

Published April 12th, 2023

## Family Focus

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Typically, parents want only the best for their children. In order to do our part well, it's a good idea to evaluate our performance as parents from time to time. Parents who are willing to take a personal inventory of themselves and their parenting are on the best possible path for success. But here are some ways we may inadvertently set up roadblocks for our children.

Don't let anything be quite good enough.

Praise your children in some way but always offer a disqualifier: i.e., "You played a good game. You could have tried harder in the last half though." Or, the stereotypical, "That's a good report card. Next time see if you can raise those B's to A's."

Some parents I've worked with say they hold back because they want to motivate their children and avoid having them be complacent or settle for less than their best. This approach is not likely to be motivating. Children respond best to encouragement and positivity. You want them to decide that they may want to try for A's instead of B's and not have this come from you. And if they don't decide this, it doesn't mean they won't be successful in life. Too often parents project into the future and become prematurely worried and anxious. Yes, this worry comes from a place of love and caring, but you need to ask yourself if it's helpful for your children and for your relationship.

Critique your children: their appearance, eating habits, friends, music, failure to be organized or on time or clean up their room.

Even an occasional mild comment can cause hurt feelings. Sara, age 26, still remembers vividly when her mother suggested they go to Weight Watchers together when she was 12. Her mother had already made not-so-subtle comments about how Sara should get more exercise and try not to eat so many sweets. Sara's weight may have eventually become a highly sensitive issue for her anyway, but feeling unaccepted and judged by her mother caused Sara to feel even worse about herself.

It works best for parents to have their children's pediatrician be the one to discuss weight with them, since it's an appropriate medical and health concern. And sometimes a doctor will refer the child and family to a nutritionist or therapist if there seems to be a potential problem. In this way, parents can remain neutral and supportive. Sometimes medical professionals give parents guidelines to follow. If a child is upset that parents are involved, parents can then say that the instructions came from the doctor or other professionals and that they are just trying to follow their advice.

Of course, a harsh comment ("You're lazy," or "How can you live in such a pigsty?") can cause anger as well as hurt. None of us likes to be criticized. And usually, criticism results in anger instead of change. Some parents complain that their children don't open up and talk much to them. One possibility is that a child is resentful, and is taking a form of control by not communicating, or in psychological terms, withholding. Also, it could be that a child doesn't want a dialogue that may produce more criticism.

To avoid being critical, first ask nicely what you would like from your child - "Will you please remember to put your laundry away after I bring it to your room?" Then, just in case, prepare for your request to be ignored. Following up, you might ask, "What do you think will help you remember to put away your laundry? I don't want to have to have to keep bugging you." See if you can get an agreement. Of course, if anything changes, be sure to throw in some positive reinforcement - "I really appreciate it" or "This really helps."

But if nothing changes, be prepared with a consequence so that you don't have to keep discussing the issue and show frustration (even though, of course, you are most likely frustrated). As I've mentioned in previous columns, reluctantly imposed consequences are the best way to go. For example, for children who are old enough: "I wanted to help you, but it's hard for me to keep doing laundry that winds up wrinkled on the floor. I think from now on it would be a good idea for you to be in charge of doing your own laundry so it doesn't have to be an issue for us." For younger children, you might tell them that they'll need to wait to use their iPad or watch TV or play outside until they've done this chore. Then, be sure to reinforce any

positive behavior by letting them know when they're doing a good job.

Let your children know often how well you did when you were a child or teen.

You may continually mention to your children or let them overhear you talking about how you were first chair in violin, or the lead in a play, or a star athlete, or an all-A student. You're not trying to brag; you merely want to share memories with your children and inspire them by relating your early successes. Instead, your revelations may well set the stage for your children to think they are disappointing you by not living up to your past performance and possible current expectations.

One highly successful dad in a family I see does a good job of minimizing his accomplishments as he was growing up, before he went to college. As a matter of fact, he claims there weren't many accomplishments at all, as he downplays them in order to avoid pressure for his children. He claims that he didn't become a serious student until college. He knows it's hard for his three sons, who are in middle school and high school, to think about trying to match a successful career like his. By pointing out how long it took for him to succeed, he's helping them avoid comparing themselves to him at this time in their lives.

You don't need to deny your childhood successes, but a little goes a long way. Try to limit how much and how often you share your past triumphs while your children are still trying to find their way.

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