



An introduction to **Purposeful Parenting**

Purposeful Parenting begins by thinking about the final result. What do parents want for their children? All parents want their adult children to be healthy, happy, and productive. They want them to be all that they can be. This is the long-term goal of parenting.

All children, including children with disabilities, are born with a desire to learn new skills. All children are driven to grow, to learn, to contribute, and to connect with others. But before they can learn new skills, think creatively, or be productive, their most basic needs must be met:

- bodily needs, like breathing, water, food, and sleep
- the need to feel safe
- the need to feel loved, accepted, and valued.

Meeting these basic needs allows children to be healthy and to learn. It helps them start to build self-esteem and a desire to be good at

whatever they do. Over time, they then begin to decide for themselves what it means to be healthy, happy, and successful.

Unmet needs, though, can cause stress. If it is brief and mild, stress can be positive and lead to growth and the learning new skills. However, too much stress can be toxic. This toxic stress can affect the basic growth and function of the brain. It can prevent children from becoming the healthy, happy and productive adults we hope they will be someday.

The six parts of Purposeful Parenting

By being Protective, Personal, Progressive, Positive, Playful, and Purposeful, parents and caregivers can decrease toxic stress. Decreasing toxic stress releases that in-born drive to grow, to learn, to contribute, and to connect with others. Purposeful Parenting helps children to be all that they can be.

Protective

- Prevent toxic stress by always meeting the child's basic needs.
- Be sure that the child has enough food, water, shelter, and sleep.
- Be sure that the child feels safe and always knows that someone they trust is there to care for them.
- Avoid being too protective. Don't "hover"! Over time, children must begin to feel capable and safe on their own.

Personal

- Show love and acceptance. Strong personal relationships decrease toxic stress.
- Be kind and gentle. Being mean, harsh, or violent may hurt the relationship and create toxic stress.
- Avoid calling the child names like bad or good, dumb or smart, mean or nice. However, naming emotions and behaviors may help your child to learn ("You look



mad” or “Hitting is not helpful”). You may not like the emotion or behavior, but always love the child unconditionally.

- Match your teaching to the child’s personal needs, strengths, and way of learning.
- Teach children helpful behaviors (“The next time you are mad, try using your words”). Avoid just saying “stop it” or “no!”

Progressive

- Infants and children are always changing. Discipline and parenting skills need to change, too.
- Learn about child development. Knowing “what to expect” reduces frustration and stress for both you and your child.
- Notice and support the new skills your child is learning and practicing (“Thanks for using your words” or “Good job sharing”).
- Remember: It is much easier to teach the behavior we want than to control unwanted behavior!

Be Positive...

- In regard. Love the child if not the behavior. Avoid punishments like spanking. They may actually increase stress because they turn parents into threats (the parents are no longer being “protective”).

Spankings may also damage the relationship (the parents are no longer being “personal”). Physical punishments also become less effective over time and teach children that adults react to strong emotions with violence.

- In outlook. Optimism reduces stress and builds confidence. Say things like “I know you can do better the next time.”
- In reward. Catch your child “being good” to nurture new behavior. Reward the child’s efforts.

Playful

- Be playful. Play time is a chance to practice new skills and helps learning. Reading together is a good example. Try to read with your child for at least 20 minutes each day.
- Be involved. Finding the time to play can be hard, but it strengthens the relationship with your child.
- Be a follower, at least some of the time. Allow your child to be creative and to lead your play together.

Purposeful

- Being protective, personal, progressive, positive and playful is not always easy. When parents are having a hard time meeting their own need for food, sleep, shelter,

confidence, or connection with others, they may be less responsive to the needs of their children. Parents must therefore be “purposeful:” to be mindful of their child’s needs and to be intentional in their attempts to meet those needs, even when the going gets tough.

- Think again about the long-term goals or purpose of parenting. Nurture the basic skills that children need to be successful. These include:
 - language
 - social skills
 - self-control (also known as emotional regulation)
- Remember that the word discipline means “to teach.” Punishments and other attempts “to teach” children what NOT to do are much harder than modeling, noting, and encouraging all of the behaviors that we want!
- Find out the “purpose” of your child’s behaviors. Many times, repeated behaviors help a child meet a basic need. For example, crying may be the child’s way of saying “I’m tired,” “I’m scared,” “I want some attention,” “I need to prove that I can do this,” or “I have an idea or plan.” Once you’ve figured out the “purpose” of a behavior, help your child to learn new skills to meet these needs.