FAMILY

Why Can't Johnny Jump Tall Buildings?

Parents expect way too much from their kids.

By Alan E. Kazdin

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Because parents love their children and want the best for them, they worry about them a lot, and one of the things that parents worry about most is whether their children are hitting age-appropriate targets for behavior. Shouldn't a child be toilet trained by the age of 4? Should a 10-year-old to be able to sit down and do an hour of homework? One reason why such questions produce so much conflict and woe in the home is that parents' expectations for their children's behavior tend to be too high. I'm not talking about permissiveness or strictness here; I'm talking about accurately estimating children's actual abilities. A reliable body of research shows that we expect our children to do things they're not yet able to do and that we judge and punish them according to that expectation.

Overly simple age-targeting is one main culprit. We all know that children develop differently, but it's natural to underestimate the astonishing variability among and within individuals. A child may be the first in her class to ride a two-wheeler but the last to learn to read; she may also grasp addition and subtraction well ahead of others but lag behind in achieving the self-control to short-circuit a tantrum. We also tend to parent subjectively, setting the behavior bar with a too-small sample group drawn from personal experience: our own first child, a neighbor's child, or our own unreliable childhood memories of how our parents raised us. (If you do want to compare a child constructively with others of the same age, the University of Michigan Medical Center's Web site offers a useful listing of developmental milestones.)

Our expectations of our children's psychological abilities, even more than of their physical abilities, are typically much too high. The research shows that we consistently overestimate their self-control, ability to persevere and stay on task, consistency of performance, and social ability. It's normal for a 2-year-old to get bent out of shape if he doesn't get something he wants; it's normal for a 3-year-old to lose it if there's an unexpected change in the bedtime routine; it's normal for a 6-year-old to fail to sustain focus on a baseball game, to pursue one fly ball with steely purpose and to let the next fall untouched in the grass because he's daydreaming. We know this, and we know that each of these developmental stages will probably pass in a few months' time, but, still, we stand over the child with index finger raised, an unpleasant edge in our voice, futilely repeating: "I *said* you'd get it later," or "Why are you making such a big deal about your bedtime story?" or "Get your head in the game!"

Necessity feeds this habit, and so does the human tendency to see the world according to personal priorities. If your work schedule obliges you to put your 3-year-old in preschool for 10 hours a day, you'll expect her to function peacefully there whether or not she's capable of it, and your own sense of sacrificing for the good of the family will encourage you to regard that expectation as reasonable. "I work and slave all day for your benefit, and all you have to do is play nicely with the other kids. So stop hitting them, or I'll have to spank you."

Frequently, we want something very simple from kids, like peace and quiet. Is that too much to ask for? Sometimes, it is. Come nap time, you may be thinking, "OK, I fed you, I changed you, I tucked you into your crib with your special blanket and teddy bear, I even bought this expensive mobile to hang over you. You're not teething—I checked. Everything's perfect. Children your age are supposed to take a nap. Your nap is scheduled for right now, and I have a phone call to make in nine minutes. Go to sleep right now!" If your child could articulate what's happening to him, he might respond, "I love the mobile, but my bones are growing like bamboo at the moment, and it hurts. I think I'll stay up and cry instead."

When a child doesn't perform according to expectations, the parent's stress level rises. Changes occur in the parent's behavior—extra doses of impatient body English and insistent harshness in the voice, for instance—which become setting events for deviant behavior by the child. When you bear down harder, in other words, you increase the likelihood that your child will escape and avoid your authority, which will inspire you to bear down even harder, and so on. The spiral of escalation twists up and up, sometimes to the point that a parent loses it and ends up doing something normally unthinkable—slapping small children, for instance, for failing to nap when they're supposed to.

When we enforce unreasonable expectations, and especially when we punish according to them, we put stress on kids, who respond by avoiding, escaping, and becoming irritable. Ironically, that puts them off whatever activity, skill, or virtue we're trying to inculcate, making it aversive rather than attractive. So how can a parent seek to counter the natural tendency to expect too much behavior from children?

First, aim to build competencies by inching toward success gradually, and focus on process rather than successful outcome: That is, focus on trying to do what's valuable, not on immediately reaching the level of performance you think a child of that age should reach. If you encounter strong resistance, then back off for a few days, and when you return to the issue, lower your demand. Seek to get the desired behavior for a shorter period, ask for less of it, or take some other step to defuse the all-or-none dynamic. Working up to the desired behavior gradually, in doable steps, is a process called *shaping*.

