or pocket money they should have,' says Atkins. 'Once this is set, you'll be able to present a united front and your kids won't be able to play one of you off against the other.'

**3 No boundaries**

While you want to appear approachable and open so your child feels able to talk to you, you also need to command a level of respect from them. 'Putting boundaries in place helps children feel secure,' says Taylor. 'If there are no clear rules, children become very controlling in the home.' Emotional boundaries are important, too. 'Don't treat kids as sounding boards for your own problems,' says Atkins. 'It is inappropriate to tell your children how your husband shouted at you or disappointed you.'

**Break that habit:**

'Children need you to be a parent, not their friend,' says Atkins. 'Don't discuss your problems with your kids as they deserve to grow up free from undue adult stress.' She says being relaxed, positive and confident is key. 'Sit down with the family and discuss ideas for setting up house rules. Ask each member of your family to think of at least one house rule that would make life at home easier, and to write it down. Then put them all up somewhere where everyone can see them clearly and easily – maybe your child would like to design something on the computer to make the rules look interesting and colourful.' And keep the lines of communication open. 'Families who value spending time with their children talking, listening and doing things together help to build up trust and respect,' she adds.

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**4 Doing too much**

'Trying to be a supermum who manages everything without any help can leave you feeling stressed and overwhelmed,' says Doherty. 'It's natural to want to give our children the very best we can – to feed them well, help them with their homework and organise activities,' says Doherty. 'But this is often in addition to working and keeping the household running – so it's no wonder if parents sometimes feel they can't cope. The trouble is, your efforts can backfire if you find you're trying so hard that you get stressed and annoyed with your children, and then they get stressed too.'

**Break that habit:**

'Be aware of how much you can do yourself,' says Doherty. 'If you realise it's all getting a bit too much, either ask for help or accept your limitations. For example, you might choose to leave toys scattered all over the floor in the evening if you're beginning to feel overwhelmed, before you inadvertently begin to take your frustration out on your children.'

In a generation where many people live further away from their families, relying on friends is ever-more important. 'Create a support network around you,' says Doherty. 'It can include parents you meet at the school gates or at your child's playgroup. Setting up a network of fellow parents means that if you pick up a friend's children one day, they can return the favour on another day and give you a break.' There are lots of ways to meet other parents – try [www.netmums.com](http://www.netmums.com) or your local NCT for regular coffee mornings ([www.nct.org.uk](http://www.nct.org.uk)).

**5 Pushy parenting**

Did you miss the chance to be an ace athlete or prima ballerina? Don't be tempted to live your dreams through your children. 'A sure sign you're a pushy parent is when your desperation for them to achieve something outweighs their own wishes and desires,' says Doherty. 'This could make your child feel resentful towards you.'

**Break that habit:**

'The key is to encourage your child in whatever they excel at, but to not label them too quickly,' says Doherty. 'If they show an ability for music, but lose interest in it after a year, don't push them. They will naturally find their own strengths in their own time.'

**6 Using TV as a childminder**

It's easy to become reliant on the TV or computer to keep children occupied when you're busy. 'By the time the average teenager has left school, they'll have spent 15-18,000 hours in front of a TV, compared to the 12,000 hours they spend in school,' says Georgia Coleridge, co-author of *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting*. 'While TV and computers can be an incredibly effective tool for learning, you do need to work out a limit so they don't spend all their time in front of a screen.' Reports have shown too much screen time can affect children's sleep and their ability to interact socially.

**Break that habit:**

Recent UK studies on parent-child relationships, found that over half the children questioned wanted more quality time with their parents. So, instead of letting children slope off to watch TV every evening, try to find time to do an activity as a family.

'Eat together as often as possible' says Coleridge. 'Turn off the television, sit round the table and swap family news – talk about the fun things as well as the problems. If your children say they'd rather eat in front of the TV in their rooms, be tough and confiscate them. Have one TV and watch it with them, so it's something you can all do together.'

**7 Arguing in front of the kids**

'Children are like mini-radar systems and will often pick up on the arguments and bad moods of their parents, which can affect them deeply,' says Coleridge. Don't forget, you are the ultimate example for your child – so if you repeatedly fly off the handle and shout and swear in front of them, they will pick up your habits.

**Break that habit:**

'It's up to you to be grown-up,' says Coleridge. 'While it's good to get things in the open and teach children how to discuss topics, it should be done in a way that is rational without shouting.' She recommends being a 'Pause Parent': 'This means not overreacting in a crisis. You cool things down much faster if you stay calm yourself. If necessary, do some deep breathing, or walk out of the room for a couple of minutes. If you give yourself time to think things through, everything will seem clearer and you are less likely to say things you regret.' **H**