

Challenging Beliefs

Professor Matt Sanders

We all know parenting isn't an easy task. For most of us, we begin our careers as parents without a lot of training or preparation. And because children don't come with their own instruction manual complete with a cross referenced easy-to-look-up trouble shooting guide to fix things that go suddenly wrong or unexpectedly appear, we have to learn by trial and error.

Of course, we don't start out with a completely blank slate — every adult is able to express a view about child rearing whether or not they have children of their own. Having been children ourselves, our adult beliefs about raising children are strongly influenced by the kind of role models we felt our parents were. These beliefs are further affected by later experiences with children, the opinions of marriage and relationship partners, and the media.

Over the many years I have been working with families I have seen three commonly held beliefs about raising children that actually result in making parenting more difficult.

“It's just a phase”

Explaining away your two-year-old child's tantrum as just a normal part of that often feared and much mentioned “terrible twos” is missing the point. Yes, many two year olds throw tantrums, but not all do. And children who do throw tantrums don't always grow out of it. Many behaviour problems are not an inevitable and necessary part of normal development and parents need to account for enormous differences between children of different ages and personalities.

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I can recall one mother who insisted that her 3-year-old's constant aggressive behaviour towards other children at a local playgroup was just a phase

and consequently nothing to worry about. That assurance did little to convince other parents whose children were victims of the aggression as well as the kindergarten director who asked her to remove her son from the group. It was another two years before the mother realised her son's misbehaviour was not going to suddenly go away and she had to seek professional help. Dealing with the misbehaviour earlier would have made life much easier for both parent and child.

“It's all my fault”

Some parents deal with misbehaviour by blaming themselves. I have talked with many guilt-ridden and worried parents over the years. These parents blame themselves for almost everything the child does and in some cases may become severely depressed. The truth is, some children are simply harder to raise than others. Those who have feeding problems, cry excessively as babies and have sleeping difficulties are hard for almost all parents to deal with.

And as our children grow, while we play a large role in shaping their character, some things are out of our influence. We can't control what happens in a classroom or a playground, the friends our child will choose, the influence of the media, the family interactions of our spouse, or the unique personality of our child.

Self-blame is destructive and won't help a parent to make the necessary adjustments to daily routines that are sometimes required to deal with difficult behaviour.

“He’s doing it deliberately just to annoy me”.

Few children with behaviour problems are actually able to explain the reasons for their actions. Most simply do not know why they do certain things and all would have difficulty putting their reasons into words. The subtle complexities involved in everyday communications within families, both verbal and nonverbal, are more likely to contribute to a problem than some inbuilt personality flaw or mean streak within a child. Blaming constant misbehaviour on the personality of a child can often result in a parent ignoring important actions of their own that may be able to be altered to help bring about a resolution to the problem.

Find more parenting tips at: manitoba.ca/triplep or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.