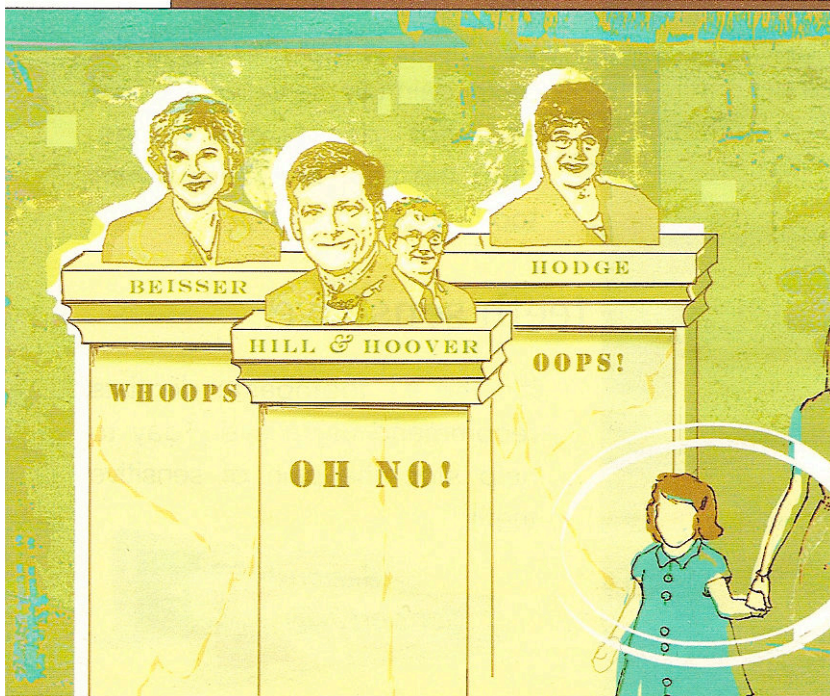


When parents make mistakes

Top parenting pros share some of their worst goofs—and show how moms and dads can turn their mistakes into the best lessons of all.

BY MICHELE MEYER ILLUSTRATIONS BY JEN RENNINGER



Guess what, parents? You're not perfect. Even the most dedicated and insightful moms and dads make mistakes when it comes to raising kids.

The good news is that kids, and families in general, are resilient. You can't erase your worst parenting moments, but with a little bit of insight and introspection, you can keep from repeating them and can use those experiences to the benefit of everyone in the family.

Even parenting pros admit that they have moments when they wish they could have hit rewind on their parental performances.

"Experts are not perfect, and we're certainly not perfect parents," says Dr. Donald Shifrin, a Bellevue, Washington, pediatrician. The examples those parenting pros share openly here can help you handle mom-and-dad mistakes better. And they illustrate an important element >> on 178

in fixing a mistake: Own up to it. You won't be diminished in your kids' eyes. In fact, they will respect you for learning from your errors.

FIND YOUR TEMPER—BEFORE YOU LOSE IT

When Shifrin's son Max refused to obey his dad, preferring to concentrate on his handheld GameBoy, the chairman of the public education committee of the American Academy of Pediatrics lost his cool.

"I yelled, 'If you're not going to do any of the things I asked, you're not going to have this thing,' and with an Olympic toss hurled the GameBoy out a second-story window. It landed in the bushes, and took me about 20 minutes to find it," he says.

That day, Shifrin learned the hard way how counterproductive it can be to go ballistic on your kids, even if they sometimes seem to deserve it.

"Max had this horrified look on his face and lost track of everything I was trying to explain. Instead, there was wailing, moaning, and teeth-gnashing, and the focus was on what Dad had done," Shifrin recalls. "It's not good for children to see us solve problems that way. Now I'll say, 'I'm thinking of swearing. Things are bad now,' and Max knows I'm at the end of my rope."

LEARN TO TALK "THE TALK"

Sooner or later, it happens. Out of the blue, your child asks, "Where do babies come from?" And though it's the same question you asked as a kid, you'll likely be as unprepared for it as your parents probably were.

"When my 8-year-old daughter, Sarah, asked the question at the dinner table one night, I launched into a pretty detailed discussion about reproduction and sexuality," recalls Daniel Hoover, Ph.D., child clinical

psychologist at The Menninger Clinic, Houston, and associate professor in the department of psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine. "Sarah started to get more and more troubled-looking as I continued talking. Then she began crying and yelled out, 'That's not true,' and ran from the room."

The takeaway message: On sensitive topics like sex, you probably don't have to go into nearly as much detail as you think you do. Try to edit your response to fit the age of your child. And remember that no matter how prepared you are, you're probably not going to get the Sex Talk right, says Hoover. Half the battle, though, is admitting that this is an awkward topic, and apologizing in advance if you mess up. "I doubt my daughter's scarred for life because of our talk, though when she has her own children, she'll probably take the exact opposite approach when it comes to talking about sex—and probably get it wrong somehow too," says Hoover.

