

Will your children honor the end of the line?

I was standing in a very long line waiting to go through airport security the other day—a line that would make anyone wish they had stayed home—when two thirty-something men slipped into the middle of it to take their place. Unjust entitlement is something that pushes my buttons, so I moved up, tapped one of them on the shoulder and said, “The line ends back there.” This tall man dressed neatly in a dark suit with a briefcase over his shoulder said quietly with a little menace, “Not anymore. So call the police.” I was infuriated and made a few choice comments like, “Oh, I see it’s all about you” apparently thinking I would appeal to a conscience and prompt, “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize....I’ll just go to the back then.” I stood there fuming, wondering how they could live with themselves, especially after being caught. Do they really think normal rules and regulations don’t apply to them? Do they really think they deserve a place ahead in the line? Do they have no conscience? My thoughts jumped quickly to how they must have been raised.

Do we as parents create or deter in our children a sense of entitlement and basic disrespect for the rights of others? I think we would all agree that we want to raise children to be respectful and considerate citizens. There are cultural mores that are important to teach our children. These men along with so many who push their way through life with no regard for others, sneak in without paying, refuse to pay speeding tickets, put down others with racist or sexist comments, etc. either were not taught these rules or intentionally decided they are above them. I believe the latter is the mostly case—either because rules were jammed down their throats with criticisms of being selfish or lazy, or they came to believe that their rights and needs were more important than those of others including their parents.

Either end of the spectrum leaves children out of balance in their world. We have all witnessed children who do exactly as they are told and practically ask permission to exist. These children, who we often wish were our own, are usually tightly controlled and either stay that way out of fear or let loose when given the opportunity. The latter bully their peers, thumb their noses at rules, and quickly dismiss parents and home as soon as they get the chance.

We have also seen children who are given more rein than is appropriate, call the shots, threaten parents with tantrums, and are treated like royalty by parents who believe that self-esteem is lost in frustration or disappointment. The result is children who have little respect for others. But if we all want our children to be respectful, where do we fall short?

When it comes to the day's agenda, where do your needs fall on your list of priorities? Do you spend your time doing for others and never for yourself? Do you shlep your children around, fix their problems, get their things together because they refuse, and give in if a meltdown looms? If so what is this teaching them about taking responsibility for themselves? What about self-respect—the foundation of respect for others? Would you feel guilty if you did something for yourself—because you were taught that doing for yourself is selfish? How would you feel if you said no to your child because you didn't want to add another thing to your plate? If the answer is guilty, then you are teaching your children that they are more important than you. Do you get angry at them for "making" you mad or tired or sick? If so you are teaching them to be responsible for your feelings.

Modeling goes a long way. If children hear you disrespecting others, they will do the same. Do you live by a double standard and tell them to do one thing but behave differently? Do your children hit you or call you names? If it happens repeatedly, it means you are allowing it even though you may punish them for it. Your own self-worth determines how you are treated and how you treat others. Self-worth is lost when children get the message that they are not as important as others. When we learn that we must be who our parents want us to be and our will is submerged by their demands, we will either continue that pattern or grab for the power we were never allowed whenever we see fit.

If you want your children to honor the end of the line, watch what you teach them now about self-worth and responsibility. They need to see us taking care of our own needs as well as theirs. And they need to have us honor them as equal human beings. Parenting is an art. There are so many layers of subtleties that go in the mix of how our children turn out. Unfortunately there are no easy answers or specific rules. Balance is the key.