A Personal Story. *I don't give parenting advice to others, unless they ask for it. It's hard to know a better way to handle a situation and watch someone use ineffective parenting skills. Once, when I was in a store, there was a young mother with a newborn on her shoulder and a toddler in tow. The toddler was going beyond where she could see him. I remembered how hard those first weeks of adjustment were, after having a second child—juggling a newborn again, forgetting to watch the older child, etc. I smiled at her and gave her an "I understand" look. She looked tired and overwhelmed. She kept calling to her toddler, "Dawana! Dawana! Get back here! Stay with me," but her toddler took advantage of his mother's inability to catch him.*

This mother and I ended up in the check-out line together. Her toddler was still running around. When she couldn't see him, I told her where he was and what he was doing. She thanked me. When the toddler was near his mother, I bent down and said, "You know, if you stand right here in front of your mommy and give that toy to the lady behind the desk, your mommy will buy that for you. But you need to stand in front of your mom if you want to take it home." This amazing bundle of energy stayed put! His mother thanked me as she left and I said, "Hey, I know what it's like. We mom's need to stick together."

If we interact with other people's children, make sure the parent is present and can see and hear us. Otherwise, the parent or child might worry that we are a "bad" stranger. We need to be cautious not to overstep our boundaries. Just be supportive and encouraging, modeling skills instead of preaching them.

A Graduate's Story. *I was at the playground when another mom come up to me and asked, "Where did you learn to talk like that?" This gave me a chance to tell her about the parenting class, without implying, "You aren't a good parent, you* ***need*** *a parenting class." The myth that parenting classes are for bad parents is so widespread, such a suggestion doesn't come off well unless someone asks for more information. I've had several people ask me, "Why did* ***you*** *take a parenting class?" It gives me a chance to reinforce the value of learning as much as we can about any commitment or responsibility we take on — and my kids are one of my highest priorities in life. Why* ***wouldn't*** *I learn as much as I can to be the best parent I can?*

HANDLING *CRITICISM* AND UNHELPFUL ADVICE ☆☆☆☆

We've learned how to be supportive of others, when they are experiencing problems with their children, but how do we handle people who are less than supportive to us?

Screening Advice

Not all advice is healthy or accurate, even when people tell us "it works." Whenever we hear or read advice, we want to screen it, to make sure it is consistent with our positive parenting plan and long-term goals. Here are a few guidelines for screening advice.

Don't blindly accept parenting advice without double-checking its accuracy. Consider the basis for the advice.

- ***Is it someone's personal opinion or is it based on research, broad experience, and methods that have been proven effective over time?*** Don't automatically trust advice just because someone believes "It worked for me and my children, therefore it will work for everyone." There could be other factors that led to the success—or the long-term negative effects are yet to be seen!
- ***Does it reflect personal power, control, or superiority issues?*** Don't blindly accept advice from people who think "I am an expert simply because I have a degree and work with families; therefore I know it all and everything I say is automatically accurate."

- ***Is the advice based on fear or love?*** Be careful if you hear a hidden message that says "If you don't do what I say you're a wimp and will lose control of your kids." Avoid advice that offers unhealthy quick fixes or extreme reactions.

Compare the advice to the proper definitions and guidelines of healthy parenting philosophies and techniques you've learned on this tour. Don't get hung-up on whether the person uses the same terms we use in this book. Look beyond the words to the *qualities* and *philosophy* of the technique. Especially consider the following questions:

- ***Is the philosophy positive, balanced, and healthy?*** Does an author promote a balanced approach or only see things in black and white; their way and the wrong way. Do they use the correct definitions for healthy parenting techniques? If the definition is incorrect, does the advice still fit the guidelines of healthy, balanced parenting?
- ***What is the philosophy of discipline?*** Is it really punishment? Does this style promote the parent's power and superiority at the expense of the child's rights and needs?
- ***What does the technique teach children?*** Are there unhealthy hidden messages?
- ***Does the advice say this is the only way to handle a situation or that there are choices to pick from?*** *The Parent's Toolshop* outlines specific steps for responding to problems, but at each step there are several options we can choose and no one response is the only possible helpful response. We can even mix and match these tools, as long as we follow the basic guidelines.
- ***Is the advice a commonly accepted idea, but inaccurate, unhealthy, or unhelpful?*** Consciously choose advice based on how well it can help you reach your long-term parenting goals.

