

## **Patient Parenting** **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Face it, you're only human. Sure you had this vision of doing it all--working a career, raising kids, and even fitting in some fun time with your spouse or just by yourself. Then reality hits and you've realized that this multi-tasking stuff just isn't what it was cracked up to be. The "Jack of all trades, but master of none" concept somehow leaves most parents feeling not that we have it all, but that we have *some* of all of it. And, at times, that we even have too much--too many responsibilities with too little time in which to accomplish them. This stress can trigger anxiety, edginess and a lack of tolerance and patience with family members--especially with the kids.

Keeping your cool as a parent can be tough, and is often exacerbated if you're short on time, or the kids have lots of extra-curricular activities to attend or your child is especially non-compliant. *No one*, and let me repeat that, *no one* can keep their patience *all of the time*. It's an emotional impossibility so don't even try to go there! What is realistic, though, is to strive to make some changes that will allow you to become a more patient parent--and the entire family will reap the rewards. Here are some suggestions--see which ones fit into your life and potentially will make the greatest positive changes:

- **Keep your expectations realistic.** Remember that there are only 24 hours in a day, and some of that must be devoted to work (at the office or at home), transportation, mealtimes, sleep, extra-curricular activities, checking homework and organizing for the next day. Trying to stuff 28 hours of activity into 24 never works well, and the entire day may feel incomplete and upsetting. It's psychologically healthier to set limits, guidelines and structure on your day *up front* rather than to fall behind and feel like a failure at the end of the day. This may mean saying *no* to some of your kids', neighbors', or friends' requests. Sure, they may be a bit disappointed but keeping your schedule on track will ultimately please you and others much more than gratifying their immediate and perhaps unimportant requests. You may also have to give up some responsibilities in order to keep a realistic schedule. Perhaps you shouldn't be room-mom this year, or karate may have to be put on hold in exchange for the family having some dinners together during the week.
- **Prioritize what really matters to you and your family.** Trust me, you can't have it all. With that in mind put some thought into what's really important to you as a parent. Some families value playing together, others focus upon family meetings or meals together, whereas others prefer to be on the go and to catch up with each other only on weekends. Does some down-time sound enticing--paying a babysitter or a neighbor to watch the kids while you and your partner relax, take a nap together, or go out to dinner? When considering what's really important to the family, don't forget to include things that are important to you as an individual. If you're not getting *some* of your own needs met, most likely you'll be out of sorts, short-tempered and less than patient with the kids.
- **Delegate chores.** Somehow our kids have convinced us that they are either incapable of helping out with household responsibilities or that it would take too much effort to

teach them how to proceed with the task. Folks--listen up here--they *know* how to sweep a floor, make a bed, do the laundry, and feed the dog. They are not dumb--in fact they are very, very smart--and cagey! By appearing helpless kids often aren't expected to help. Neat trick and I find that it works in most of my client's households. Well, it's time to pull the plug and to set up a chore chart that is age-appropriate. Be sure to keep it realistic to your children's developmental stages, set definite time limits by which the chores must be completed, and attach significant consequences (both positive and negative) to task completion outcome. You are not a demanding parent if you insist upon your kids helping out around the home--in fact, you're preparing them for life as an adult—their future spouses and bosses will thank you for the work ethic that you're establishing early in their lives!

- **Stop nagging, lecturing, and yakking.** You really don't need to repeat yourself when you've made a kid request--she probably heard you the first time, and definitely the second! If you attach a consequence that has "teeth to it" (daily allowance, use of electricity--TV, CD player, computer time) she'll probably get it done on time. All that reminding, lecturing and yakking just annoys and aggravates the kid--let your actions speak louder and longer than your words.
- **Stick to a routine as much as possible.** Mornings and evenings seem to be the two most stressful parts of the day. Set up strict "getting ready for school or camp" schedules (get dressed, brush teeth, eat breakfast) as well as bed time rules (in bed by 8:30, read a book, lights out by 9:00). And, there's no point to setting up schedules if you don't stick to them--expect the routine to be followed and your kids will be more compliant.
- **Don't ask "Who started it?".** Whatever you do, never, never try to figure out who began the current fight or bickering. First, you'll probably not get to the bottom of it, and second, it really doesn't matter. The perpetrator will deny any wrong-doing and the victim will never feel adequately heard. Set the following rule: "Whoever is in the fight (bicker, whine, cry-a-thon) needs to knock it off, or go to time-out." Of course you should listen to real concerns and emotional meltdowns, but the daily sibling squabbles are a no-win situation. If you stay out of the way many kids will either resolve the problem, learn to ignore the sibling annoyance, or decide to take some quiet time in their bedroom.
- **Don't personalize your kid's behavior.** All children have difficulty at times behaving in restaurants, malls, and in the car. Your child is not acting up to make you angry or to prove that you are less than Parent-of-the-Year. He's whining or fussing because he wants what he wants when he wants it--pure and simple. She's dawdling with her homework because it's boring--not to get you mad or to prove that your attempts at teaching study skills are worthless. Child-rearing is not a sprint--it's a marathon. Responsible, polite behavior can take years to develop and there will be many embarrassments along the way. Try to keep this in mind when you're feeling self-conscious about your child's public behavior--give a consequence and move on.
- **When you feel yourself about to blow, have a back-up plan.** Kids can really push our buttons, and we all need some quick calm-down tricks at our disposal. If your child is fussing in the time-out room, you don't have to subject yourself to listening. As long as he's safe, put on some music that will distract and calm you down--

whether it's easy-listening or boogie, use whatever works best. Or, how about putting *yourself* in time-out? Have an older sibling watch the fussy little one and sit in the tub or take a relaxing shower. "Taking five" allows you to calm down and to think about what you really want to say to your child. Remember, you can always reprimand later but you can't take back inappropriate statements made in anger. Saying, "Your behavior is too much, I need some time to think about what I'm going to do--I'll get back with you in ten minutes" not only gives you the time and space to think clearly, but also allows the child to wonder what fate will befall her! It's a handy trick, one that I've used on many occasions with my own kids as well as clients. Finally, consider putting exercise into your daily routine. This doesn't mean 45 minutes per day with a personal trainer--a quick walk or jog around the block, doing some crunches or sit-ups, or a work-out at the gym can help to keep things in perspective.

- **Remember--this too shall pass.** When you find yourself at your wit's end, consider whether the current problem will matter tomorrow, next week, or next month. If it won't, let it go. We can't solve all of our kids' problems nor provide for all of their needs. Be realistic, practical, and most of all realize that at times just getting through the day in one piece is a success. Take the pressure off of yourself--you don't need to raise a junior Einstein or a concert pianist to feel like a successful parent. Acquiring some patience with your kids' antics and non-compliant behaviors and having some family fun are what really matter!

Patience is truly a gift, as well as a skill to be developed. I've often wished for more, but I want it *now!* As with acquiring any other skill it takes practice, compromise, and actually setting a goal. Try baby steps first, such as counting to ten before raising your voice, and then moving on to higher level skills such as developing a different perspective or changing your parenting and family priorities. I'm sure that there will be setbacks, but the more you exhibit patient behavior with your children, the less stress there will be in your household or carpool. And, your kids will take notice and just might begin to model a more tolerant attitude themselves!