

Parenting in the Age of Awfulness

Kyle was absorbed in a videogame on his cellphone, so I asked his mom, “How long has Kyle had a stomach ache?” Mom said, “I’m thinking it’s been about two days.” Then Kyle replied, “Shut up, mom. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” And he gave a snorty laugh, without looking up from his videogame. Kyle is 10 years old.

I have been a physician for 29 years. This sort of language and behavior from a 10-year-old was very rare in the 1980s and 1990s. It would have been unusual a decade ago. It is common today. America’s children are immersed in a culture of disrespect: for parents, teachers and one another. They learn it from television, even on the Disney Channel, where parents are portrayed as clueless, out-of-touch or absent. They learn it from the Internet. They learn it from social media. They teach it to one another. They wear T-shirts emblazoned with slogans like “I’m not shy. I just don’t like you.”

The challenge of raising children in America today is different from 30 or 50 years ago. Back then popular culture supported the authority of parents, whether it was the “Andy Griffith Show” in the 1960s or “Family Ties” in the 1980s. Kids are not born knowing how to be respectful. They have to be taught.

Multiple lines of evidence, including cohort studies such as the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, now demonstrates that disrespectful children are more likely to grow up to be anxious and depressed, three times more likely to be overweight, more likely to be fragile, less healthy and less creative, compared with respectful children.

But don’t give up hope. Just as I see children like Kyle in my office, I also see children who are courteous, respectful, happy and confident. Same race, ethnicity, and household income. But the parents are different, and they parent differently.

For the past seven years I’ve been talking with parents and their children, trying to understand why some children are respectful even though most of their peers are not. The difference is in the parents.

Here’s some of what those parents have taught me: Require respectful behavior at all times. It’s OK to disagree. It’s never OK to be disrespectful. Prioritize the family. The family meal at home is more important than piling on after-school extracurricular activities. Instead of boosting self-esteem, teach humility. Fight the cultural imperative to be “awesome.”

THE FATHER KNOWS BEST

Moreover, no screens when you are with your child. Put your cellphone away. No electronic devices at the dinner table. Teach the art of face-to-face conversation. No devices in a public setting, such as the doctor's office. Govern your children's use of social media, television, and any device with a screen.

If you're going to make a change, don't be subtle. New Year's Day is as good a time as any to sit down with your children and explain that there are going to be some changes in this household: changes in how we talk, in how we behave, in how we treat one another. It is possible to create a culture of respect in the home while living in the U.S. today. It isn't easy, but it can be done.

Leonard Sax