

Always a Big Deal

Whatever parents have before them is a big deal. No matter the age of the child, there is always something to worry about. When our children are young, we worry that the problems of today will intensify over the years and become significant issues during their adolescence. And during their teenage years, we wonder about the decisions they will make when they are away from us when they are with their friends on weekends and when they are living in a college dorm.

But what if there is a bigger deal than what is happening in front of us? There are times when parents are worried about what their children are doing, but what their children are doing is age-appropriate and inevitable. The child who is reluctant to try something new, hesitant to do an overnight at a friend's home, clings to us at bedtime, refuses to cooperate, forgets to study for a test, is no different than the one-year-old needing diapers. Instead of "big deals," these are the ordinary moments of parenting. They are needed and it is up to us to make these moments count.

Some of us had younger siblings when we were growing up. Others learned what children are like at different ages by babysitting. Or maybe we were one of the younger siblings and had nieces and nephews for many years before we became parents. And some parents read parenting books, go to parenting seminars and utilize library and website resources about parenting. But for parents who are not sure if what is in front of them is age-appropriate or not, it seems "big."

Parents may approach a teacher, counselor or psychologist when they are concerned about one of their children. If that person shares the concern, that provides some external validation. But consider it a gift if the teacher or counselor is less concerned. That is your signal to be less worried, frustrated, discouraged or anxious. Perhaps what you thought was a big deal is actually an inevitable part of childhood.

Parents may get frustrated on car trips or while running errands. Perhaps their children are bickering about nothing, complaining about something not being fair, or whining and demanding a treat. Not pleasant moments of family life, but it is what happens next that is critical. Parents who "get" the inevitability of these kinds of behaviors at certain ages will *feel differently* than those who do not. They won't have to force themselves to stay calm. They will genuinely

feel calm because they are not worried or concerned about what the behaviors mean. And they will not feel that inner pressure to “nip this in the bud” to prevent their child from carrying some bad trait into their future. What if the next time you are concerned about one of your children, ask yourself if your concern might be a result of a lack of information (or lack of acceptance) of an inevitable moment of childhood. Take a few breaths and mull this over the next time your children do something they shouldn’t do or don’t do something they should. You might find yourself feeling less frustrated. After all, one-year-olds cannot be toilet trained, six and eight-year-olds cannot get along on car trips, and ten-year-olds cannot go through a day without whining.

And then there are teenagers. Show me the parent of a teenager who isn’t worried! No less true than with younger children, thirteen-, fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds still have work to do. They struggle with friendships, respect, responsibility and manners. Many are less organized than they need to be, less motivated by schoolwork than we would like them to be. Every step of the way, we try to start where our children are at, make things better by our presence, resist the urge to parent in the heat of the moment and try not to lead with our frustrated and worried self. Instead of pushing our children away when they are at a weak moment, we strive to reach out to them, hold them close and pull them ever closer to us and all we represent. After all, it is the space between us and our children that is always the big deal. May we focus our energies more on keeping things peaceful between us and our children, and less on the specific challenge of the day.

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