

Four Steps for Un-Spoiling Your Child

If you're afraid that you have given in too much to your child and have created a spoiled "little monster," it's not too late to reverse the damage. Committing to a few simple steps that I've outlined here can help shape your child's behavior and make them a joy to be with again. But before we examine what to do, let's first define "spoiled."

The First Eighteen Months

According to experts like T. Berry Brazelton, M.D., children in the first year and half of life who cry to be picked up and held often are NOT spoiled. In his book "Touchpoints" (Persus Books, 1992), Dr. Brazelton points out that it is impossible to create a spoiled child during this time because the parent is suppose to attend to the child's needs. Adults however, can create an "anxious" child by being "anxious" or annoyed themselves around their children when they become fussy. He suggests that parents create frequent moments (10 – 15 minutes at a time) of putting the child down and letting the child cry. By returning frequently to pick the child up, the parent helps the child self-regulate by knowing the parent will return. And the most important aspect of each encounter with the child is to remain calm and peaceful. This demeanor will help the child develop more peacefulness for herself.

Over the Next Sixteen and a Half Years

Children and teenagers who demand things of the parent and throw fits may be considered spoiled, but they are actually reacting out of frustration to the adult's inconsistencies with limits. A child whose parents create consistent, firm and respectful boundaries for them are more likely to be more calm, cooperative, and content. So, "un-spoiling" a child means committing to new behaviors as a parent and better management of limitations for the child.

How They See the World

Young children don't understand many concepts of society that are second nature to adults, and many teens don't understand them if the adults around them are behaving badly. Some of these concepts include time management, commerce, supply & demand, and safety issues. And because adults are living very full lives, it is often hard for them to see the world through their child's eyes. For example, a child may throw a fit in the discount store because she doesn't understand why she can't have the toy off the shelf, especially if the adult allowed her to have toys off of shelves on other occasions. A nine year old may throw a fit because many of his friends have cell phones and he doesn't understand that his parents have decided to not "go with the flow" of other misguided parents and not let him have one so soon.

If you feel that you have spoiled your child by giving in too often, here are a few things you can do now to change that behavior:

Own Your Part

In their book "The Courage to be Imperfect" (Hawthorn Books, 1978), Turner and Pew wrote about the extensive work of psychiatrist Rudolf Dreikurs and how he changed

families and marriages by teaching adults to own their part of a behavior situation. Dreikurs used to ask his patients, "Do you want to save the relationship or destroy it?" If you're willing to accept the fact that you may have created or contributed to the "spoiled" behavior of your child, jump start the transformation by acknowledging that you may have been inconsistent with limits and boundaries, and may have also managed your emotions poorly whenever the children were testing you or asking for what they wanted.

Remain Calm

When your child begins to ask for something, remain calm and say little. Acknowledge him for having the courage to ask for what he wants by saying, "What I love about you is that you know what you want and you aren't afraid to ask for it." He will need this skill when you aren't around and acknowledging it will strengthen it. Your disposition is also vital to teaching your child to handle their frustration and anxiety. The more unbalanced your emotions appear, the more unbalanced your child's emotion will become. You and your state of calmness is more powerful than you might realize and it will also set an example for your child to learn about self-control.

Use Alternatives to the Word NO

The response of "NO" from a parent, who has given in frequently to a child's previous demands, has little credibility with the child. Therefore the child is compelled to continue badgering the parent until the adult caves in to the request as they have done in the past. I suggest replacing the use of the word NO with, "I'm not willing." This response is far more effective because the adult is demonstrating full control over their own will. Keep in mind that you don't always have to have a reason for a decision you have made, and saying, "I'm not willing (to spend money on that)," or "I'm not ready (for you to do that)" is far more effective at setting limits. Be aware that your child may ask you, "When WILL you be willing (or ready)?" When they do, simply say, "I'm not sure, you'll just have to check back with me," and say it calmly.

Set up Rules in Advance

Take measures to think proactively more often and set up rules in advance. You know your children well enough to know what situations may trigger fits and tantrums. Before going into the store with your child or teen, get to his or her eye level and calmly go over the rules for the segment that is about to occur. Ask her to repeat the rules and then commit to not breaking them yourself, no matter what. Finally, acknowledge her for cooperating or supporting your rules when the shopping trip is complete. You will build greater success by concentrating only on what went well, rather than the failures.

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