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A Lost Art: Instilling Respect

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There's been a fundamental change in family life, and it has played out over the years in my office. Teachers, pediatricians and therapists like me are seeing children of all ages who are not afraid of their parents. Not one bit. Not of their power, not of their position, not of their ability to apply standards and enforce consequences.

I am not advocating authoritarian or abusive parental behavior, which can do untold damage. No, I am talking about a feeling that was common to us baby boomers when we were kids. One of my friends described it this way: "All my mother had to do was shoot me a *look*." I knew exactly what she was talking about. It was a look that stopped us in our tracks -- or got us moving. And not when we felt like it.

Now.

These days, that look seems to have been replaced by a feeble nod of parental acquiescence -- and an earnest acknowledgment of "how hard it is to be a kid these days."

In my office, I have seen small children call their parents names and tell them how stupid they are; I have heard adolescents use strings of expletives toward them; and I remember one 6-year-old whose parents told me he refused to obey, debated them ad nauseam and sometimes even lashed out. As if on cue, the boy kicked his father right there in the office. When I asked the father how he reacts at home, he told me that he runs to another room!

It came to me like a lightning bolt: Not only are the kids unafraid of their parents, parents are afraid of their kids!

What ever happened to the colorful phrases our parents relied on to put us in our place? "Keep your shirt on." "On the double." "What do you think we are, made of money?" "Because I said so." "If you want sympathy, look it up in the dictionary." Or one of my personal favorites: "Don't bother me unless you're bleeding," which a friend's mother said to her six kids when she sat down to read before dinner.

The Honor Is Yours

Today's generation of children is the most closely observed, monitored, cherished and scheduled in our history. They are also the most praised. Families are smaller, and there are fewer children upon whom parents can beam their attention.

Today there are moms and dads who aren't just parents -- they believe in "parenting." They read volumes and volumes about how to be good parents and view parenting as both an art and a science that must be studied and updated and practiced self-consciously. Letting children run around the neighborhood and be bored some of the time is anathema to them.

Many parents these days don't expect their children to contribute much around the house, although they

do expect them to achieve outside the house. They have strong beliefs about what makes children successful and happy-ever-after, and underpinning those beliefs is the concept that they -- the parents -- are all-important in this quest. Such parents believe that self-esteem is the key to lifetime success, and to this end they compliment their children a lot.

They are egalitarian, and they believe families should be democracies. Needless to say, they don't give orders. They believe that children will do things when they are ready to. They ask their child politely if he or she will do something and are surprised and dismayed when the response is "no."

It's as if parents have rewritten the Fourth Commandment to read, "Honor thy children."

And, boy, are they paying for it.

When a teacher, pediatrician or therapist suggests that perhaps these "parenting" behaviors are not helping but in fact causing harm, such earnest parents can be hard to convince. They don't want to have to hear that their New Age concepts for raising kids not only do not work, but actually are prescriptions for disaster.

'Scrumptious'? Please.

Let's take the constant parental praise. I first noticed it when my three children were small, and I would hear mothers lauding their kids' incredible artwork or rich vocabulary. I can recall one mother who brought her 6-year-old to my office after the school observed some social difficulties. "Isn't she scrumptious?" she said, in front of her beaming daughter. (I made a mental note to myself: This may be part of the problem.)

After all, there is a difference between appreciation, which is from the heart, and flattery, which is from the mouth.

Starting in the mid-1990s, a team led by psychologist Carol Dweck did a series of experiments on fifth-graders over a 10-year period. One study compared two randomized groups of children in a classroom setting. In one group, researchers attributed children's achievement to their effort and in the other to their intelligence. Those praised for their hard work, it turned out, were more likely to attempt difficult tasks and performed better than those praised for intelligence. Children who were told that innate intelligence is the key were less likely to expend effort and take risks, perhaps because they were trying to maintain an image that they felt was not under their control.

A later study that Dweck conducted among seventh- and eighth-graders confirmed these findings and found that an effort mind-set also led to higher achievement, as measured by math grades.

More-serious concerns were raised by a 1996 review of 200 studies on self-esteem by Roy Baumeister, a psychologist at [Florida State University](#). Rather than promoting success, he found that an "unrealistically positive self-appraisal" was linked to aggression, crime and violence.

It all makes a therapist long for the days of the good old inferiority complex. And for parents who could put children in their place. Some interesting research on interpersonal attraction has shown that self-confidence in combination with some degree of vulnerability makes a person more appealing to others. Unshakable self-regard is a liability. And dominance is the kiss of death.

Over-parented and under-disciplined children can also have trouble later as young adults with the

process of separating from home and creating an independent life. Kids who were constantly praised often become thin-skinned adults who have trouble taking negative feedback on their job or in their personal lives. And I have had more than one client over the years who was positively indignant when a boss expected him or her to be at work on time and to call in sick only when necessary.

Kids who were told, "You can do anything," may have extremely high expectations that can be hard to attain in our multifaceted modern lives. In her 2006 book, "Generation Me," Jean Twenge, a psychologist at [San Diego State University](#), documented an enormous rise in young people's expectations from the late '60s to the late '90s. Twenge refers to a quote from the character Tyler Durden in the movie "Fight Club": "We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very [ticked] off."

Maybe it wouldn't be so painful if parents would sign on to the following manifesto: Let's expect more help from our kids around the house and withdraw some of our frenetic investment in their academic, sporting and social achievements. Let's shore up boundaries and let them be kids in the kid zone. And let's allow them to experience some of life's disappointments. Let's talk on the phone and go out on weekends with our friends. Let's start worrying less whether our kids are happy all the time and more about whether we are enjoying them and ourselves. Let's get a life in the parent zone. And last but not least, let's resurrect an old concept: Father and Mother Know Best. ?

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