> ***A Professional's Comment.*** *There's so much about The Parent's Toolshop that I like. As a parent, it is easy to react to problems; this offers many healthy alternatives. As a counselor, I like the way I can apply the process to all relationships. There were so many things that even as a therapist, with all the training I've had, that I didn't realize—like the myths about time-outs. I've been giving the same kind of advice lots of other professionals give—and assumed it must be right, because so many people believed it. This was a real eye-opener.*

You will find that you can trust the advice of the authors I've referenced in this book. Since *The Parent's Toolshop* is so comprehensive and references many other books, it could take a lifetime just to master *these* ideas. We don't need to confuse ourselves by reading books where we have to pick and choose ideas with a fine-toothed comb. We can be selective about our future reading, choosing those books and articles that explore balanced parenting techniques in more depth or those that deal with specific issues.

> **Our focus is on establishing a good relationship with our own children. We can ignore any advice that gets in the way of these goals or reduces communication and mutual respect in our family.**

Why People Criticize

Adult behavior can be unintentional or intentional, just like children's. Unintentional criticism usually comes from people who mean well, but express themselves poorly. Seek the value in what they say, instead of reacting to the *way* they say it. People often criticize parents because they are insecure about their own parenting (their upbringing, or how current methods compare to those they used when their children were young). If someone follows their advice, it confirms their way is "right" (PO, power).

Often, people offer advice because they assume others don't know any better, especially first-time parents. It often seems that everyone from the maternity nurse to the stranger in the grocery store thinks new parents need advice. Unfortunately, unsolicited advice is often inaccurate and confuses new parents. When a mother has her second child, the maternity nurse often says, "Oh well, I guess you know all this." Use this to your advantage. The more educated you become, the more confident you will be, and the less criticism and unwanted advice will sway you.

Other people criticize because pessimism and know-it-all-ism are part of their personality (PU). You probably can't change them, but you can learn to protect yourself from their toxic personalities. Refuse to believe their insults. Let comments "roll off your back." If you can do this, you'll reduce your stress and maintain the relationship (if you must, as with relatives). If this doesn't work, you may need to set limits for yourself or the other person. (See "When to Set Limits" later in this section.)

Some people intentionally criticize to get revenge or express jealousy (PO). They might feel guilty about mistakes they made and want to justify their decisions. They might also think that because you read a lot of parenting books or have taken a parenting class, you think you're perfect or your children are perfect. They thrill in pointing out your mistakes or shortcomings. "Did they teach you to do *that* in your parenting class?" "So when does the book tell you to finally give that kid a spanking?" Always try to present yourself humbly, "I'm not a perfect parent and neither are my kids. I don't know it all and still have a lot to learn." If you want to explain your methods, you can say, "This may not be the way for everyone, but from all I've seen, read, believe, and tried, this is the way I want to go. I believe it's worth the investment, but that's my choice. I don't expect everyone to agree with me."

Responding to Criticism

Use the Universal Blueprint. It is best to take the same approach with criticism as we do with parenting problems. Remember, the blueprint is "universal" because it applies to *all* relationships.

A. **First, figure out whose problem it is, theirs or yours**. If it's their insecurity, just listen and be understanding. Is their behavior unintentional or intentional? If it is intentional, what is their goal. Power? Revenge?

   If you are repeatedly criticized by someone you can't avoid, Prevent the problem from starting or worsening by planning ahead for the next "attack."

   - Consider the criticizer's perspective, so you can acknowledge their feelings and reduce their defensiveness. If they feel understood, they might not attack as much. It can also help you better understand their motives.
   - Imagine the situation and what the person usually says. Plan a respectful response and practice it in your mind or with a person who knows the criticizer and what he or she might say or do. Include in your plan the words you will say, staying calm, positive self-talk, tone of voice, body language, and when to walk away, if needed.

B. **If or when you respond to criticism, start by Acknowledging the other person's feelings** or perspective, "I can understand how you might feel that way . . ." or ". . . how it might seem that . . ."

C. 1. **Set limits or express your feelings respectfully**, "I feel . . ." or "I've decided to . . ." Just speak for yourself, without attacking what they're doing. That causes others to feel defensive or offended.

   2. **Remain firm in your decision**. Don't defend or explain yourself, unless someone is truly interested in your opinion.

If people don't realize how critical they sound and are willing to change, set up a signal. When we use the Universal Blueprint, people who are unintentionally hurting us usually hear our concerns and don't want to hurt us again. They may agree to a hand signal, word, or phrase you can use whenever they blame or criticize, to help them change this habit.

