



Navigating Questionable Parenting Responses

There are moments in parenting that don't necessarily cross legal or abusive thresholds, yet still feel hard to witness. They linger. They can bruise a child emotionally and leave a co-parent unsure how to respond.

We might think of these as *questionable parenting responses*, not to shame, but to acknowledge that something landed uneasily. These moments often arise from stress, overwhelm, inherited scripts, or unresolved pain. Sometimes they are ruptures that can be repaired, but only if they can be spoken about safely.

The following 13 responses sit in these grey zones. They do not define a parent, nor do they necessarily signal pathology. But they can carry emotional costs for children — confusion, fear, shame — and relational costs for couples, especially when one parent feels worried yet afraid to raise it.

In cohesive co-parenting, these moments become opportunities for reflection rather than blame. Not about getting it perfect, but about staying aligned in the shared hope of doing less harm.

1. Verbal Criticism

Verbal criticism refers to the continual negative comments about a child's abilities, choices or character. While constructive criticism can help children learn and improve, excessive verbal criticism can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem and anxiety. Over time, children may internalise these messages, believing they are not good enough, which can affect their self-worth and social interactions.

Often rooted in fear – fear the child won't cope, won't be liked, won't succeed. But it can sound like condemnation instead of care.

2. Name-Calling

Name-calling involves using derogatory language or labels toward a child, which can be damaging to their self-image. This behaviour can instil feelings of worthlessness and foster a negative self-concept. Children internalise these names, which can manifest in their interactions with peers and in their self-esteem.

These moments usually reflect a parent's emotional flooding. The name gives shape to their panic, but it can wound deeply.

3. Mocking

Mocking includes ridiculing a child's feelings, interests or accomplishments as a form of humour or discipline. This behaviour can create embarrassment and hurt in children and lead to a belief that their interests or emotions are unworthy of respect. It can stunt emotional expression and discourage open communication between the parent and child.

This can come from discomfort with vulnerability – a subtle way of distancing when emotions feel overwhelming.

4. Smacking

Smacking, or spanking, is a form of physical discipline that can cause immediate fear but does not effectively teach appropriate behaviour. Research has shown that physical punishment can lead to aggressive behaviour, increased anxiety and a poorer parent–

child relationship. While some parents may argue that it is a traditional or culturally acceptable form of discipline, it can have lasting negative effects on a child's emotional health.

Still defended by some as traditional, smacking often emerges from a place of powerlessness rather than intentional harm.

5. Public Humiliation

Public humiliation involves reprimanding or belittling a child in front of others. This behaviour can be deeply damaging, causing humiliation, anxiety and a sense of betrayal. Children may feel less secure in their relationship with their parent and may avoid open communication or expressing their feelings in the future.

May arise from shame. The parents sense they are being judged by others. Unfortunately, the child absorbs the cost.

6. Manipulation

Manipulative behaviours involve using guilt, shame or coercion to control a child's actions or emotions. Parents may guilt-trip their children into behaving a certain way or using emotional leverage to get what they want. This dynamic can foster distrust, resentment and feelings of inadequacy in children as they may believe they must always comply to be accepted or loved.

A parent might be trying to preserve connection – 'if you loved me, you'd behave' – but it teaches children that love is conditional.

7. Emotional Blackmail

Emotional blackmail occurs when a parent uses their child's feelings or fears against them to get what they want. This could involve implying that the child will hurt their parent's feeling or cause them distress if they do not comply with demands. It creates a toxic dynamic that sows distrust and can lead to anxiety in the child.

It's often a cry for support misdirected at the child instead of the co-parent.



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8. Gaslighting

Gaslighting involves making a child doubt their perceptions, feelings or memories. A parent may minimise or dismiss a child's emotional experiences, suggesting they are overreacting or imagining things. This can create confusion and instability, leading children to question their judgement and reality, ultimately harming their self-esteem and emotional health.

This can be subtle and intergenerational, a sign that the parent's own emotional life was not mirrored or valued.

9. Threats

Threatening behaviour entails implying or stating consequences that a parent may not intend to follow through on, such as threatening to withhold affection or support. Such threats can evoke fear and anxiety in children, compelling them to comply with the parent's demands. This can undermine a child's sense of security and trust in their parent.

Reflects a moment of desperation. The parent may feel out of options, and the threat is a last-ditch attempt to regain control.

10. Threats of Abandonment

Threatening abandonment entails using the possibility of leaving or withdrawing love and support as a means of control. This can instil fear in children, leading them to behave in ways aimed at preventing abandonment, rather than fostering genuine emotional development. Children may feel they must always perform to avoid an emotional crisis.

These are especially damaging. They speak directly to a child's primal need for security and evoke panic.

11. Silent Treatment

The silent treatment involves deliberately ignoring or refusing to communicate with a child as a form of punishment or control. This behaviour can leave children feeling confused, rejected and anxious. It undermines the parent-child relationship and can prevent children from learning important communication and conflict resolution skills.

Often stems from internal shutdown – the parent is emotionally overwhelmed, but the child interprets it as rejection.

12. Isolation

Isolation can take many forms, such as limiting a child's interactions with peers or other family members. This behaviour can lead to feelings of loneliness, abandonment and low self-worth. Children may struggle to develop social skills and healthy relationships when they are not given opportunities to connect with others.

May be well intended ('they need time to reflect'), but can breed shame, especially if not followed up with reconnection.

13. False Promises

False promises are commitments that a parent makes but does not follow through on, such as promising to take a child out for ice cream or attend a school event and then backing out. This inconsistency can lead children to develop distrust in their parent's words and intentions, which can result in disappointment and disillusionment in the relationship.

Usually not malicious. More often a sign that the parent is stretched too thin, but children still experience it as betrayal.

How to Use This List

This is not a diagnostic checklist. It is not about blame or guilt. It is a conversation starter — a way for co-parents to name moments that feel difficult to witness or difficult to admit.

Some couples may recognise one or two of these responses. Others may see more. That is not failure. What matters is what happens next.

Consider:

- Can we talk about these moments without collapsing into shame?
- Can we stay on the same side — not “you did this,” but “we both want our child to feel safe and loved”?
- Can we notice how our own histories echo in these reactions?

Being a team means being able to say, “That didn't feel okay. I want to talk about it — not to attack you, but because I care about the parent you are trying to be.”

You may also consider using the **Painful Patterns in Parenting** exercise, the **Tackling Turbulence** framework, or **After the Blow Up: A Couple's Repair Tool** to help structure the discussion and stay connected while you work through it. More info at www.parentingasateam.com.



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