

# Why Your Kid's Bad Behavior May Be a Good Thing

The safer children feel, the more they can show their true selves — warts and all — experts say. And that's good for their development.

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There was a moment over Thanksgiving break when my 7-year-old bossily instructed her 76-year-old grandfather, whom she rarely sees, to “stop taking pictures and put down your camera,” and boy, I wished I could hide under the dining room table for the rest of the evening. I wondered: What kind of child am I raising? I would never have dared to speak to my grandfather that way. Am I failing as a parent if my kid is sometimes rude, or even defiant?

We all know friends or relatives who would unequivocally say, “yes.” In their generation, they say, children knew their place and respected their elders. I certainly try to teach my kids about respect, and we talk ad nauseam about table manners and saying “please” and “thank you.” Still, the relationship many parents today have with their kids feels substantially different from parent-child relationships decades ago.

Much has been written about the shift in recent years toward more intensive, child-centered parenting, and one byproduct is that many parents today are less likely to bark out orders and punish their kids. They are more likely to empathize and engage in dialogue. Because of this, many children today feel more comfortable around adults, and they are more willing to challenge them and speak up when they feel the impulse.

Although this spiritedness sometimes looks unsavory, child psychologists say the shift is a good thing. It is a reflection of how safe and loved children feel and how much trust they have in their parents.

“It can manifest as kids being a bit more assertive and opinionated, and maybe even more argumentative, and I think that the challenge is to not interpret that as a bad thing, but as an important and necessary process,” said Emily Loeb, a psychologist at the University of Virginia who studies how parenting shapes child development. When children feel safe and loved, they are better able to “find their voice and figure out the world for themselves,” she added.

Think of it this way: When kids are always respectful, complacent and obedient with adults, it is often because they are afraid of those adults. It's not a coincidence that people who boast about how well behaved their children are may also be those who throw around phrases like, “Spare the rod, spoil the child.”

Yet kids don't blossom when they are afraid of their caregivers. Fear-based, authoritarian parenting — when parents are extremely strict, punish their children harshly for defiance and say things like, “Because I said so!” — is linked with myriad negative outcomes in kids. Children of authoritarian parents are at an increased risk for anxiety and depression, exhibit more disruptive behavior and are more likely than other kids to have low self-esteem, studies have found.

“The science says that over time, fearing your parents makes you less confident in yourself and more in need of external validation,” said Rebecca Schrag Hershberg, a clinical psychologist based in New York who specializes in early childhood social-emotional development and mental health.

Strict parents sometimes use specific tactics that are especially harmful. One is conditional regard: when parents show more love or affection for their kids when they behave well, and less when they behave poorly. One study found that teens whose parents used conditional regard reported feeling more resentful toward their parents and were less academically engaged and emotionally regulated compared with teens whose parents supported them unconditionally.

Another approach that authoritarian parents sometimes use is psychological control. This is when parents toy with children's sense of self and intrinsic value to get the behavior they want. It's “a kind of control where you're asking your kid to think the same way that you do or to feel the same way you do,” Dr. Loeb explained. A parent using psychological control might say things like “You didn't make your bed — you're such a bad girl!” or “If you really loved me, you would go to sleep.”

One of Dr. Loeb's recent studies, which followed kids from ages 13 to 32, found that children whose parents were psychologically controlling were less academically successful and less liked by their peers in adolescence compared with kids whose parents were not psychologically controlling. As adults, they were also less likely to be in healthy romantic relationships. Other research has linked parental psychological control with antisocial behavior and anxiety in kids.

Parents who use psychological control usually mean well — they think that controlling their kids will make them more successful — but “it kind of backfires,” Dr. Loeb said. “They end up struggling to think for themselves once they're outside of the control of the home.”

And this is what many parents want — for kids to grow into independent thinkers who sometimes question authority and think outside the box. Ultimately, what the research suggests is that harsh, strict parenting does not sow the seeds for healthy development; it does the opposite. In the short term, sure, kids might be better behaved. In the long term, children suffer.

“We really want our kids to know themselves and trust themselves and believe in themselves — and that all gets sacrificed if parents are the be-all, end-all rulers of everything,” Dr. Hershberg said. Kids should be treated with respect and made to feel that their opinions and beliefs have worth.

This is not to say that children don't need rules, limits or consequences — they certainly do. So-called “permissive” parenting can pose problems, too, and has been linked to child self-centeredness and poor impulse control. Dr. Loeb distinguished between unhelpful psychological control and helpful “behavioral control” — when parents set limits and expectations, such as that kids have a certain bedtime, need to clean up their room each morning or are only allowed a certain amount of screen time each day. Boundaries and rules are crucial for healthy development, she said. But parents don't need to manipulate their children's sense of identity or punish harshly to uphold them.

Indeed, research overwhelmingly suggests that what parents should strive for is a middle ground, “goldilocks” approach known as authoritative parenting (as opposed to “authoritarian” parenting). These parents have high expectations of their kids and set strict limits, but they are also warm and respectful with their children and sometimes willing to negotiate. Research shows that children of authoritative parents perform better in school than their peers, are more honest with their parents and are also kind and compassionate.

There are complicated cultural issues to consider, however. Assertiveness is interpreted much more negatively, for instance, when it comes from a Black child than from a white child, said Dana E. Crawford, a pediatric and clinical psychologist who is a scholar in residence at Columbia University's Zuckerman Institute. Research shows that Black and Latino children are more likely to be disciplined at school than white children. Because of this, Dr. Crawford

explained, parents of nonwhite kids may feel they should parent more punitively to protect their children from the downstream effects of racism, such as expulsion or police violence. They also might feel they need to parent harshly to make their kids tougher.

There's a difficult balance to achieve between "teaching with softness and empathy, but also building resiliency and fortitude," Dr. Crawford said. Still, she said, among Black parents, there is now a movement toward more gentle parenting.

Children who feel comfortable challenging their parents or grandparents about rules and expectations, who occasionally say sassy or rude things, are, in essence, kids who know they are loved and accepted for who they are.

Do I wish my daughter had been more polite in asking her grandpa to put down his camera? Absolutely. But I'm also proud that she's brave enough to advocate for herself, and that she knows she has a voice within our family.

Audio produced by Tally Abecassis.

Melinda Wenner Moyer is a science journalist and the author of "How To Raise Kids Who Aren't Assholes."