

For the New Year: Trust yourself to color outside the lines

I never learned to draw. But I could color—as long as I had the lines to color in. I never thought I could make anything look right if I didn't have the lines. I still don't draw, but I have learned to go outside the lines. It's risky at first.

Many parents I know fear the territory outside the accepted lines of parenting. Those lines were set up by generations past and are now enforced by family and friends, who still feel defined by them. But those lines often don't fit the needs of individual children and often provoke resistance. So I am offering a resolution for the new year: Trust yourself to do what you think is right, don't be pressured by others, dare to go outside the lines.

Why is it so hard to be real? To be ourselves, to trust ourselves, forget about the lines? I believe it's because most of us were taught as children to *only* listen to others and were never valued for our own opinions and desires. In so doing, we were unintentionally taught not to trust ourselves. The voices of others are always in our head telling us what to do. We are frustrated, worried, and anxious, because we didn't learn how to be an authority figure so we default to control—whether it makes sense for our children or not. The tension we exert when we don't really know what to do and end up faking it causes difficulties, and our children can smell our confusion and fear a mile away.

So, give yourself a break, color outside the lines, allow yourself to be real. You know what it feels like. It happens more often than you think. It's those times when you feel good with your child, when you feel connected, when it just flows. No one is telling you what to do. That kind of connection doesn't happen when you think you have to do or say something that someone else has told you to do or say.

Declare that this year is going to be different. Rather than imposing too many lines on your children, follow three general rules: Respect others, respect yourself, and take responsibility for your actions. Anything within those, work out together with your children. And remember to follow them yourself. This year allow yourself to be real. What does that mean? Let me offer a few pointers:

- Don't think you have to have the answer. We spend far too much time directing our kids—telling them what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. Allow them

to figure things out. State what isn't working and ask what can be done instead. Your relationship will improve by NOT having the answer.

- Be honest—with yourself and your children.
- Ask your child what he might do if he were you. Put your child in an imaginary position of authority without handing over the final decision. You'll be amazed at how he can rise to the occasion. And you might learn something.
- Go with your gut as much as your head. We need to balance what we know with how we feel. When you do something that doesn't feel right, it's probably not right.
- Don't hide your feelings by blaming them on your children. "I am so angry about..." rather than "You make me so mad." "I'm really worried about..." "I'm concerned that..." Don't pretend you don't feel afraid or doubtful about something. Say it.
- Don't punish your child, use time-out, take away privileges if it doesn't feel right to you or if it only adds to anger and animosity. Ask yourself, "How did I feel when that happened to me?"
- Say "no" when you mean "no". Too many parents today are afraid to curtail their children's behavior out of fear of meltdown or unhappiness. When their behavior interferes with your rights or the rights of others, "no" is a very important word.
- Parent in the positive—even with a "no". Tell your child what *to* do instead of what *not* to do. This may mean taking some time before you respond to get clear about what it is you do want.
- Take all the time you need. You don't have to immediately react to a difficult, even dangerous, situation. Stop whatever needs to stop and then take the time you need to decide how to handle it. You will be more effective when your emotions have calmed.
- Allow your vulnerability to show. We think we have to be right, to play the role of parent and say and do what we think we should. But when we're wearing someone else's costume, our kids see right through it.
- Trust your children to think and be creative.

Instead of trying to follow the old lines when you're not sure what to do—something that feels arbitrary or not quite right—ask yourself, "Does this work for me and my child?" That's what matters. Put those other voices aside for the moment. And be sure to encourage your children to color outside the lines.