

Good parenting is rooted in warm relationships

But sometimes it also requires clever tactics.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [May 4, 2022](#) issue



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Even though our children finished high school years ago and are now married and living at a distance, my wife and I still get invited to many high school graduation parties every spring. Although I wonder if some families invite everybody they can think of, most of the invitations from inside our congregation grow out of deep and abiding friendships, which is a loveliness that's supposed to emerge from a faith community.

We usually attend as many of these grad parties as we can. Parents inevitably cluster together as teens chat among themselves nearby. Balancing paper plates heaped with brisket and beans, we stand around and laugh about the challenges of parenting. Maybe it's our foibles and ineptitude. Whatever the case, it's clear to all of us that parenting is more art than science. It is, as Wendell Berry says, "a vexed privilege and a blessed trial, absolutely necessary and not altogether possible." Various of us confess to flying by the seat of our pants, making stuff up as we go, and doing our best to look like pros along the way.

I'm struck by the prominence of fidelity over expertise for those who manage parenthood so skillfully. Even though parents seldom feel sufficiently prepared, those who grasp the value of strong emotional bonds with their children seem to know that character and attitude are more important than technique. Parental warmth supersedes method. Wisdom surpasses tactic.

I remember trying to parent this way when our kids were young. *Don't worry about knowing clever techniques, I'd tell myself. Just maintain a deep and coherent self-understanding, and it'll rub off on the kids.* One day I came across the story of a parent who undercut my whole approach. I've never forgotten her strategy, and recently I decided to look up her story again.

Michelle Tribout of Belleville, Illinois, had grown tired of her three kids not pitching in around the house or showing more gratitude. Misty, 15, Joseph, 13, and Rachel, 7, had been fighting, talking back, and failing to get out of bed when asked. One day when they came home from school, they found that their mom was up in the tree house. She'd left a note on the mailbox below: "On strike mom. No cooking, cleaning, doctoring, banking, or taxi service. Out of order."

The kids cooked dinner that night and came out promising Mom they'd be nice. She refused to come down. They then baked her favorite brownies and wrote up a settlement promising they would do the following: "1. Pitch in whenever you see something needs to be done. 2. Act your age, not like you're five. 3. Don't smart off. 4. Come when you're called. 5. We are the kids; you are the parents. 6. Give and take on an equal basis. 7. Ask before you do something. 8. Do not hit or hurt anybody." At 11:30 p.m., they presented their settlement. A contractual agreement was finally signed at midnight, and she came down.

At the time, Tribout's approach struck me as little more than a shrewd technique for getting attention. But now that I better understand this absolutely necessary and not altogether possible vocation many of us share, I'm more ready to say that parenting involves both technique and attitude, both method and character. Tribout may have climbed into that treehouse as a clever tactic. But I'm also pretty sure she lived with more depth of character than I realized before.

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