A Less-Is-More Approach to Parenting

By Katherine Reynolds Lewis

Vicki Hoefle is a parent educator and author of *The Straight Talk on Parenting: A No-Nonsense Approach on How to Grow a Grown-Up* and *Duct Tape Parenting: A Less Is More Approach to Raising Respectful, Responsible, and Resilient Kids* who will be speaking in the Washington, D.C., area in November. She spoke with Katherine Reynolds Lewis about her five-step plan to becoming an effective, engaged parent of kids who solve their own problems.

Q: What are the primary concerns that parents bring to you?

A: There’s a general sense of discord in the family. Parents can sense something is off. There are too many power struggles and them bossing the kids and the kids refusing to be bossed. By the end of the day, everyone is exhausted and confused and disheartened.

They come with specific problems that include: my kids won’t do what I ask and they’re lazy and defiant. What they’re really describing is this discord in the home. My job is to help tweeze all that apart and look at it from a very different perspective, which oftentimes offers parents possibilities they hadn’t considered before.

Parents are under a lot of pressure in life in general, outside of their role as parents. There’s a lot of pressure to perform, to succeed, to get ahead, and that filters into their parenting. Then parenting becomes another vehicle for that stress-induced performance anxiety. That wears us down.

There’s some level of guilt that plays into this because we don’t spend as much time with our kids as we imagined when they were younger. We’re conflicted between this “sign them up for soccer and violin so they have a secure future,” but we give up that connection time, that easy living. Parents are exhausted trying to give their kids everything they desire in hopes it will make them happy.

There are these small pressures that at the end of the day weigh very heavily on us, and it chips away at our confidence. It makes us less secure as the leaders in our family, so we begin to make more parenting decision based on fear and less on, “What’s my best course of action in this situation?”

Q: What is that perspective you share with parents to help them?

A: Imagine that right now, we’re standing in front of our children and saying, “Let me make your decisions for you. Let me ensure you will do well in school and on the soccer field and have friends. Let me do it for you.”
Our intentions are great but our children are looking at the back ends of their parents. It’s not a great view. Sometimes it’s a really stinky view.

What if you took one step to the right and a half step back so your kids could see the world they’re being asked to navigate? You can be involved but you’re just far enough away that the child can develop their own assessment skills, the difference between good and bad choices, learn how to overcome frustration, how to make amends, to reach out, to take a healthy risk. You would be close enough to watch this and offer a little commentary, when asked, so you find that balance between being involved and taking over.

In that visual, parents have a sense that there’s a way to create more balance in the family. Then it’s about introducing them to these five foundational pieces:

1. Focus on developing relationship strategies. If what you’re going to do is going to fracture the relationship with your child, don’t do it. That includes nagging, reminding, counting, bribing, giving in, because each of those fractures the relationship a little bit. Over the course of 10 years, it’s no wonder that tweens find their parents unpalatable, because there’s a crack in the foundation. When you establish a good relationship with your kids, they’re more cooperative and they’re more responsible. Those are the byproducts of a healthy relationship. You only get those when the relationship is healthy.

2. What we generally call discipline strategies are really control strategies. We have a chance to help our children develop self-control, self-regulation, along with many other character traits, if we stop focusing on compliance and start focusing on character development over time. The benefit is if you focused on teaching your kids self-control early, by the time they were 7, there would be little fighting between children, you’d be able to trust they wouldn’t be on the computer when they weren’t allowed, and when they got into middle school, they’d have the mental muscle to say, “I’m not going to cheat on the test.”

3. The third is to quit your job as the maid. We give our kids 18 years to master all the self skills, social skills and life skills they’re going to need to live a healthy and fulfilling adult life. That is messy and it takes them time to learn. There’s this propensity to make things neat and tidy. We can do it faster and better but what we give up is the ability to be emotionally available to our kids. When you’re doing, your attention is somewhere else. They need us to be emotionally available when they get into a tough spot. They don’t need us to be doing their laundry, making their lunch. How do you make that shift in an organized way so the family isn’t thrown into chaos?

4. This idea that our children should be happy all the time. The human experience is one of ups and downs. Our job is to ensure that our children know how to pick themselves up when they are down, not to ensure that they are never down. There’s this added pressure on parents that their children should always be happy, that their children are never upset. I talk
about what stops us from allowing our kids to have temper tantrums, what stops us from letting our kids be frustrated, left out, to fail, so over the course of 18 years they don’t worry about making a mistake because they know how to pick themselves back up. We’re seeing the results of the kids who don’t have that resiliency, because that’s where the anxiety comes from, the increase in cutting, promiscuity, that is the result of kids who are incredibly emotionally immature because of parents who save them from even the smallest disappointment in life.

5. The last piece is this idea that parenting isn’t about what happens between 0 and 18, it’s really about what happens between 18 and 80. When you get into that mindset you’re no longer worried about being the perfect parent or having the perfect child. You’re much better at moving through a difficult moment with grace and ease because you’re not raising a 7 year old. It opens up the possibility that we do not have to be so stressed about a child who’s rude, or clothes are mismatched, or gets a C in algebra for a year until he decides he doesn’t want to get a C any more. It’s to look beyond this moment that is so awful that it threatens to drop us into a pit of despair and instead say, “This is nothing, this is something the child will pass through on his way to maturity.” It inspires parents to go back to being a real mentor, a real leader, a real resource to their children, instead of saying, “I will do your life and then I will drop you on the freeway when you’re 18 and then you will have to enter traffic on your own.”

Q: So what are the steps to quitting your job as the maid?

A: You make three categories. Category one is what they will do and can do on their own. Spend three or four days acknowledging that they know how and they are doing these things. Say, “I appreciate that you picked up your coat and hung it up.”

The second category is what can they do that they just don’t do. They can hang up the towel. They just don’t. Have a conversation to say, “Let’s figure this out because I’m nagging you. If nagging you and reminding you is off the table, how do we solve this problem?” You’re teaching kids problem-solving skills, which means a lot of the doing for them goes away.

The third category is what can’t they do because I haven’t shown them. You very quickly begin to identify what are the self skills that my child hasn’t taken charge of. You want to turn that over to the child. Teach them about skill development in an area they want first.

Then it’s very easy to ask for help in the kitchen, cooking meals. It’s very systematic. It’s very slow. Look at it like teaching addition. You do it until the child doesn’t think about it.
Vicki Hoefle will give a talk for parents about raising responsible and resilient kids on Friday, Nov. 20, 9:30-11 a.m., at Temple Emanuel, 10101 Connecticut Ave. in Kensington. Michael J. Bradley will give a talk called “Loving Your Tweens and Teens Without Losing Your Mind,” based on his award-winning book Yes, Your Teen Is Crazy!, on Thursday, Nov. 19, 7:30-9 p.m., at Landon School, 6101 Wilson Lane in Bethesda. For registration and information, visit www.PEPparent.org or call 301-929-8824.