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Family Focus

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Just about every good parent indulges or even overindulges his or her kids at one time or another. This is part of the pleasure of parenting - to be able to helpfully and lovingly address your children's needs and desires. This column, however, addresses how consistently indulging your children too much can lead to unintended consequences. Children who are used to being catered to by their parents may not fully develop adequate self-discipline and empathy for others. They may automatically challenge authority in school, sports, or with adults in general, and become argumentative and rebellious. We want to teach children to stand up for themselves of course, but not to overreact to every correction they receive.

Here are a few ways parents may inadvertently be too indulgent:

Not insisting on good manners. For example, your children interrupt you without saying excuse me and waiting for you to give them attention. They don't ask to be excused from the table. They don't say please, thank you, and hello and goodbye to you and others.

At an early age children can learn that parental preferences prevail over theirs. As long as parents act benevolently and firmly, even humorously at times, while providing training, children will eventually respond. They may need consequences of course, but that is to be expected. It helps to be calm, not emotional, while administering them. As a previous column mentioned, it works well to show reluctance when you need to give a consequence.

Letting them wear you down with their persistent crying, whining or nagging after you've already said no. In other words, their negative behavior pays off and gets reinforced.

Yes, we're all preoccupied or distracted at times, but it is important to be consistent in addressing this behavior so it will eventually be extinguished. With a younger child, you may need to just tough it out, telling him a reluctant "no" and then something encouraging. For example, "I know you want ice cream, but unfortunately we can't stop to get it right now. Maybe we can tomorrow, but only if you stop crying now." If he stops crying, be sure to get him ice cream the next day and tell him it's because he listened well and stopped crying right away the day before. If he doesn't stop crying, ignore him until he stops and definitely don't get him ice cream the next day. Wait until you're pleased with his behavior for any reason before you take him for ice cream the next time, and of course let him know why you're doing it.

With an older child, you can establish rules ahead of time. It helps to offer an explanation along with your initial "no" so your child won't feel dismissed. You may decide that she gets one chance to rebut your "no" if she is calm and polite, and you certainly can change your mind if you want. But if you stand by your decision, you expect her to respect it even though you know she's not happy with it.

It is important to allow for discomfort in a parent-child relationship. It will eventually pass, and you can always figure out new ways to make him or her happy on your own terms if you want. But if you try too hard to immediately fix a disagreement, your child will sense that he or she has the upper hand. Part of a healthy family dynamic is when a child can recognize and accept a parents' authority even though they may disagree with an outcome.

When your child has problems with others, automatically believing their version without first considering all possible sides of the situation.

It is important to listen carefully to your child when he or she is upset, to give them empathy, and to even agree with them initially. You will be showing caring and trust in them, which is a loving response. But in reality you don't want to automatically trust his or her perspective without checking out the facts.

For example, it is common for a child to complain to a parent that a teacher is picking on them. The teacher may very well be correcting their behavior often, but it is frequently because the child is misbehaving. A child doesn't always see the cause and effect of their own actions, and can sometimes feel they are being treated unfairly. (Of course sometimes the fact that a certain child is frequently disruptive in class may cause a teacher to make an inaccurate assumption that this same child is acting up again, even if he isn't).

It is important for parents to have a healthy skepticism if a child says he is frequently a victim in various situations, and to dig for more information.

One 8-year-old boy I saw, "Evan," complained that the kids in his after-school program were mean and didn't want to play with him. I urged the parents to check with the director of the program. They found out that their son was making mean faces at some of the younger children, was grabbing toys and puzzle pieces from others, and was basically the cause of his own unpopularity. After we learned this information, we were able to help Evan become aware of his own behavior and to make positive changes.

Be aware whether you are consistently providing the leadership in your parent-child relationship, or if too often your child is managing to lead you instead. Remember, it's never too late to change your approach.

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