

Top 10 GREAT THINGS YOU CAN DO *for your Child*

Caroline Baxter Lambert

Our last column focused on one of the best things you can do for your child: the gift of reading aloud, to foster a life-long love of reading. Included was a list of recommended books to read to children of different age groups.

Since then I have been polling other parents and reading parenting magazines and books to come up with an admittedly subjective and personal list of what I think are some of the very best things you can do for your child—outside of the basics of keeping her safe, fed, clothed and under a roof. I'll list them here as New Year's Resolutions we can all shoot for; in later columns we'll explore them in more detail, with recommendations for books and websites with helpful information. Please write us at Moms in the Know to let us know your opinions, additions, and revisions to the list.

1 Read to your child!

As a recap of the earlier column: Make it a habit to read together. Children who love to read have an easier time in school, are better writers, and have stronger vocabularies. A love of reading is one of the most joy-giving, imagination-enhancing, world-enlarging gifts you will ever give your child. Experts say to start reading to your children when they are babies and continue even after they can read to themselves.

2 Eat meals as a family.

Studies have shown correlations between families eating together and more healthful eating, better performance in school, and a reduced likelihood of substance abuse and unhealthy weight control practices such as bulimia or anorexia. It can be hard to stick to this when you have a lot going on, but make an effort to sit down at the table together to eat as a family.

3

..... Establish family traditions.

Children love the pleasure it brings to be able to say, “We always . . . ,” whether it’s we always eat Mexican on Fridays, or we always watch the Grinch on Christmas eve. Family traditions help make life predictable, comforting and safe. Traditions involving helping others can also give children values to take into adulthood. Rituals such as these form a family identity and give a child a group to belong to—something that a recent study revealed as most important to children who described themselves as “happy” in high school.

4

..... Love your child as an individual.

There are several parts to this. If your son is more of an artist than an athlete, don’t sign him up for soccer boot camp; embrace the person he is and play up his positive strengths. If you have more than one child, carve out time to spend one-on-one with each. Of course you love your child, but it is important for each child to FEEL that love—for who she is.

5

..... Teach your child that she is a part of the universe - not the entire universe.

I want my children to know that while they are extremely important to their father and me, the world does not revolve around them. They need to do their part to help out, to treat others well, and to be polite. This has to be a never ending campaign, day in and day out: it’s a pain to constantly ask children to say please and thank you, to remind them to pay attention and help bring in groceries, to teach them that they have to be considerate and think about other people’s feelings, but it is a disservice to them not to do it. We want our children to be people others enjoy being around.

6

..... Establish a discipline that feels right for your family.

Be consistent, beyond a necessary flexibility. Children need boundaries. Read parenting books on discipline if you need help coming up with a philosophy that fits your family’s needs.

7

..... Give your child the best education you possibly can.

Investigate school options, choose one you feel good about, and supplement at home when necessary. Get to know your child’s teacher, and volunteer to help out in the classroom if you can. At home, work with your child on his weak areas, and help him find extra books and materials on things that catch his interest. Make the most of the years when children are excited about learning.

8

..... Teach your child values through your actions.

Your child is constantly learning how to behave by watching the way that you behave. She learns how to treat others by the way you treat her; she listens to how you interact with the other people in your life; she is a keen observer of what you do in different situations throughout the day. Talk about the difficulties and choices we all face, and share your personal experiences with your children. We have to communicate--talk about what they did right, what they did wrong, how to make better moral decisions, and why you've made certain choices in your own life.

9

..... Make healthy choices a part of your lifestyle, and teach your child healthy habits.

You can be a great example by teaching your child healthy habits like exercising and avoiding junk food. In daily life, establish safe practices: use sunscreen, buckle children into car seats and booster seats, and wear helmets when biking or skateboarding. Boost your children's health by serving plenty of fruits and vegetables, and by making sure they get enough sleep; children who are sleep deprived are more likely to get sick, are more prone to meltdowns, and may have a hard time focusing on school work.

10

..... Slow down, and enjoy each age and stage of your child's life.

Enjoy it! This is SO important and sometimes hard to remember when things are tough and you get grumpy. During difficult times like potty training and homework struggles, repeat your mantra: "This too shall pass." But remember: so will the good, sweet, fun times with your little person. Carve out time to laugh, play games, and have conversations. Remember to just listen, tell stories, sing songs, and enjoy.