Use a "one-liner." If you react to criticism like me, you stand there stunned with your jaw dropped to the floor. Over the next week, you think of a million things you "should have" said. At these times, it helps to have some are quick, assertive, respectful responses you can choose:

- ***"We've researched this and discussed it and we've decided . . ."*** Or "I know it might not work for everyone, but we've decided . . ." Once people realize you are making a conscious choice to handle a situation this way, they often back off, even if they disagree with your decision.
- ***Say you'll consider their opinion*** the next time you and your partner discuss it. You *can* choose to give the idea some thought . . . even if only for one second!
- ***Accept your mistakes and faults, without apologizing.*** "You're right; I made a mistake. I know better than to do that." Use this when you agree that the other person is right.
- ***Calmly acknowledge that there is "probably some truth"*** in what they said. You are agreeing in principle only, without making any commitment one way or another to change.
- When asked a "Why do you do ____?" question, respond with ***"Why do you ask?"***instead of defending yourself. It may cause the person to think about their motives and whether they want to admit their reasons.
- ***Agree to disagree.*** Say you're not willing to discuss the issue and *change the subject.*
- ***Ignore the cut.*** Forgive and forget. If you're not ready for that, let the person know you heard the remark ("Umm-hmm") but don't respond further.
- ***Use humor.*** If someone says, "You still haven't lost your weight from the baby!" a woman can reply, "Yeah, I'm still trying to pass for pregnant so I can get special treatment." We can also simply agree with no excuse, "Yeah, I'm in no hurry to lose it." One graduate's mother-in-law asked her, "How long are you going to breastfeed him anyway?" Her reply was, "Well, what do you think they have recess for?" Her mother-in-law realized how ridiculous her question was and never brought it up again.

When to Set Limits

If you have consistently used respectful communication skills and the person is intentionally trying to hurt you or undermine your parenting, you may need to set limits. Try setting less restrictive limits first, in the following order:

1. **Remind the person that you need support more than you need criticism.** Reveal that you will not respond to criticism. If your children are the targets of criticism and it hurts their feelings, try to explain to them in nonjudgmental, understanding words that some people don't know nicer ways to say how they feel. Teach your children how to let the comments "roll off their backs."
2. **Set guidelines for your visits with this person,** such as what you are willing to discuss, how you plan to handle situations, or how you expect others to treat you or your children. Set time limits for the visits. If difficult people from out-of-town want to visit, limit the visit to a few days or arrange to have them stay at a nearby hotel. (I know, this is an expensive option, but the alternative—having a nervous breakdown or major blow-up—would make it worth seriously considering.)

3. **If they are unwilling to respect your bottom-line limits, you may need to leave or keep visits on "your turf,"** where your family rules are in effect. If you've revealed your expectations and they criticize you again, say "We need to be going now" and leave (even if it's abrupt). This emphasizes your willingness to follow through with your intentions. If the criticizer wants to visit you, say, "You can come to visit if . . ." Use the assertive communication skills you learned to keep the blame out of your statements. If they violate your family rules, you have every right to say, "I think it's time for you to go."

Even within our own families we sometimes need to set these kinds of limits. The bottom line is to do what you can to resolve these conflicts peacefully and assertively, but be willing to do what is best for you and your children's mental and emotional health. To decide whether you should compromise your rights, ask yourself the following questions:

- How important is this issue to me?
- If I compromise my rights, will I violate my values, principles, or feelings of self-worth?
- How will I feel later if I compromise?
- How much will it cost me if I compromise? (time, energy, self-respect, money.)

Let's practice a few examples of responding to criticism and unhelpful advice. The practice exercises and the answers are in the middle of the chapter this time, so we can end our tour with a final booster shot of confidence.

PRACTICE EXERCISES

A. Correcting Myths about Parenting

Remember the true/false quiz you took in the beginning of the book? Every answer was totally or partially "false." The following exercise lists these myths again. Recall all that you've learned on this tour and rewrite the myths so they are true statements. Possible revisions follow the exercise.

Myth 1 Parents should attend parenting classes when having problems with their children.

Myth 2 Parent educators tell parents what they are doing wrong and how to raise children the right way.

Myth 3 Whenever parents use an effective parenting skill, they should see it work right away.

Myth 4 Children should not be the center of the family; the parent should.

Myth 5 Democratic parenting is too permissive and only works with certain kinds of children.

Myth 6 It is the parent's job to control children's behavior.

Myth 7 Parents need to immediately react to a problem to effectively resolve it.

Myth 8 When parents stop children's misbehavior, the problem usually goes away.

Myth 9 Parents can encourage children by giving them lots of praise and rewards.

Myth 10 When parents let children know they are proud of them, children feel parents are giving them credit for their accomplishments.

Myth 11 Sometimes it's helpful to offer constructive criticism to help children improve.

Myth 12 Children should obey their parents because they are adults in authority. When children ask "Why should I?" parents only need to say, "Because I said so."

Myth 13 Behavior charts with stars or rewards foster internal motivation.