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Family Focus

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Happy New Year! Many of us take stock of our lives at this time of year and think of future goals. Parents in our community are almost uniformly loving, dedicated and conscientious. I see parents putting their children as top priorities. Even though you're probably doing a great job already, here are a few reminders of what can benefit your children.

1) Take good care of your marriage or partnership. Put your partner as a priority along with your children, not secondary. If your relationship is in jeopardy, work with a couples therapist before the damage is too entrenched to turn around. If there is physical abuse, don't hesitate to get help and find out about safe ways to leave the relationship.

2) Put yourself as a priority along with your children. Too often, parents with the best of intentions let their households revolve largely around the children and what they would like. If this is the case, you may be creating expectations for your children that their needs and desires always take priority. And you will be sacrificing your own needs in the process. In putting yourself in the mix, you may decide to leave time and energy for a relaxing soak in the bathtub instead of reading them

another bedtime story. You may want to stay home instead of taking them ice skating, which they are begging you to do. The important thing is being able to put yourself first at times without feeling guilty. I often hear from moms who feel bad or guilty if they choose to do something for themselves and it means they won't be complying with their children's wishes. But I also hear from many moms who don't feel very appreciated by their children. If you are always catering to your children, they will come to expect this from you and naturally won't have a big sense of appreciation. So keep in mind that by saying no and choosing yourself at times, you will be fostering an attitude of appreciation in your children.

3) Help your children obtain the security and consistency that all children crave. The best gift you can give them is a stable, happy home, whether it's two parents, one parent, a blended family, or relatives living together. It doesn't matter if you own a home or rent. What matters most to children is feeling protected and taken care of physically and emotionally by the adults in their lives. For that matter, take good care of all the relationships in your home. Make sure that your children are treated well by siblings and other family members. Try to foster connections so that family members share with each other instead of isolate. Even if an older sibling isn't being overtly mean, ignoring and excluding can feel hurtful to a younger child.

4) Practice kindness, generosity, and tolerance for others and others' ideas. In the current political climate it is especially important to show your children how to avoid being uncivil or thinking in extreme terms. Teach them how to stay at arm's length from people who do. Help them look for middle ground, if possible. Avoid negative confrontations with others, even when provoked. We need more role models for practicing restraint in our interactions. If you demonstrate respect for others and also self-respect, you will be a wonderful example for your children.

5) Distance yourself from anyone who persists in being too disrespectful, confrontational, or hurtful to you or your children. First it's important to try a variety of measures to encourage another person to alter his or her behavior. It's always a good idea to first make the effort to see if the relationship can be improved. But, if after all your continued attempts the person is unresponsive and persistent, you don't want continue to expose your children or yourself to words or actions of others that are damaging. This is not an easy task. You don't need to adopt an extreme approach; especially in the case of a family member, it can be hard and disruptive to cut off contact completely. But you can decide how much contact to have, under what circumstances, and how you can take more control of the relationship.

6) Show your children how it's possible not to take yourself too seriously. Laugh at some of your past and current mistakes. Admit some inadequacies and show how you can still feel good about yourself in spite of them. Walk the fine line between being a responsible, dependable person and letting less important things slide at times.

7) Along with not taking yourself too seriously, avoid putting too much pressure on yourself. If you have too many commitments and not enough time to relax, figure out ways to achieve a better balance. If you are expecting too much from yourself - a clean, organized home, perfect appearance, excellent coordination of

all your personal and family activities, happy mood with others at all times - try to loosen up. Not only do you not deserve to be frequently stressed, but your children will also be affected, of course. You will be doing them a favor by showing them how setting realistic expectations for themselves can lead to greater contentment.

8) Last, remind yourself often of all your good motives and efforts. Parenting isn't a perfectly documented science - otherwise there wouldn't be thousands of parenting books on the market. Chances are your children recognize how important and valued they are to you, and how loved. Your words and actions show this in countless ways. Just like you try to concentrate on the positive with your children, focus on all that you are doing well as a parent and give yourself one of the countless high-fives you regularly give to your children.

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