Child-rearing challenges can create some of the most frustrating situations, but we’re often reluctant to ask for help, fearing we’ll be seen as parenting failures.

Yet, reaching out for guidance actually signals a healthy level of commitment and care, says Gary Johnson, director of Great Circle’s Parenting Life Skills Center, in Springfield, MO. “It’s proof that your family’s well-being is important to you and that you want to be the best parent you can be. You just need to develop the right tools to address those challenges positively.”
This Installment is part of Great Circle’s ongoing Family Strength series to help brighten all futures.

Johnson has worked with hundreds of families throughout his career. Some are young and need help transitioning into adulthood and parenthood simultaneously. Some attend mandated parenting classes. Others participate because life’s challenges have created new parenting hurdles.

“Sometimes your upbringing wasn’t a good model for raising your own kids,” says Johnson. “So it’s important that you fill those knowledge gaps and address your children’s needs in healthy ways. It’s equally important for parents to realize it’s not so much about what you do right or wrong on any given day, but about being committed to bringing your best to your parenting day in and day out.”

During Child Abuse Prevention Month - and every month - it’s never too late to become a stronger parent. Here are five key tips for positive parenting:

1. **Parent: Know thyself!** Johnson encourages parents to do a self-inventory. “It’s important to know your parenting strengths as well as your ‘hot buttons’ that could trigger anger or negative responses,” he says. “Do you need to be more compassionate? Are you a good listener?” Taking inventory helps you understand your parenting style, so you can react better to a “button” situation and build a more positive relationship with your child.

2. **Discover what works for your family.** Johnson says many parents fear they’re doing things “wrong,” especially when it comes to discipline. “It’s not about right or wrong, it’s what works best for your family.” When parents focus first on having a respectful relationship and positive bond with their child, the times when discipline is needed won’t detract from the overall positive relationship, he stresses.

3. **See yourself from your child’s point of view.** “Children aren’t mini-adults. They don’t have enough life experiences to react to situations as adults do,” Johnson says. Coming home from a tough work day, a tired parent may yell or snap back at a child’s request for play time. The child thinks, “What did I do wrong that Dad’s mad at me?” In that moment, Johnson encourages parents to put themselves in their child’s shoes. Instead of anger, offer an alternative time later for play or help them understand why you’re tired, in terms they understand.

4. **Use the power of play.** “Children use play all the time to learn about themselves or the world around them,” says Johnson. “Adults should take a cue from that and ‘play’ with new parenting strategies. Maybe it doesn’t work the first time, but on the tenth time it does. Or move on and play with a new strategy.”

5. **Feel good about seeking help or guidance when you need it.** Johnson uses YouTube videos in his parenting classes to illustrate making good choices, and also encourages checking out parenting books from the library or joining a parenting group in your community or faith group. Focus on having non-judgmental conversations that help build positive parenting skills, which helps reduce negative responses from both parent and child, he says. And, should you feel the need for professional guidance, Great Circle’s counseling centers are always available as an option.

Don’t stop adding to your parenting toolbox. “You’re always learning new skills at work, so why wouldn’t you do the same thing with your parenting skill set?” asks Johnson. “As your child grows up and life happens, being prepared to positively respond to new challenges and reaching out to your circle of support helps ensure you’re being the best parent you can be.”

Great Circle provides a unique spectrum of behavioral health services for children, adults and families facing personal challenges or difficult circumstances. For more information about Great Circle’s parenting programs that help strengthen children and families, visit greatcircle.org or call 1-844-424-3577 (GCHELPS).