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What to do when your child is acting entitled

Tantrums are a manipulative scheme; show empathy, stay firm, but don't give in

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Today's parents are more intentional and involved. But we are also accused of overparenting or doing things for our kids too much.

This phenomenon spans socioeconomic classes and cultures and affects our children's future and society. Delayed gratification has been dethroned by instant gratification.

Excessive praise, social media normalizing selfies and reality TV reinforce the "me" culture.

"When we shelter them from disappointments and pain, we rob our children of the opportunity to make mistakes and build resilience, even if we do so out of love," said Amy McCready, founder of PositiveParentingSolutions.com, at the 2021 Positive Parenting Summit. She reminded listeners that our goal as parents is to develop life skills in our kids for them to become happy, healthy, functional adults.

The great give-in

McCready said that when we say "yes" when we should be saying "no," we train children to exploit others to get what they want.

So fearlessly say no to teach them about boundaries. Mean what you say, and don't let them wear you down with the badgering and bargaining.

But how do we handle meltdowns and tantrums in kids acting entitled? McCready explained that first, we must understand the difference.

Meltdowns are a skill deficit. We need to help the child calm his big emotions down when in the moment by establishing an emotional connection.

Be there in the moment, then follow up with the skill development outside the moment using practice and role play. There's no quick fix, especially not with parents getting frustrated.

Tantrums are a manipulative scheme. It's tormenting, not letting up, yelling and slamming doors.

As much as you probably want to throw an even bigger tantrum, show empathy:

"I know you're frustrated. It's upsetting when you can't do what you want."

Establish an emotional connection in the moment to show you are on their team, but

don't give in. Doing so would only show that tantrums effectively get what they want. We also want to refrain from engaging in a power struggle. So show empathy, stay firm, then disengage.

Outside the moment, practice skills with role-play. Rehearse breathing techniques to manage big emotions.

Boundaries and rules

Be clear ahead of time about boundaries and rules. Have the child repeat the rules to you, so it's clear what happens when those are crossed. Agree on relevant consequences to teach personal responsibility and that all choices have positive and negative outcomes. Then comes the hard part: follow through without anger or frustration when the rules are defied.

McCready advised giving the child the opportunity to save face. Say, "I know you might not even know you're doing this, so when I hear that, I'm gonna do this." Come up with a nonverbal redo signal, like maybe have your finger make a revolving motion that you both understand.

It has to be nonverbal, not a code word. "Because when we respond with words, there can be a tone or edge that can make our frustration come through that can make it likely to escalate to a power struggle," explained McCready.

When you make that signal, your child can get a do-over, an opportunity to say they didn't mean what they did or said, so they can say or do it again more reasonably.

'Convince me'

For older kids, McCready suggested being firm but not "my-way-or-the-highway" stonewalling where you'll never listen.

"Convince me" is a concept she recommends if a child wants to go to a concert or go to a friend's house alone. Your policy has always been "no," but the child feels passionate about it.

First, get them to confirm that they know you have concerns and, in their proposal, how they will manage them. This exercise gives children an opportunity for decision-making. It puts the onus on them to find a way and show competence, leading to more freedoms and responsibilities in the future. They need such moments to practice decision-making and see good or bad outcomes.

"They might even develop a little PowerPoint to show their rationale," said McCready. The bestselling author of "The 'Me, Me, Me' Epidemic" and "If I Have to Tell You One More Time" said, "We're raising future adults. So, we must ensure they have all the traits they need to succeed, as it also affects their teachers, coaches, friends, future coworkers and spouses. We want to raise people who can contribute to their community for the greater good."