

Are Kids Really Different Today?

I haven't lived across too many generations, but I certainly hear it enough that children today are different than they used to be, that they expect to be treated differently, won't take no for an answer, have no respect for anyone else, and think they are above the rules. Is this true? Why is it happening? And what can we do about it? I wish I had the answer. I don't, but I'll add my two cents.

I have been working with parents for the past twenty years, and I've noticed a bit of a shift as well. But I don't think that kids are different. I think parents are different, the world is different, and therefore our expectations are different—confused to say the least. Most parents I know do not want to bring their children up the way they were raised. I have seen this across cultures. Parents are reacting to forms of discipline they hated; ones that they are still dealing with or recovering from, ones that they have not yet learned to replace.

I believe we are in the process of transitioning our parenting style. Parents want to do the best job possible and most want to do it differently, but when push comes to shove, they either revert to the tactics they hated or throw up their arms in defeat, because they don't know what else to do. And with both parents in the workforce—a major shift in our economic structure—they don't have the time to devote.

To make a fundamental change in something like parenting takes time. Our current older generation, products of the sixties when authority began to be seriously questioned, is perhaps the first wave of the change and therefore inconsistent at best. It is only recently that spanking has not been considered an effective means of discipline. It is my opinion that we are moving in the right direction, but it will take a number of generations to change our methods and find a new consistency.

Back in the 1940s, obedience was the #1 value in households. Today it's independence. Our children need it to succeed in this cutthroat, money-hungry

world we are giving them. They need it to survive the bullies. Look at the model our country is providing. Americans are the entitled bullies of world politics. We demand that others do it our way, because our way is the best. Why wouldn't American children feel entitled too? If we don't want our children to learn the values of our present culture, we have to supervise them constantly. The media is in their laps.

Today's children know we don't want to use force and fear tactics to raise them. Today's parents want better relationships with their children than they had with their parents. But when parenting methods swing from friendship to screaming empty threats, children find leverage. They have learned they will not be held accountable—not really. Hitting, grounding, and isolating don't work with most of today's kids because they won't take it. They don't have to. They are not afraid. They are freer to be themselves than most of us were, and they demand to be treated differently. But adults misread their demands as acts of defiance and disrespect because most were never allowed to demand. In our desire to parent differently, we have allowed our children to have strong voices. But many parents never found their strong voices and so have not yet learned how to reach a balance between their needs and their children's to achieve mutual respect and cooperation. So they react in anger with blame and disrespect toward their children. And that's how children learn to behave.

I experience so many parents who are putting in tremendous effort to learn a better way, a way that offers a better and a balanced relationship. But they are often inconsistent at best. It's like learning a foreign language to raise children differently than the way we were raised. And it's like swimming upstream against the constant pressure of friends and relatives telling them what they are doing wrong. It takes constant practice and a lot of support. The old way is in our blood, it's what was modeled, it's all we know. Our children's disruptive behavior is always a wake-up call to work harder.

Children today are way savvier than we were. They want logical answers. They argue and negotiate, and if we don't make sense to them, they won't let us off the

hook. If we maintain a balance of rights, and the consequences for their behavior make logical sense to them—even if they don't like them—they understand and accept. If they don't, they resist. They have learned from us how to behave. We need to keep learning, to practice non-violent ways to communicate, discipline, and hold both our children and ourselves accountable. We must always treat our children with respect so they learn to respect others, and we need to really get it that they do want to succeed.