

## Responding to Kids with Compassion Instead of Criticism

By Kathy Slattengren, M. Ed., [Priceless Parenting](#)

---

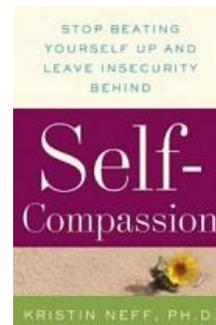
Critical comments flow easily for most parents. In fact it may be so natural that you don't even notice yourself making negative comments. In her book, [Building Moral Intelligence](#), Dr. Michele Borba writes "studies reveal that the average parent makes 18 critical comments to his child for every one positive comment." Yikes!

When you criticize your kids, you are usually trying to correct their behavior or help prevent them from making mistakes. While these are worthwhile goals, what if criticism actually does more harm than good?

### Criticizing Kids Teaches Them to Be Self-Critical

A big problem with criticism is that kids tend to quickly internalize it and then repeat it back to themselves. When your kids use negative self-talk, they hold themselves back instead of confidently moving forward.

In her book [Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind](#), Professor Kristin Neff writes "*When mothers or fathers use harsh criticism as a means to keep their kids out of trouble ("don't be so stupid or you'll get run over by a car"), or to improve their behavior ("you'll never get into college if you keep getting such pathetic grades"), children assume that criticism is a useful and necessary motivational tool. Unsurprisingly, research shows that individuals who grow up with highly critical parents in childhood are much more likely to be critical toward themselves as adults.*



*People deeply internalize their parents' criticisms, meaning that the disparaging running commentary they hear inside their own head is often a reflection of parental voices – sometimes passed down and replicated throughout generations."*

Being self-critical isn't exactly the legacy you want to give your kids!

### Criticism Comes Easier Than Forgiveness or Compassion

Being critical of your children's behavior stems from a belief that criticism is necessary in helping them grow up well. When you criticize your kids, you are attempting to exert control over their behavior in order to improve it. Is there a better way to do this?

Professor Kelly McGonigal's research on willpower has found that forgiveness and compassion are more powerful than criticism. In her book, [The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do To Get More of It](#), McGonigal explains "As soon as I mention self-forgiveness in class, the arguments start pouring in. You would think I had just suggested that the secret to more willpower was throwing kittens in front of speeding buses. 'If I'm not hard on myself, I'll never get anything done.' 'If I forgive myself, I'll just do it again.' 'My problem isn't that I'm too hard on myself – my problem is that I'm not self-critical enough!' To many people, self-forgiveness sounds like excuse-making that will only lead to greater self-indulgence."

According to McGonigal, "Study after study shows that self-criticism is consistently associated with less

*motivation and worse self-control. It is also one of the single biggest predictors of depression, which drains both 'I will' power and 'I want' power."*

She goes on to say *"Surprisingly, it's forgiveness, not guilt that increases accountability. Researchers have found that taking a self-compassionate point of view on a personal failure makes people more likely to take personal responsibility for the failure than when they take a self-critical point of view. They also are more willing to receive feedback and advice from others, and more likely to learn from the experience."*

### **Compassion Works Better Than Criticism**

Let's consider a couple situations and compare responding with criticism to responding with compassion.

Suppose your child comes home with a poor math grade, how might you respond?

- Criticism: "That grade is a disgrace. You're not trying hard enough. How will you get anywhere in life if you can't do better than that?"
- Compassion: "Oh, that's not the grade you wanted. What's your plan for improving it?"

What if your child spills a glass of juice?

- Criticism: "Look at the mess you've made! You need to be more careful!"
- Compassion: "Oops! Let's get a rag and clean it up."

If you were the child in these situations, how would each response make you feel?

Neff explains why compassion is more effective than criticism, *"So why is self-compassion a more effective motivator than self-criticism? Because its driving force is love not fear. Love allows us to feel confident and secure (in part by pumping up our oxytocin), while fear makes us feel insecure and jittery (sending our amygdala into overdrive and flooding our systems with cortisol). When we trust ourselves to be understanding and compassionate when we fail, we won't cause ourselves unnecessary stress and anxiety."*

### **Compassion Towards Your Kids Begins with Compassion Towards Yourself**

If you want to be more compassionate and forgiving towards your children, start with how you treat yourself. One mom said she realizes that when she is being compassionate with herself, it is much easier for her to also be compassionate with her son. When she is critical of herself, she also is more likely to be critical of him.

Now that you know the power of compassion and forgiveness try being more compassionate with yourself. Your self-compassion will bring out your best for yourself and your kids!

---

Kathy Slattengren is an internationally recognized, inspirational parent educator and founder of Priceless Parenting, <http://www.PricelessParenting.com>. Priceless Parenting offers online [parenting classes](#), [parenting presentations](#) and [parent coaching](#). Parents learn to effectively handle misbehavior while building loving relationships.

*This article is available to be reprinted or republished free of charge courtesy of Priceless Parenting on the condition that the byline, article text and hyperlinks are not altered.* © Priceless Parenting, LLC