



Top 10 Things to Remember as a Parent

By Josh and Stacey Noem

Parenting is a constant call to conversion. If conversion is a turning around—a choosing to orient ourselves and our lives to God again and again—parenting offers an abundance of opportunities for conversion. Usually these opportunities are invitations to convert our own temperament. Scottish philosopher David Hume said, “He is happy whose circumstance suits his temper, but he is more excellent who can suit his temper to his circumstance.” I am not sure if there is a greater skill in the parenting repertoire than being emotionally flexible. It calls for an enormous reservoir of strength and patience, something we can only find in our relationship with God. That is why parenting is a call to conversion and orientation to God.



The following list was created by Josh and Stacey Noam, bloggers for USCCB's For Your Marriage website. The couple has been married more than 20 years and they have 3 children.

1. The Days are Long, but the Years are Short

That is how I have felt shuttling three children to two different schools many, many miles apart across Portland each morning only to repeat the whole trip for three different dismissal times each afternoon. Those days were very long...

...But the years were short. And now that is suddenly all over.

2. Parenting Consists Of Thousands Of Tiny Corrections

Although there are undoubtedly educational components to parenting, I would not say that parenting is precisely the same as educating. Educating involves formal moments of instruction. Parenting seems to me to be much more about consistency in the form of thousands of tiny corrections, in a hundred different settings, to communicate and cement the lesson at hand. It takes a ton of attention and a ton of energy. Beautifully, it is all completely worth it when your 6-year-old sits at a table in a restaurant, looks at a menu to select her meal, respectfully orders her own food, and places her napkin on her lap. This applies particularly to taking children to Mass as well.

3. Routine

Children of any age absolutely thrive on routine. This is very well-known and time-worn wisdom. As children get older, interests diversify, families get busy, and as old routines become hard to maintain, new routines are very challenging to establish. In the face of that reality, I think there are some specific areas to focus on for routine. I arrived at them by adapting a saying about retreats from a priest friend of mine. He says that no matter what else happens, a retreat will always be good if it has good prayer, good food, and good rest. I think the



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same is true of family life. If we focus on a good family prayer routine, good nourishing meals (fresh fruits and veggies) shared in common, and making sure we all have enough good rest, everything else will fall into place.

4. Boundaries

Children of just about any age always know exactly where boundaries are because they push them until they smack right up against them! Boundaries are the interpersonal equivalent of routine. Children thrive in relationships where boundaries are clearly established and defined. They derive personal comfort and confidence from knowing what is and is not acceptable behavior and the roles that individuals play in their lives. Now, just because they know the boundaries does not mean that they will not attempt to push the boundaries. See number 2.

5. Parenting is a Team Sport

I am not always at my best, and Joshua is not always at his best. Just like in team sports, you need to be able to substitute in and out of the game from time to time. Additionally, the “time-out” is just as effective a tool for parents as it is for children. It is possible that at this point in our parenting careers, Joshua and I have taken more time-outs for ourselves than we have given to our children. We are attentive to recognizing when our energy is too low to handle a situation well, when we are getting too caught up in the moment, or simply when our buttons have been pushed. Sometimes those moments happen when the other person is there to just step in (we have given each other timeouts of the “why don’t I take over here while you sit this one out” variety). Sometimes they happen when there is no one around to help. In those times we call each other to “talk us off the ledge” or just tell the children we need a time out and adjourn to a private space. God is usually there waiting.

6. Manage expectations

On some level happiness and contentment are just a reflection of how well reality stacks up to our expectations. When it meets or exceeds our expectations, we are usually on the happy or content side. When it falls short of our expectations we are less than happy or content. As adults we have habits around forming our expectations. Optimists generally have positive expectations. Pessimists usually have not so positive expectations - although if you ask them, they will simply call them “realistic” expectations.

Children have little to no ability to shape their expectations of a given event or situation independent of adult input. Consider the toddler who falls and looks immediately to his parents for a cue on how to react-was it a big deal or not so big a deal? The same holds true for the school-aged child, middle-schooler, or teenager. It is unfair to assume that our children will know what to expect and how to behave in a given situation-even if they have seen it before-unless we shape and manage their expectations ahead of time and in the moment.

For example, our Saturday morning routine includes allowing children to watch cartoons (their only guaranteed TV during the week) and pancakes. This Saturday, we will be attending a morning funeral. Rather than spring it on them Saturday morning, we are much better served as a family for me to bring it to their attention right away. I let them know we are going to deviate from our routine and exactly how much. Then, hopefully, when Saturday comes, there are no surprises, and everyone can be the best version of themselves for the sake of one another and those with whom we will be praying.

7. Try to model instead of command

I had a high school basketball coach who used to say, “Do as I say, not as I do” whenever he flubbed the demonstration of a new play or a shot. He



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recognized that exactly the OPPOSITE is true: children are impressionable, and they are far more impressed and formed by our actions than our words. It is very easy, especially as children grow older, to try to parent verbally instead of physically. When a child is across the room and about to pick up a dangerous or breakable object, it is easy to speak at them sharply or say loudly "Stop. Get away from that." In our experience, it is much more effective to cross the room, get down at their level, introduce the object to them and explain how it is dangerous and breakable.

With older children, we find it tempting to raise our voices and say, "Don't take that tone with me!"-using a very particular tone ourselves. It turns out much better if we stop, offer our full and undivided attention, and in a level, voice explain how their choice of words and tone are simply not acceptable and could they please try again because we would like to hear what they have to say. If this sounds like a specific example, that's because it is-whenver I choose the quieter way, things go exponentially better.

8. How we show love shapes how our children understand God.

How else will my children learn what unconditional love is, if I don't show them? We show our children the face of God when we demonstrate the true nature of love - gentle, sure, and unconditional.

9. Learn each child's personality

This tip is entirely for multi-child families. No two children are alike even if they share the same DNA and upbringing. One of my biggest lessons as a parent of three is to work with the child in front of me. That means carefully learning each of my children's unique personalities. Sometimes they differ enormously - Oscar will eat just about anything we offer him; Simon would rather not eat

than to deviate from what he deems "acceptable." Sometimes they differ only in degree - Lucy will protest explosively, verbally and loudly over pretty much any discomfort but when it's gone, it is like it never happened; Oscar will also note pretty much any discomfort but quietly and unobtrusively, then after the fact, he won't let us forget it until bedtime. They are each precious individuals and parenting them often calls for different sets of skills for exactly the same lessons.

10. Read to your children

No matter what their age, no matter what it is we read - comic books, literature, poems, folk tales, the newspaper, board books that you are reciting from memory - read to children. Even if it is just for 10-15 minutes a day. We were dedicated readers with Oscar and he absolutely devours books now. But we slacked off with Simon and reading has come a bit less naturally to him. Interestingly, just increasing our reading time with him has ameliorated the situation noticeably. Some of my dearest memories with a younger Oscar and dearest moments now with Simon and Lucy are when we are snuggled in a chair, hip to hip, working through a story together.

