

Family coach has some one- size-fits-all advice to offer



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The longer you've been a parent, there's a good chance that at some point you've looked at one or more of your children and sighed in frustration.

Not because you didn't love your child — and not because you didn't want to help him. Nor because you had grown tired of dispensing love and advice to her.

The truth is that once they outgrow their bottles and diapers, our babies morph into youths and adolescents who thrill us on some days and test our intellect, patience and wallets on others.

For those latter times, someone like Stephanie Michalowicz is a visit, phone call or e-mail away.

Michalowicz is a Richmond-based family coach.

You've likely heard of life coaches, who help clients develop strategies to achieve their personal goals; or executive coaches, who help top-level business professionals thrive in their careers.

Michalowicz's role isn't that much different.

Instead of assisting an individual at a crossroad, or an executive seeking to advance, she helps parents and children implement changes that make their personal, social and academic lives better.

Search the Internet for a family coach and you'll find that the field is blossoming.

"There's such a need," said Michalowicz, a former school counselor who has helped clients with issues ranging from time management and family transitions to anger management and study skills.

"A lot of people think of counseling and coaching [interchangeably]," she said. "I don't do long-term counseling. With coaching, you don't have to have a big problem; you just have to want to make things better. We set goals and I offer accountability."

While the needs of every family are different, some advice is one-size-fits-all.

Michalowicz shares with us today some of the strategies she has encouraged families to implement to make their lives more full and less stressful:

■ Try to limit your children's extracurricular activities.

"Don't overprogram," Michalowicz said.

"There are so many more activities for children and youth compared to 20 years ago. There's no way you can do it all. Spend time where you're just playing in the yard or hanging out and having fun together."

■ Communicate often and well.

"Practice active listening, where you hear each other," Michalowicz said. "Repeat back what is said. People need to be heard. That

More info

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doesn't necessarily mean you agree, but at least you're hearing their side."

■ Try not to criticize.

"It's not what you say, but how you say it."

■ Parents should take time for themselves.

"They should have at least one thing they enjoy doing. It's important to have fun and model that for their children," she said.

■ If they are married, parents should date each other.

"There is nothing more wonderful for youth than to see their parents enjoying each other and spending time together."

■ Discipline is important.

"It's easy to let behavior slide because everyone is busy, but consequences are important," Michalowicz said. "Have a structure in your family regarding this issue. That doesn't mean you have to scream. I like [counting to] three and then having a consequence for behaviors."

■ Realize that raising healthy children requires a support system.

This can be one or two people, a church group or support group, or friends at work or at school. "Extended family may fit this category, but may not," Michalowicz said. "Each of us must assess our own situation honestly. Sometimes [with extended family] you need a little distance."

■ Show affection.

"Even if you are not touchy-feely, find a way to show your affection. You may be surprised at how it makes you feel."

■ If you practice a particular faith, encourage your family to embrace it.

"Believing in a higher power is key when going through difficulties," Michalowicz said.

A mother of two, Michalowicz knows firsthand the rewards and challenges of parenting.

She hopes more families will grow comfortable with tapping into the range of resources in their community — from parenting Web sites and support groups to coaching — that can help them thrive.

"There's a lot of stress in the world and on families, because we live in such a fast-paced society," she said. "It helps to have [objective] input."

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