



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in *Pact's Point of View* © 1995
Do not reprint without permission.

Executive Parenting Strategies that Work

By Jim Manhoney

Parents function in their families much as do senior executives in business. When parents function in an executive mode, they establish and maintain a healthy family culture. Parents as executives make things happen by being both directive and cooperative. Parents as executives create a sense of family belonging, identity and direction. To do this, parents as executives in the business of family and the family of business operate with a sense of confidence. They try out their approaches with information at hand instead of waiting for all the information to come in before they problem-solve. This leads to an increased hands-on parenting approach which separates the expert parents from non-expert parents. Executive parents respond pro-actively to crisis, use long-term planning and solve problems by seeking information from different sources. They are comfortable with the use of control but also build ownership of family decisions by involving family members in decision-making. Executive parents see themselves as the most capable individuals to manage their family; however, they will subcontract responsibilities to the specialized skills of others. In serving their family members well, executive parents establish their vision and increase family security.

Following are ten executive parenting strategies that work in all situations. These executive parenting strategies are especially necessary for parents of special-needs children.

1. Maintain awareness of time urgency.

The period from birth to age eighteen consists of 216 months. If the child in your care has special needs or is vulnerable to discrimination, you have until the child has reached latency, approximately eight years of age, to instill self-care and self-preservation core values. It is never too late to learn self-preservation skills. After children reach latency, they may not say much, but as long as they are within hearing range, they are learning by evaluating what you do and how you say it. They are deciding how much to believe you by seeing how much you "walk your talk." Family meals and non-task time together, such as reading a book and shared time in a car, are important opportunities to talk about little important things. Five minutes of parental time is worth five hours of therapist time.

2. Discrimination and racism will not end in your life-time or the life-time of the children you care for and love.

If you think to the contrary, specify what year and month you think your special-needs child, child of color, daughter

or son will not experience discrimination and racism. When will their race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, age, religion, family, marital and health status no longer be a source of discrimination? Acknowledgment that discrimination and racism will endure is not meant to be accepted passively. Discrimination- and racism-awareness are meant to serve as a challenge that we must aggressively embrace life-affirming measures using a time-urgent approach. As adults who love children, we must forever remember that education, self-esteem, and validation are literal life and death issues for many of the children we care for.

3. Plan for your retirement before you have children and while your children are young.

If you live to eighty years of age, you will have lived 960 months. Many adults will not live more than 1,000 months. This means if you are forty years old, you have about 480 months to live. The last ten years of your life (520 weeks) will probably involve changes in health, finances, partnership and residential status. No one is too poor to invest, whether it is in maintaining health through good self-care habits, education career skills, a house, savings account, retirement fund (IRA, 401K, Keogh Account, mutual funds, stocks and bonds).

4. You may lose your partner to divorce, separation, death, or incapacitation.

You have about a fifty percent chance of experiencing these changes while your children are growing. This means you should discuss who will meet the needs of your children if you separate, divorce, become ill or die. Many primary earners have life and disability insurance. Often they and their partners fail to insure the primary caregiver for disability and life insurance. Discuss how much it would cost to provide services maintained by your partner. Discuss who will be your first and second choices for executor and guardians of your children.

5. You have more in common with other foster and adoptive parents than with your family of origin.

As caregivers of special-needs children, you have more in common with other similarly involved adults than you do with your family of origin. Examine who you feel has expertise about your family needs. As parents who choose to adopt or foster care, you are reinventing your family every day. Effective family executives are most likely to contact other similarly involved caregivers for information, support and referral. They will also hire to their weakness and involve other professionals to address family problems. They know that "family will get

you through times of no friends better than friends will get you through times of no family.”

6. It takes a whole village to raise a child.

Parents using the executive parenting approach will examine how they respond to the needs of fatherless and motherless children in their community. Do they informally include other children in their family activities? Or do they think that, as foster and adoptive parents, their plate is full and they feel it is someone else’s formal responsibility to respond to children’s needs for guidance and nurture? Male-abandoned households provide the basis for more violence among young males than any other cultural behavior in this century. This behavior constitutes a unique gender crime committed by men. Witness that women in most communities will assist men raising their daughters. However, men will often not help at all in assisting women in their communities to raise their boys.

