

CHILDREN & DISRESPECT

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Submitted by: Lytle EAP Partners

Are children more disrespectful than the children in previous generations? As a therapist and parent, I have noticed many clients and friends stating that they are. In previous generations it was socially acceptable to keep children in line with violence, to expect children to blindly follow their parents rules; to be "seen and not heard." Today there is encouragement to understand children's developmental stages and to recognize that hitting promotes obedience through fear and not true learning.

Since these earlier beliefs are becoming increasingly unpopular, a quandary has evolved. How do you teach your children morals and values in a society that encourages children to express themselves and to grow up quickly, without receiving disrespect from your child?

First you may want to examine what disrespect means to you. Is it a child saying no or questioning a parent? Is it a child refusing to do a chore? Is the child expressing oppositional ideas to your own?

If you're trying to teach your child to have self control, to think critically, to have independent thought, to believe that their feelings are valid, how can you expect that those in authority won't be questioned or that the child's feelings won't be expressed at times in an angry manner?

The problem is, the newest methods take a lot more time, patience, modeling, education, revamping of traditional ideas and practice. It falls on the parent to draw a clear line of behaviors that will not be tolerated while simultaneously allowing the child to expand his or her thinking. It requires that the parent give the child respect, to admit when they are wrong and to give the child a sense of power in a truly powerless position.

These ideas can be difficult for many parents whose traditional beliefs become threatened when their power and control is perceived by them as being reduced or eliminated. What's not understood is how this will nourish the relationship and thus raise respect levels in the child, thereby increasing the chances of compliance by the child. Here are some suggestions for implementing this modern method:

- Consistency, consistency, consistency. Do what you say and say what you will do. Always follow through with consequences and rewards. Make consequences fit the crime whenever possible and give the child one or two warnings so the child has the opportunity to make a good decision and then praise that good decision.
- Follow a reprimand or consequence behavior with a discussion about what makes the action inappropriate and get the child thinking about what she can do differently in the future.
- Teach your child empathy by encouraging the child to think of how he might feel if this was done to him and show your own feelings of sadness, frustration, anger and happiness. Don't use the word disappointment when describing feelings toward your child— it is powerfully shaming.
- Give yourself timeouts when you've had too much, and have meaningful conversations about behavior when you and your child are not angry, hungry or tired.
- Separate bad behavior from a bad child to provide an internal sense of worth. The child needs to know she is always good, but sometimes makes bad decisions. Express faith your child will make a better decision next time.
- Equalize or exceed (preferably) the number of good behavior comments to negative ones and comment positively when bad behavior is absent. Also notice when the child is trying to improve behavior.
- Whenever possible provide your child with choices that you deem appropriate. Examples may include choice of bath time, choosing among 3 different clothing outfits and consequences.
- For those with younger children, put expressive words to feelings for your child and teach that all emotions are ok, but there is choice in behavior.

I would like to end this article with a story. When my friend's 2-year-old son began to say no, she said, "Can you believe that my son is starting to say no to me?" I looked at her quizzically and said, "Good. That means

he's doing what he's supposed to do." She said, "You mean be disrespectful?" I said, "Yeah, maybe, but at least he's becoming his own person." I don't think she was thrilled with my answer.

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