

New Year's Parenting Resolutions Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.

I sincerely hope that 2005 was a great year for you and the kids, with lots of fun, learning and growing closer as a family. At this time of year, though, we need to take a gander at what we've accomplished with our children, as well as an introspective look at what still needs to be changed in the coming year. Nope, we're not going to talk about starting a new exercise plan, a diet or losing that last 10 pounds. We're here to take a look at parenting resolutions that I'd like your family to consider for 2006, some of the most important aspects of parenting that will lead to the greatest payoff in terms of building good values, obtaining personal satisfaction as a kid or a parent, and making the necessary changes in your family environment that you've been longing for.

Let's keep it simple and focus upon five, beginning with one of my favorites!

- **Don't major in the minors.** Five small words that speak volumes—let the small stuff go! I'm sure that if you look back over the past 12 months you'll remember lots of arguments and fusses that really amounted to nothing or very little. A rule of thumb that I've tried to use with my own family as well as my clients is that "If it won't have a lasting effect beyond a few weeks, let it go." Sound too simplistic? Perhaps in some cases, but most of the time it's a sanity saver. I've never heard of a kid being harmed by skipping the teeth brushing a few nights, or not using soap in the shower, or the bed actually being made only on sheet-changing days. Or, if your son is too tired to complete the homework once in a while you may let him get up early the next morning and finish the math problems. What is important, though, is that your focus is upon the important things, which may be different from your neighbor's list of priorities. In your house having dinner together at least 3 or 4 times a week may be important as it helps keep communication cooking and children eating some nutritional foods. Your family code of values (what's major, not minor) may involve sticking with rules about cell phone usage, not sneaking around and actually being where you say you will be, abstinence from substance use, etc. It's different for everyone, but try to focus upon issues that involve education, safety, avoidance of illegal activities and hanging around decent kids. If your daughter wants to try blue streaks in her hair, perhaps that's a possibility in the summer when it won't be so embarrassing if it's disaster. Roll with some of the requests, compromise when possible, but stick to your guns on the big stuff.
- **Assume your home is wired to a nanny-cam.** Trust me; I know how easy it is to forget about gratitude, politeness and manners at home! On a daily basis it's often a drama including short tempers, difficult kids, demanding parents and spouses who send each other *service messages* rather than truly communicating (pick up the cleaning, walk the dog...not "how was your day?") That's normal, but not nice. And, you can do a better job just by "assuming" that your associates and friends will see your home videos and get a real look at how the family treats each other. Being "on tape" is a great motivator for watching your language

(knocking off the negative tone of voice, requesting rather than demanding, cleaning up the four-letter words and just being more polite with your spouse and kids). If you don't believe the power of assuming you're on tape, actually set up a camcorder for one evening when everyone's at home and you're trying to negotiate dinner, homework, chores and who gets first access to the remote control. Then, take a look at your family's production. Is it something that you'd like Margaret at the office to see? How about your mother-in-law—would she approve or go into “I told you so...” mode? At the very least, it's a fun activity, but hopefully you'd all see where some improvements in common courtesy, politeness and body language need to occur.

- **Put guilt in its place—generally in the trash can!** Guilt can be a handy and useful motivator when necessary—“if your friend finds out that you're gossiping about her she may not want to play with you again” makes sense, and helps to teach your child that there are consequences attached to her words or behaviors. Good for guilt, when it's being used for a teachable moment. However, parents tend to fall too quickly, too deeply and too often into the guilt mode when kids are involved. Parents hate...yes hate...to disappoint their children and we'd probably be able to uncover an evolutionary basis for that feeling if we were to take the time to analyze it. But, just as we no longer really need our gall bladder, molars, tonsils or last year's fruit cake, many guilt moments are no longer of value either. Saying *no* to a kid is a disappointment, but it can also be a teachable moment. Children must learn to tolerate frustration, to learn to work for greater goals rather than to expect all to come to them in the present, and to evolve into a being that accepts and understands another's point of view. Do not, and let me repeat—do not cave in to nagging, negotiating and complaining when you truly disagree with the kid's request *just to avoid feeling badly about it*. She'll get over her anger before you even begin to work through your guilt. As you're feeling awful as a parent and obsessing upon whether your stand was fair, she's most likely moving on and considering how to sit next to the cute guy in World History. Kids are resilient—it's really difficult to get them down and they are often pro's at knowing how to push your guilt button proficiently. Grow a spine and try to put budding guilt feelings in their place as soon as you perceive that the kid got to you and your feelings of remorse are beginning to blossom. Remember, if your decision is fair, then your guilty feelings are probably irrational. Illogical, but probably par for the course for the parent who just wants the kid to love them!
- **If it didn't work last year, try something new.** Sure, most of the parenting books suggest using time-out, limiting television or other electronics, or grounding for inappropriate behavior. Generally these consequences work and change the child's behavior, but what do you do if your child is particularly ornery, or just doesn't care about TV, music, clothing or the typical things that motivate all your friends' kids? Well, you need to get smart, to think outside of the box, and to try something new. First, take a gander at what's up with the child's bedroom. Favorite possessions or activities are usually found in the bedroom and you may be able to discern a pattern of priority from checking out what's posted on the walls, under the bed, or stacked on the desk. I've learned that every kid is different and that there are *always* motivators that they will work for

