

Are You Raising a User?

Some children, it seems, will not take “no” for an answer. They take center stage and demand attention both at home and in public. Minor infractions—a plate that’s not the right color, a toy that falls to the floor, a sandwich that is not cut just right, a comment that is taken the wrong way—can bring on wailing or screams. Parents often feel like they are walking on eggshells. This strong will can be very intimidating especially to the parent who does not do well with conflict. Given either too much control or too much permission, this child can quickly grow to be a user—a child, and later adult, with a sense of entitlement, a sense that his rights and wishes are more important than those of others, that he is above it. Users defy authority, rules and regulations and sometimes even the law. Whose fault is this? No one’s. But it does arise from the fit between the parenting style and the temperament of the child. Balance is important with all children, but balance is critical with this strong-willed child.

Children need to be given the opportunity to be a part of the whole in the family, not the center of the whole. When there is too much child-focus, when the balance is tipped heavily toward the child, she learns that she is the center. Perhaps this is an only child, a child who has arrived later in a parent’s life, or a child whose parents do not believe in restricting a her wishes. Many parents have a hard time saying no because they fear doing damage to their child’s self-esteem. Other parents don’t say no, because they don’t want the hassle or the tantrum they fear will result. Still other parents don’t say no because they were never allowed to say no as a child and do not know how to communicate in conflict.

When children are regularly allowed to interrupt adult conversation, disrupt phone calls, demand a separate menu, scream to get what they want, have power over parents’ plans, refuse to do what is asked, and “run the show” either at home or in public, parents are in danger of raising a user. Tight control and punishment, including time-out, is not the answer. When children are considered equal members of the family, when what they have to say is attended to, when their temperaments are taken into consideration but not pandered to, and expectations are appropriate, they learn that they will have a turn just like everyone else.

But equal part means everyone else is just as equal. And this means the child has to wait his turn. Parents should not “give in” to the child at the risk of sacrificing their own needs and desires or to avoid conflict. Firmness and clarity of house rules is essential. Limits must be clear and consistent. This requires a certain amount of

disengagement from the parent in order to maintain house rules in the face of strong argument and complaint.

We should not have to teach children to respect others. It comes naturally when we respect them as well as ourselves. But when we give them more than we give ourselves, we are out of balance. We can expect children to behave well when we appeal to their natural sense of fairness and logic. That sense gets distorted when we do not. Limits and nos are necessary to keep naturally egocentric children in balance with others.

No one likes to be told just plain no. Placing restrictions on behavior is easier to take when the adult explains the problem. Giving choices of action such as, "You can take that radio to your room or outside. It's disturbing others here in the living room," will be heard easier than, "Get that radio out of here." Removing a child from a group when his behavior is disturbing to others makes it easier to explain the problem and set limits. "I cannot allow you to yell when other people are with us. Let me know when you are ready to speak calmly and we will go back. Otherwise, we will need to leave so the others can enjoy their meal." Either ignoring or criticizing the child in front of the group will lead to more problems. To stop incessant interrupting try, "Daddy and I are speaking to each other right now. As soon as we are done, we want to hear what you have to say. Would you like to stay here and wait quietly or play in the other room while you wait?" If he seems to be happily playing, go to him anyway as soon as you can with, "We're done now. What was it you wanted to say?" It doesn't matter if he's forgotten. The important thing is to build his trust that he will not be dismissed, which makes it easier for him to wait his turn next time.

Allowing a child to be expressive, to argue and complain, to have his point of view is important but not when it affects the rights of others. If we are to build a society that values *interdependence*, we must teach children from the beginning that their rights are just as important as, but no more important than anyone else's. Imagine if our world leaders believed this!