



# REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR GREAT PARENTING

by Mimi Hudson

“What should you expect of your child? One might think that parents would be content if the child became a useful and happy human being.” -- Rudolph Dreikurs, *The Challenge of Parenthood*.

The key to successful parenting is to have an unconditional relationship with your child that is strong, safe and nurturing. No matter what, our children need to know that they are good enough the way they are. What gets in the way of an unconditional relationship? Our expectations, particularly unrealistic expectations.

Where do our expectations of our children come from? Most of our unrealistic expectations of our children come from our own childhood and family of origin as well as cultural norms. Realistic expectations come from knowledge of childhood development, observing children in various situations and understanding the pressures they are experiencing at various times in their lives.

In parenting our own children, we may rely on the expectations our own parents had for us. We accept what was expected of us without questioning how those expectations may fit with our own children or family.

Many parents admit to expecting the most from their first born and being less demanding of subsequent siblings. This often is a result of inexperience -- thinking of children as miniature adults. We set the bar very high with the first child and become more realistic as we add to our families.

We may have had childhood needs that were never fulfilled and expect our children to have the same desires. If we were indifferent students or athletes, we may push our children to achieve where we were unsuccessful. Or, if we see our children as extensions of ourselves, we may expect them to live up to the high standard we had set in academics or athletics. Unfortunately, most of us raise our children to suit our own needs rather than theirs. We may see misbehaviour as anything our children are doing that interferes with our own comfort.

Too, our children's sibling relationships may trigger our past experience of a domineering older brother or whiney, “cry-baby” younger sister, tempting us to take sides in our children's sibling squabbles.

Unrealistic expectations of our children may also originate from cultural values about the way boys and girls are “supposed to” behave. Although society's views have changed in recent years, children still get messages from parents and other adults about what it means to be a boy or a girl and how they are expected to behave accordingly.

“Boys are tough – they don't cry.” “She's a girl -- girls are sensitive.” “Girls play with dolls – boys play with trucks” “It's the terrible twos!” “Help! There's a teen in my house – raging hormones.” “Brothers and sisters should always love each other.” “Parents give the orders – children obey.”

Realistic expectations of our children come from knowledge of childhood development and the

child's temperament, from observing other children the same age and understanding what pressure your child is currently under -- like the birth of a sibling, starting school or, for teenagers, puberty.

What has become known as the “terrible twos” is a developmental milestone. The child's recognition that he/she is separate from his/her parents. The “no's” and the tantrums are part of coping with this independence. This may be played out again as children reach adolescence.

Remember, each child is unique. As parents, if we know why our children are behaving the way they are, occasionally seeing the world from their point of view, we make adjustments in our expectations. If we embrace these milestones and think of the “terrible twos” as the “terrific twos” we will find our children behave accordingly.

It is important to examine our expectations, questioning why we have them. Where did they come from? What is their purpose? Whose needs are they based on – mine or my child's? And, do these expectations fit with my child's temperament, age and stage?

Expectations are powerful motivators, but as parents we must be careful not to damage the parent-child relationship by setting unrealistic expectations.

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