PLAN AROUND HER PERSONALITY—NOT YOURS

"I threw my introverted 10-year-old daughter a surprise birthday party and she was mortified when faced with a roomful of people," says Sally Beisser, associate professor of education at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Calling herself "a classic extrovert," Beisser threw the kind of party she would have loved when she was 10. "But you need to consider your child's personality, not your own. She would've been much happier if she'd planned the party. That was a mistake I never made again. As I like to say, parenting is the only profession that, by the time you're really good at it, you retire," Beisser says.

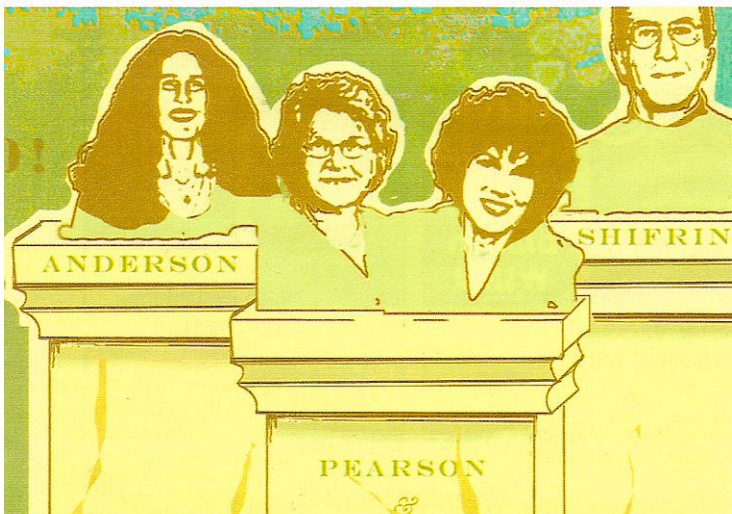
AVOID BECOMING A DADDY DOORMAT

Setting limits is a critical job for any parent. Remembering to enforce those limits isn't easy, but don't worry: Your kids will remind you.

"After I told my daughter we'd only buy the things we needed at the store, I let her add this and that to our bill. When we got to the car she said, 'You were really easy. I expected you to say no.' It dawned on me that I had become an easy mark for her," says Gary Hill, a family therapist and clinical services director at The Family Institute at Northwestern University in Chicago.

"After that, every store we went to, she'd ask for things. Finally, I had to sit her down and apologize, telling her from then on, I'd be more consistent. She got the message and was fine with it. You've got to be ever vigilant. If you set a limit with your kids, you simply have to follow through. Otherwise, you end up reinforcing the very behavior you're trying to get rid of," Hill says.

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FOCUS ON SECURITY—NOT SCARE TACTICS

Instilling respect for mom's rules is important, but sometimes, in moments of haste, parents accidentally instill fear instead.

"I was really frustrated because my 4-year-old son, David, was dawdling and wouldn't get with my schedule for getting in the car. Before I could stop myself, I asked him, 'Are you sure you want to stay inside this house by yourself, with all those bogeys under your bed?'" says Geri Pearson, assistant psychiatry professor at the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington.

Of course, the scare tactic backfired, leaving Pearson with a first-class case of guilt and a fair bit of damage control to do. "I felt awful for implying the things he imagined were actually real. Then we 'swept' the bogeys away. Of course, I also had to reassure him again and again that he was safe. I realized it was more important that he feel secure than we get out the door on time," Pearson says.

GET ALL THE FACTS FIRST

It's only natural to defend your child if they've been accused of wrongdoing. But like you, your child makes mistakes too, and it's important to get the whole story before you decide how to respond.

"I self-righteously chewed out the school nurse when she called me to say my 10-year-old son had sent her daughter an inappropriate e-mail. When he told me at first he hadn't, I believed him. It turned out he had," says Roni Cohen-Sandler, clinical psychologist in Weston, Connecticut, and author of *Trust Me Mom, Everyone Else is Going*. "You shouldn't be so sure that your kids would never do anything wrong. Sometimes they act out of character, so you shouldn't automatically defend them."

Even though her son hadn't known what the word he'd written meant, Cohen-Sandler took away his Internet privileges for lying. "Today computers are his life. He learned to be very careful about what he writes," she says. "And to be honest from the start."

WATCH YOUR MOUTH

Kids hear everything you say, and nothing makes an impact like a parent's slip of the tongue.

"When my 10-year-old son, Steven, shaved his head for team solidarity before a soccer game, I cried out, 'Why did you do that? You look so ugly!'" says Ariel Anderson, education professor at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan. "He felt bad, wondering if I still loved him. I still feel bad about it to this day, 11 years later. Of course, his beautiful hair grew back, but I learned to think before blurting something out," Anderson says.

It's a lesson worth remembering. Otherwise, you might just find your kids telling on you.

"I swore in front of my 7-year-old son and didn't realize it until he called my mother to tell her she needed to talk to me about using bad words," says Linda Hodge, president of the National PTA in Colchester, Connecticut. "That cured me really quickly." ♡

—Michele Meyer writes frequently on health and family issues.

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