

Finding Balance through Appropriate Expectations

Saying “no” to our children includes saying “yes” to ourselves. Many of us were raised believing that putting our own needs up front was selfish and inconsiderate. Yet, when we don’t, we react from resentment, become unbalanced, and turn into the nag we are trying so hard not to be.

You have the right to ask for help. When you don’t, your children and your partner expect that you will do it all. Not because they are selfish and insensitive, but because you have set the standard and that is what they have come to expect.

Guilt plays a large role in keeping us “in our place.” We fear making demands of our children, provoking their unhappiness and being the bad guy. But when we try to make them happy, we often end up unhappy. That’s not balanced.

Sally complained that Jason, aged 12, left his wet towels, underwear and tee shirts all over his room, and then griped that he had nothing to wear. Sally repeatedly asked him to put his dirty clothes in the laundry hamper to no avail. He would bite back with some excuse and then tell her he had a game and needed clean clothes now. Even though Sally felt the anger and resentment rising, her guilt got the better of her. She would do his laundry and plead with him to pick it up next time.

In order to maintain balance, and teach her son responsibility at the same time, Sally needs to put her guilt aside, grit her teeth and tell Jason to expect in the future that the only laundry washed will be what she finds in the hamper. This does not need to be announced in anger—what she fears. It is a calm statement of fact. If she is still afraid of his reaction and her subsequent back-down, she can write him a note. If he protests, she can refer to the note as the way things will remain. Then she must follow through and keep to her word.

Not only will Sally not nag, whine, or guilt-trip, she will set herself up as a good role model—a woman who sets good boundaries and does not allow herself to be subservient to anyone.

Alice was having a hard time getting her four-year-old to pick up her toys and respect the family living quarters. Sienna loved pulling all her toys out to examine them before playing and, to her mother’s dismay, never put them away when she was asked to.

The first thing Alice needs to understand before she can set an effective limit, is that Sienna should not be *expected* to put her toys away on her own. When we expect our children to do what we ask when we ask it, and pleasantly, we are setting both ourselves and our children up for failure. When Alice *expects* that Sienna will not want to put her toys away (normal for a four-year-old), Alice can approach the situation from a different perspective and have more luck getting Sienna’s cooperation.

She can say something like, “Sienna, I know you don’t want your toys back in the box because you love to see them all spread out. Since everyone else has to walk through here they do need to be put away every afternoon. So let’s try to make it really easy to put them back. Any ideas?” Together they can come up with music to make the job more pleasant, maybe making a chute for the toys to slide down or a hoop for them to drop through.

When we think things such as, “Why can’t I get her to do this, She’s being defiant and disrespectful, Why can’t someone help around here for a change?” we get angry and resentful. When our expectations are realistic and appropriate for the age and temperament of the child, we can approach the situation with more clarity. Amazingly, ideas we never had before pop up, and it isn’t quite so hard as before.

Since it is Alice’s desire for the toys to be picked up, not Sienna’s, she will have more luck doing most of the job and asking for Sienna’s help. This may seem like giving in. Why would Sienna be able to get away with not putting the toys away, when Jason must put his dirty laundry away? The answer lies in the question we must always ask. What is the long-term learning?

By Sally picking up Jason’s laundry, he is learning that women will do his bidding. Sienna is learning that help is available for chores she is not yet ready to handle on her own. But if Sienna refuses to help, then Alice can let her know that she will not do anything else with her until they have put the toys away together.

Alice must slowly raise her expectations of Sienna’s ability to pitch in, while Jason should have been expected to help long ago. In both cases, balance with appropriate expectations will help these mothers live in a more cooperative environment.

Please email me at bh@bonnieharris.com with situations that you would like to contribute to the next few columns.

Under the same topic, check out my feature article in the Feb. issue of Working Mother Magazine called “How to Unspoil Your Child.”