Joan Crawford’s Top Ten Parenting Tips

Gay dad Bradley Jacobs argues the screen legend was just a single mom struggling to raise her kid right

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Mommie Dearest, the nearly 40-year-old melodrama, cemented Joan Crawford’s reputation as the worst mother in Hollywood history with the four little words: “No more wire hangers!” Joan deliberately crushed her daughter Christina in swimming races, threw fits when she didn’t send her holiday cards out in time, and oh yeah, once tried to strangle her. But inspired by Mother’s Day, gay dad Bradley Jacobs reexamines the camp classic and sees shades of meaning among all the scenery chewing: Joan was simply a single mom struggling to raise a normal kid among all the excesses of Hollywood. Herewith, Joan Crawford’s top ten parenting tips:



1. Don't let your child show off

A studio photographer fawns over Christina at her 5th birthday party, saying, “She’s a real natural, Miss Crawford.” But Metro’s *grande dame* refuses to let the shutterbug take glamour shots of the girl for publicity purposes. She will teach her that life is more than being pretty! A few scenes later, Joan hits the roof when she catches Christina wearing her makeup, putting “setting lotion” in her hair and practicing an Oscar acceptance speech. “You’re always rummaging through my drawers, trying to find a way to make people look at you!” she scolds, trying to curtail the girl’s emerging vanity, a lost cause in the ultra-shallow world of Hollywood that has benefitted Joan so greatly. “Why are you always looking at yourself in the mirror?!”



2. Don’t spoil your kid

Despite throwing her a lavish birthday party complete with a carousel, Brentwood’s screen legend is determined not to let her girl grow up “a spoiled Hollywood brat just because she's Crawford's daughter.” Joan insists Christina can keep only *one* of her birthday presents. The rest of her dozens of gifts need to go to an orphanage at which Saint Joan is a patron. Still, Joan can compromise — a bit. She allows Tina to keep a second gift just this once (“this time, we’ll make an exception”), a bracelet from Joan’s long-suffering lawyer beau.



3. Teach your child pride

Crawford, who grew up as poor Lucille Fay LeSueur in Oklahoma and was abandoned by her father before she was born, wanted so badly to be a parent she got pregnant seven times (each time she miscarried). In one of her few emotionally grounded moments, Joan reminds Christina not to feel shame that she and her brother were adopted — but self-esteem. "Darling, remember what I told you about adopted children?" Joan asks. Christina responds, "Adopted children are the luckiest because they were chosen."



4. Kids should eat healthy

Joan demands her daughter eat her steak even after Christina complains it's oozing red juice. "Darling, rare meat is good for you," says the fit Oscar-winner. "The doctor said so. Meat loses its vitamins if it's overcooked." The two face off, with Christina choosing a days-long food strike over slicing up the slimy steak. Ultimately, Joan blinks first — she can't have her daughter starve, "What would Mayer say?!" — and makes her clean up the disgusting dish. "Empty that plate... into the trash can." Joan still sticks to her guns a decade later when she treats teenage Christina to "lovely evening" at Perino's. "Tommy, we'll have the New York steak for two — rare."



5. Don't sugarcoat a thing

The actress, who jogs at the crack of dawn while her assistant tails her in her car, doesn't believe in the modern notion of giving kids trophies every five minutes to build up their confidence. "You've got to know how to compete and win, life goes too god-damned fast," she says after crushing Christina — repeatedly — in swimming races in their fabulous pool. "No one ever said life was fair." Joan was right, right?



6. Develop hobbies with kids

Crawford isn't big on boundaries. Whenever anything bad happens to Joan's career, her daughter seems to be the first person she tells. Warners fires her and she bawls to Christina, "No contract. No studio. No money. Tina, I don't know what I'm going to do."

Yikes, Mommie! Similarly, after Louis B. Mayer tells her theater owners called her “box office poison,” Joan uses her size XXL shears to clip every rose out of her prized garden — and pulls her children out of bed at midnight to cart away the branches. That’s when Joan commits to chopping down her rosebush and enlists Christina’s help with her famous call, “Tina … bring me the axe!”



7. Cleanliness is next to godliness

Joan scrubs by example, getting down on her hands and knees to shine her mansion's floors. (“Helga! When you polish the floor, you have to *move* the tree.”) She not surprisingly expects Christina to keep her spaces tidy, too. When Joan questions her daughter about her less-than-sparkling bathroom, Christina deflects: “Miss Jenkins said it was clean.” Bossy Mommie calls her out. “Miss Jenkins said it was clean,” she imitates. “Do *you* think it's clean?” Joan is willing to work alongside Christina to make sure the job’s done right — until she has her own temper tantrum, shrieking, “Look at it, nothing is clean! *Nothing* is clean!”



8. Thank-you notes are *everything*

Manners matter to perfectionistic Joan. She pushes Christina to send sincere, handwritten letters and later, when Christina's a teen — even though she's earned a near-perfect report card from her fall semester — Joan reminds her she still needs to get her Christmas cards out early, which only draws more ire from the girl.



9. Show interest in your kids’ activities

The movie star and her new hubby, Pepsi “King” Al Steele, visit adult Christina in New York City. “So you’re acting?” Joan asks, lighting a ciggy. “Good luck, darling.” And once Christina is cast in a soap opera, Joan commits to plopping down in front of the boob tube every afternoon to support her girl. All good, right? Not so fast. After Christina suffers an ovarian tumor and can’t appear on the show for a stretch, 64-year-old mama Joan calls Christina’s producer and steps into her daughter’s TV role *herself* — even though Christina’s character is just 28.



10. If you’re going to give a kid a $300 dress. . .

Of Joan's infamous wire hanger moment, honestly, is it so wrong for her to expect dresses for which Joan paid $300 each — that’s $3,200 in 2019 dollars! — to hang on higher-quality crochet hangers?!