

Disrespect in the High School: Whose Fault Is It?

Last week, Tim Clark, high school English teacher, wrote his column on the level of disrespect he witnesses in the high school, both among students and toward teachers. This is not unique to our school. I was talking to a friend about it, and she said, “Of course when we were in school, we were too afraid to show disrespect.” It wasn’t that we respected authority anymore than kids do today; it’s that we feared authority more and kept our mouths shut. Too often we confuse the meanings of respect and obedience. Fear and obedience have little to do with respect.

Since we no longer use the same fear tactics to keep our students in line, and since our students apparently feel that they have the right to express disrespect toward others, we must look beneath the behavior to the root of the disrespect. Punishing them for it will only bottle up the intimidated or will give the unintimidated more cause to behave disrespectfully. We need to raise kids who are not afraid to speak their minds AND who are respectful of others whether or not they agree with them. We have flipped from fear of authority to the other end of the spectrum and now must find the balance.

As a society, we have this idea that respect is something that must be taught. We have banners in our schools announcing the respectful policies of the school, while the children beneath the banners exhibit little of it. We have bandaid approaches that do little to address the real need. One banner that grabbed my attention was “Respect: You learn it, You earn it.” This is the wrong message. This implies that respect is not earned until it is shown to others first. The message is that I expect you, the child, to respect me before I will respect you. In other words, I expect you to be the grown-up first.

Respectful treatment of others is learned naturally when children feel respected by their elders. When we shout at them all day long, criticize them for what they do and don’t do, demand that they listen and do what we tell them, hurt and humiliate them, and then demand that they respect us they gain little self-respect, and thus do not learn to respect others. What do we expect from this double standard? Most of us would never dream of talking to a friend the way we talk to our children. Disrespect begets disrespect.

There are as many students in the high school who are respectful of others as who are not—hopefully more. It would be an interesting study to look at how differently they feel about themselves. I am quite sure that the most disrespectful are ones who have learned that they are not quite good enough, that who they are is not important or worthy, and who have little self-respect. When children feel invisible, unimportant, a disappointment, a

problem—disenfranchised in some way—their tendency is to perpetrate the same behavior they experience on others. Why should a teacher deserve respect when teachers are generally identified, from the child’s perspective, with the same authority group whom they have come to resent? Rarely does a child who has been disrespected by a parent (and I can point out to extremely well-meaning parents the daily messages of disrespect they send to their children) feel motivated to respect others in a similar position of authority. Unless they are afraid, in which case they obey; they do not respect.

I applaud the conversation about respect that happened in Tim Clark’s classroom. Unfortunately, to get to the root of the issue would mean taking the discussion into the family realm—clearly territory that is out of bounds for a teacher. We cannot expect therapy sessions in the classroom. But it is the teacher who sees the strength and potential in a student and highlights it in some remarkable way who is able to dig down to that root and make a difference.

The main question we must face is—can we, the adults, learn from this inappropriate behavior in the hallways and classrooms of our schools? Are we willing to look at the disrespect and turn the mirror on ourselves and take responsibility for our part in creating it? Even the best of parents can learn more about respecting their children. It is so easy for us to criticize and so hard for us to discipline positively and non-violently. Violent parenting includes screaming and yelling. When our buttons are pushed, we retaliate because it is what we learned when we were growing up. If I felt invisible or unimportant as a child and then my child ignores me, that button is going to ignite. It happens to the best of us, but most of us don’t see our responsibility for what we have set in motion. Instead, most of us blame our children for making us mad. It’s their fault, not ours.

Here we see the results of our labors. Can we look and learn? Or will we continue to bury our heads in the sand, point our fingers and keep criticizing these disrespectful kids?