

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

“Stop the train, I want to get off.”

~ *Anonymous*

WHAT PARENT HASN'T CRIED OUT inwardly and irrationally, “Will this phase in my child’s development last forever?” Many behaviors encourage “forever” fantasies, but none so strongly as a child reverting backward in development—our potty-trained child starts messing her undies, a great sleeper begins waking hourly at night, an independent four-year-old suddenly cries about going to school, a six-year-old becomes clingy and uses baby talk. We’ve all heard that healthy development involves steps forward then back, but when our own child spirals into baby-like behaviors, we need reassurance and practical guidelines to move sanely forward.

Avoid Shaming. Telling your child to “Stop acting like a baby” will only make him more anxious. Imagine the kinds of supportive statements you would like your partner or friend to make when you’re feeling vulnerable. “I’ve felt just like you before. I’m glad that you’re expressing your feelings and showing that you need support.”

Gently suggest situations that might be causing stress. Instead of asking “Why are you acting like this?” sit with your child and mention situations that may be causing worry. Hearing that you’re aware that your recent business trip or Grandma being in the hospital could be hard to manage reduces a child’s tension. Talking helps but it won’t erase babyish behaviors. Pretend play and role playing provide great support.

Think in terms of cycles. When a child whines and complains at the end of the school day, that’s a small cycle of regression. She’s tried to be her “best self” for hours, and seeing you allows for a safe drop in her maturity level. After a minor trauma, it took one of my children months before a more sturdy self re-emerged.

Let yourself off the hook. Milestones make us proud, but we need to understand that “going backward” isn’t a reflection on our parenting. Regression actually protects a child’s “mature sense of self” from too much stress and provides us with an opportunity to provide needed support. This is a time when we may need the support of a friend or professional. Getting guidance can give us a chance to “redo” previous periods of development in a more nurturing, supportive way.

Understand that excitement involves stress. Even if your child expresses excitement about kindergarten or moving to a new house, it’s up to you to understand that she’s also nervous and unsure. When the baby-self comes out, validate unsure feelings and try to handle the situation matter-of-factly.

Trust your child’s development. Few college students speak baby talk. However, many young people beginning college come home frequently and even talk about quitting. These are natural forms of regression that help the emerging more mature self to thrive. Children don’t usually pop out of a regressive stage as quickly as we like, and helping them move forward involves patience with the recycle process.

New York-based parenting coach Alice Kaltman says, “Shout out for going backward!” The spiraling nature of development lasts throughout our lives and offers us all a chance to slip back into what’s already comfortable before we move on.

April 11, 2012