For example, let's say your child is lagging behind the rest of his class in reading. His teacher wants you to work with him at home on his reading every day for 20 minutes. Your child, who's embarrassed about his reading, resists this "extra" work, perceiving it as an unfair penalty. The resistance, on top of the reading problems, produces a situation that can make a parent crazy with frustration and anxiety. One move you can make in response is to try something low-key, like, "We're going to read to each other. You read for two minutes, and we'll talk about what you read, then I'll read for two minutes and we'll talk about it." Then, once you've got the habit in place, over a week or two you can escalate in easy stages up to 20 minutes of reading.

Try to bear in mind that you feel your child's resistance to learning to read, or perhaps his genuine difficulty with reading, as pressure on *you*. Your stress goes up, and, since you're not a saint, it's very likely that your increased stress will translate into behavior (such as harsh categorical statements in your Metallica voice about doing 20 minutes of reading every single day or else) that causes his stress to go up when you try to get him to work on his reading. So it's crucial that you separate the pressure you feel to help your child read from the project of working with him on his reading. If that stress gets into your voice, it affects the process.

Or reconsider what's vital and what's negotiable in your demands. Take the example of the non-napping child. Parents know that a child of that age should take a nap, and they've picked a time of day when that nap should happen, and yet the child cries or wants to play. If you're in that position, recognize that the problem here is in part the expectation. Shifting it to, say, having the child play quietly in her crib at that time will take care of most of what's really at issue: The child needs to rest, and you need a break. A designated number of minutes of actual unconsciousness on her part is probably unnecessary.

If you find yourself saying, "No matter how hard I try and try, I can't make my kid do X ..." or "No matter how hard I try, I can't make my kid understand Y ..." it's usually a clear sign that expectation and enforcing that expectation are a significant part of the problem. Your expectation may in fact accurately address the mean—that is, you may expect a behavior of your 9-year-old that most 9-year-olds can do—but remember the range of human variability and try to structure antecedents (the things you do to encourage a behavior to occur) with room for that variability.

When your child fails to meet a reasonable—specific, clear, flexible—request and it's a one-time occasion, try to let it go if you can. But if the request is not met and it's not a one-time event, then it's time to begin shaping the desired behavior. Start with a lot less than you will eventually settle for: less behavior, for less time, less often. Ten minutes of homework, not the full hour right away; putting the forks on the table, not setting the whole table. Then work up to the desired level. And, once you get close, remember that getting a behavior to occur most of the time, as opposed to every single time, is probably good enough. Exceptions are usually not a problem; they're normal. As is the case with your own efforts to exercise and eat properly, if it's a habit, and if you do the behavior most of the time, that's good enough.

I know that you feel that you're helping your child set habits now that will last all of her life, and sometimes that's exactly what you're doing, but often, it's not the right model to keep in mind. Yes, when it comes to, say, developing vision and language, childhood habits set the pattern for life, but in a lot of other cases, they don't. Little kids will lie, cheat, and steal, for instance, and still grow up to be scrupulously honest adults. Don't crank up the pressure unnecessarily by making every single one of your child's behaviors into a slippery slope, a domino, or an occasion to draw a line in the sand.

Finally, bear in mind the cholesterol-stroke caveat, or the principle of the U-shaped relation. Most of the time, we think about cause and effect as a linear relation. That's because it often is. If you do X, Y happens. If you do X a lot, Y happens a lot, so more X equals more Y. It works for, say, pressing on the gas to make your car go fast, or drinking alcohol to get drunk, or the correlation between high cholesterol and the risk of heart disease. But some relations are U-shaped. One of them is that between cholesterol and the risk of stroke. People with high *or* low cholesterol have a higher risk of stroke, and those in the middle have the lowest risk. It can be the same with expectations. Both chaos (not enough expectation: feel free to watch TV and play computer games all day, go to bed when you want to, do or don't do homework and chores as you see fit) and regimentation (too much unreasonable expectation, too little allowance for variability, unrelenting "tough love" that's too heavy on the "tough") can have a similar negative stressing effect on a household and put children at greater risk for problem behavior: tantrums, fighting, and the like. Variations in children's and parents' temperaments can make it hard to give blanket advice, but the trick in each case is to find the individual child's sweet spot, the point between too little and too much expectation.

The good news is that you're the world's leading expert on your child, the one person in creation best equipped to find that sweet spot. Just remember, as you go about it, that it's only human for parents to tend to expect that our children can do more than they can really do. Even slight adjustments of your expectations to compensate for that tendency—a little more emphasis on shaping, a little more patience, a little reflection on what's really important to you as a parent and what behaviors can be left to disappear or develop on their own—can produce surprisingly excellent results.

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