

The Dangers of Unexamined Expectations

Most of the time the expectations we set on our children and ourselves are unspoken and unexamined. They seep through us automatically and send messages that put undo pressure on both us and our children. When we can step into our children's shoes, we can understand how what we say sounds and feels to them. But we also need to be able to understand how our expectations are being received.

Are they ones our children can live up to successfully or do they expect our children to be and do only what we want, thus setting them up for failure and making the job of parenting harder than it needs to be? Start by looking at your child's inappropriate behavior. Ask yourself many tough questions including, how is she learning about handling conflict? How does she see me handle conflict with her? Who does she see using power-over methods to get what is wanted? In addition, take a hard look at what it is you expect—both of yourself and your child.

A mother in one of my groups is having a hard time dealing with her four-year-old son who is having a hard time dealing with his two-year-old sister. We have been looking at many aspects of the dynamic, and she has tried many skills to help her son with his intense aggression toward his sister. She is exhausted and worn down by her many-times-daily encounters with her children even though she has learned to respond more effectively to them than in the past. We're now seeing that it is possible that her expectations are unrealistic and compensating for her past.

This mother describes she and her siblings all as trouble-makers. Both her parents were self-involved and gave little time or thought to what their children were up to. She wishes her parents had been more involved in her life and had given her more feedback about what to expect and what was expected of her. They did little in the way of protecting their children from harm—out of naivety, she says—leaving them to come and go as they wished. As a result, she got into a lot of trouble as a teenager and of course wants to protect her son from the same experiences.

Since she wished for more involvement from her mother, she expects herself to be very hands-on in her children's life and to stop her son's aggressive tendencies now for fear he will end up in trouble later on. An understandable expectation. But by compensating for what she never had, it is likely that she is striving to be the fantasy of what *she* wished for, but what her son is resisting, setting them both up for failure and thus her exhaustion. By unconsciously compensating for her past, it is likely for her to over-protect and over-direct her son in her attempts at perfect mothering. As a result, he is getting more aggressive toward his sister instead of less.

In addition, she realizes that because she has no relationship now with her siblings, she has placed an expectation on her son to love and get along with his sister so they will be friends. Again, a fine expectation—unless you have a child like her son who is showing with his behavior that there is a deeper problem. Even though she has told him he doesn't have to love his sister, a mixed message is coming across with an expectation that he can't meet up to.

We must take our cues for realistic expectations from our children, not our past. When our methods—as well intentioned as they may be—are met with inappropriate behavior, the answer is not more of the same but perhaps a different direction altogether. By examining what message she is actually sending herself and her son, this mother can adjust her expectations so they can both meet them successfully. She can find a place in the middle where she can be more involved than her mother, since she learned that benign neglect did not work for her, but not go so far as to be over-controlling of an extremely strong-willed boy who does not respond well to being told what to do.

By telling her son (yes, even at four) that she may be trying too hard to get him to be friends with his sister because she doesn't want them to have the relationships she has with her siblings, she can own her issues and perhaps release a burden from his shoulders. The irony is that he will be more likely to get along with his sister when there is no pressure to do so.

By understanding that she doesn't have to be the exact opposite of her mother in order to protect her son from danger (ripe territory for a self-fulfilling prophecy), she can relieve herself of some of the weight that exhausts her daily.

These are small yet difficult adjustments, but when the meaning sinks in and changes her perspective, they can amount to major achievements.