7. Therapy?

Are you doing the right things or doing things right? When you choose therapy for your child or family, examine if you are doing the right things or doing things right. Therapists and other family service providers have a fiduciary responsibility to their clients. We have to make sure our clients are getting the most value for their treatment dollar. We are responsible for maintaining the standard of care for every disorder and problem we treat. Your child with Attachment Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or any other disorder may be in therapy. This may or may not be a good thing. Do you have a DSM-IV diagnosis for your child? Are you aware of the professional standards of care regarding your child’s therapeutic needs? Have you asked your therapist to describe the standard of care regarding your child’s diagnosis? Are you present when your child is receiving therapy? If not, how does the therapist rationalize your lack of presence? Do you or your therapist think your presence is harmful to the child? If not, why are you not present during services for the child in your care?

8. The hidden contract with special-needs children.

An executive-parenting approach will assume the child will do in your home what has been done to them. The hidden contract in caring for special-needs children is that whatever happened to them will happen to the other children in your home. A child who has been abused or neglected will often act out those same issues in your home. Do you have an ongoing education process in your home dealing with good and bad touch, sexually-transmitted diseases, drugs and alcohol, and stranger avoidance? Do you have smoke and carbon monoxide alarms on all levels of the house? Do you also have a smoke alarm in your child’s room and closet? Parents who have received competent advice will keep a large ABC fire extinguisher under their bed. Effective providers will educate parents that they are liable for torts (damage against persons or property) of their children. You and your children can be sued for accidental or intentional damage to others. Parents should engage in asset protection. This may include asking

their attorney or insurance agent about the merits of obtaining at least \$1,000,000 worth of Umbrella Insurance to add to their homeowner’s and car insurance policy. Executive parents will also create a will or set up trusts either to protect their assets or as a way of protecting their children’s interests if the parents become ill or die prematurely.

Using the executive parenting approach, parents — long before their children are sexually active — will examine their parental views about sexual activity of their children. An executive approach involves reexamining parental feelings about abortion, adoption and foster care. This means evaluating how you feel about having your son or pregnant daughter living at home with their partner or paramour. Do you push for your pregnant child’s independence and rely upon state social services to support your child and grandchildren? Do you plan on selling your house after your children emancipate or do you plan to keep your house and assist your adolescent and adult children in raising your grandchildren in your home?

9. Executive parents will not let the tail wag the dog.

They know the Pareto principle of special-needs families saying, in effect, that one special-needs child will consume eighty percent of the family’s emotional, time and financial resources; the other eighty percent of the family will often receive the remaining twenty percent of the family’s resources. This results in the tail wagging the dog. If they are not careful, the lives of families of special-needs children will revolve around the pathology of the needy child instead of causing that child to revolve around the health of the family. When this occurs, all family members see that the squeaky wheel is greased with attention and compliant children are punished with lack of attention for their appropriateness.

10. Executive parents will keep in mind that they or their partner may tire of parenting and partnership.

Executive parents will support each other and take each other at their word about personal stress and behavior of the children. They know children can respond in dramatically different ways to each parent. This often leads to splitting and triangulation in which children favor or abuse one parent over the other. Unless parents regard each other as equal and competent partners, splitting and triangulation by the children can disunite the partnership of the parents.

At the same time, executive parents will keep in mind that they or their partner may tire of parenting or of partnership. We must all keep in mind that we will get tired. The bigger our task, the harder we may fall. We will not always be able to keep up the demanding pace of meeting the legitimate and conflicting needs of our selves, our children, our partners and our community. When we tire or burn out, we need to learn to forgive and accept ourselves, our partners and our children. By doing this, we will achieve an evolving life perspective and maintain the necessary life-affirming measures and direction the next generation of competent parents will need.

All rights reserved, Jim Mahoney MSW.

Jim Mahoney is Clinical Director of Spokane consultants in Family Living. He is a therapist in private practice in Spokane, Washington.