Guidelines for Living with Children

• “Catch ‘em being good.” The single most important role in living with a child is to work very hard to praise or attend to the child when s/he is being appropriate (not when you feel like it). Being appropriate includes everything (depending on the parents’ personal preferences) from playing quietly with siblings to doing homework, to being a good sport.

• Let them help you. The second most important rule is to let your children help you to do the variety of tasks involved in everyday living. This is much better than doing the job or task by yourself because it is too difficult for the child to do. Most children enjoy helping their parents and can learn a great deal while doing so. The ‘helping’ might just consist of simulated ‘work’ in your vicinity, but it is still good to have them with you.

• Monitor your children. When your child is playing quietly, catch him being good! Don’t fall into the old trap that you don’t want to disturb him. Check on your child frequently (at first, every 10 minutes or so; then gradually decrease your monitoring to every 30 minutes or so) so you can give him lots of feedback on what he is doing. But don’t disrupt activities which you wish to encourage; a five to ten second interaction is all that is necessary.

• Home routines and responsibilities should be (within reason) orderly and predictable. Don’t let toddlers decide their own timetables. You should decide on a reasonable bedtime and stick to it.

• Discipline and enforcement of discipline should be as matter as fact as possible. When a child breaks a rule, she should pay for it in whatever way you enforce broken rules. Once a child has paid for the broken rule, no part of the incident should be mentioned again. It is much better to have a child sit in a kitchen chair or sit on the sofa for three or four minutes than to spank her. The first spank is for the child; all the rest are for you. For a younger child, try placing her in her crib until she is quiet for five or ten seconds; then go in and pick her up. Don’t be reluctant to have a child sit on the chair 10 or 15 times in one day if she deserves it.

• Lectures belong in lecture halls, not in homes. Do not lecture your children, not even under the guise of reasoning with them. Threats and nagging are useless in dealing with children. In fact if anything, threats probably make children worse, not better. Talking with your children is important; however, be careful that you avoid talking with them only at times of crisis or problems. Rather, spend your time talking with them when things are pleasant and running smoothly. For example, going somewhere with your child or working on a task with your child is the perfect time to talk with your child. With smaller children, talking to them a lot is a good way to get language development started. Just try carrying on a running description of what you are doing.

• Show sympathy when you discipline. When a child has to miss a movie, a trip to the store, or an opportunity to play a game with a friend because he hasn’t been behaving, you should be sympathetic with him, don’t give in. Make sure that this sympathy doesn’t last over a minute.

• Prompting and modeling or imitating. Children learn by what they see and hear you and others do. If your child breaks one of the house rules and you handle the whole issue matter-of-factly, then your child will learn that problems can be handled matter-of-factly. If you scream when you are mad, you can probably expect your children to follow that example. Therefore, its important to show your children that you can handle problem situations without losing your cool.

• Be a mother, not a martyr. Find a good babysitter or preschool and use it; not as an escape, but as a breather. It’s very desirable for a mother (or father) to spend time with adults and no children around.

• Parents are teachers. Whether you program it or not, whether you intend it or not, you teach your children through your interactions with them. If you only pick them up when they are crying, you teach them to cry more often. Particularly with younger children, what you do is much more important than what you say.