(in terms of earning more, or not wanting to lose what they already possess). Some of the more unusual motivators that I've used with my clients are earning: military memorabilia (medals, patches, ribbons), completing a chemistry set project or electronics project, accumulating flip-flop sandals in all of the colors, belt buckles, classic rock & roll albums, hermit crabs and hermit crab accessories, nail polish in assorted shades of black, arts and crafts materials (popsicle sticks and glitter glue are favorites), tickets to concerts, picking the restaurant for the family to go to dinner, renting a DVD or video game, extra time up at night or on the computer, sleeping in the living room, camping in the back yard, making Dad play Barbies, Mom go paint-balling, wearing the same outfit to school five days in a row (go figure!) and the list goes on and on. I once had a kid who wanted to earn figs. Yes, figs. Kid couldn't stand chocolate but he wanted dried fruit and was willing to try to control his temper if figs were in the future. Also, consider the negative consequences that you're employing. Ten minutes in bedroom time-out is generally a waste of time, but an hour in a *safe, boring spot* (empty hallway, safe bathroom, utility room with no chemicals or dangerous objects) generally will get the kid's attention. Of course, electronics are huge motivators, but be sure that if you take them away as consequences that the child can't sneak usage. Many children that I work with will keep an old keyboard on hand to hook up to the desktop in their bedroom, so when you think that they are sleeping they are really sending instant messages to their buddies. If you happen to own one of these particularly sneaky kids, you may have to figure out how to isolate the circuit breaker for their bedroom and bathroom, and turn off the juice if their behavior merits loss of electronics for an extended period of time. Hand the perpetrator a flashlight, and kiss them goodnight—they'll quickly get the message! You may need to put a lock on the circuit breaker box, though, as these smart, sneaky ones may try to monkey with the breaker box when you're not looking. Electronics stores are great places to get good ideas about rewards (electronic experiment kits) as well as "tracking devices" (GPS systems for cell phones or cars, buzzers for alerting parents to open windows or doors when Junior is trying to sneak out after bedtime). Again, think outside of the box, and move onward and upward from last year's ineffective techniques!

- **Focus upon teaching compassion and gratitude as you would math and reading.** Sure, a 1600 on the SAT sounds terrific, but does the kid care about other people? An IQ of 135 is nice, but it's the EQ (emotional quotient) that really counts when it comes to making it as an adult in the work force, relating successfully with a spouse and raising one's own children appropriately. Yes, homework needs to be completed, and academic gaps should be filled. We all want our children to be bright, literate and to achieve to their capacity in the academic setting. But how about in their hearts, souls, and value systems? Take some time with them to discuss right from wrong, how it feels to be in someone else's shoes, why people make the decisions they do and the consequences (good and bad) that result. Let this be the year that your children remember the *family* volunteering and giving back to the community. Consider working some Sundays at the soup kitchen, visiting, reading to or playing games with the residents at a nursing home, helping out at Habitat for Humanity, having a garage sale and

donating the profits to a favorite charity or local event, or helping out at the pet shelter. And, please don't just drop off the kids as they do their service hours—join in. Donate your time, your caring, and perhaps some money if possible. The kids have recently received gifts for the holidays, let's take the next twelve months to promote giving, not getting.