

Who's the Grown-Up First?

I always tell parents it is important to understand that a child's job is to get what he wants when he wants it. This is developmentally appropriate and to expect otherwise will only result in frustration and power struggles. Certainly they are capable of controlling their desires but only when they are calm and happy. To expect that they should do what we want, when we want it—cheerfully—is to set ourselves and our children up for failure.

To be a grown-up means to be able to delay gratification, control impulses and temptations, do things we don't want to, empathize with and respect the needs of others, and take responsibility for our behavior. To be a child means to be egocentric, narcissistic and impulsive, to have a hard time sharing and taking turns, to have volatile and quickly changing moods and emotions and to have little control over impulses and behavior. Many times we behave like children and expect our children to behave like grown-ups.

When we get frustrated and impatient with our children, don't we sometimes fly off the handle, scream and yell and say things we never meant to? When we get into a power struggle with a child, who's the grown-up? Who's in charge?

One of my least proud parenting moments happened when my daughter was almost four. She was on the inside of her bedroom door trying with all her little might to pull the door open, and I was on the outside trying with all my might to hold the door closed. And we were screaming at each other. And I had just completed my graduate degree in Early Childhood. I'm ashamed to say that I won that battle and most other battles I had with her almost every day for the first five years of her life. Until I got it that she wasn't out to get me. She was out to get what she needed and wanted. No different from me. The only difference was that I could overpower her with childish behavior.

It never works to expect your child to be the grown-up first. But we expect it all the time. We want them to mind us by stopping themselves from going after what they want even when they lack impulse control. We ask them to share and be polite when they cannot even understand the concept. We expect them to do their best at school 100% of the time and then come home, do their homework

and continue following orders. Yet we slack off, get impatient and yell, smoke, drink or eat too much to soothe ourselves, get depressed, take medication to try to be happy—in short, rarely do our best. We expect them to take responsibility for themselves when we have never taught them how. We either fix all their problems to try to make them happy or we criticize them thinking that will motivate them to be better. What's wrong with this picture?

Think about this. You take a three-year-old to the toy store to buy a birthday present for a friend. You have explained that you won't be getting anything for her, just the present for her friend. She nods in agreement. She is then faced with row upon row of toys. She starts to whine and beg. You get mad at her because you've told her what the deal is and she isn't behaving. She cries harder and you yell and drag her from the store saying, "Why can't you listen and do what I say just once!" Who's the grown-up here? You are expecting an impulsive, egocentric child to be grown up and understand that it is her friend she should be thinking of, to ignore the toys she desperately wants, and to mind you rather than what tempts her.

Or this. Your teenager asks to go to a party at his friend's house. You do not know the friend's parents and don't even know the friend all that well. There is no question in your mind. You retort, "Absolutely not." Your teen yells, "You are so lame. I can't wait to get out of this house. I hate it here and I hate you. You never let me do anything!" as he stomps up the stairs and slams his door. You are furious and ground him for the next two weeks for talking to you like that. You expect that he should have taken your answer with an "okay" and been big enough to handle the disappointment like a gentleman continuing to clear the table and do the dishes. You are ignoring his agenda by not even considering the importance of this party to him—whether or not you will let him go. You punish him for reacting to your thoughtless remark and expect him to be the bigger of the two of you.

You will resist thinking about it this way, but when you can take your child's development and desires into consideration, you will respond more respectfully, and you will get more respect in return.

The next time your child does something you don't like, ask yourself why she is, what's behind her behavior, and what it is that you expect. If you discover

that you are asking her to be more of a grown-up than you have just exhibited, it's time to do some reevaluating and reparenting.

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