



Generation "Why?" Kids

By, Michael Zito, PhD

There is much written about Generation X, Y, and Z, and Generation Text kids. I think a more pressing question is, "How did we develop so many Generation Why Kids?" These children ask, "Why do I have to do chores, homework, and clean my room, etc.?", They also ask, "Why can't I have that expensive videogame, smart phone, etc.?" If challenging parental authority doesn't work, the child often blames the parents for their ensuing distress. The regular debates, parental blame, and entitled attitude are extremely frustrating to most parents. Parents often lament that when they were children they simply did what they were told without debate. A democratic process in the family can benefit children, but there needs to be some limits.

This sense of entitlement, debating and placing blame on parents grew out of well-intended ideas that have been taken to an extreme. There has been a strong effort over the past 30 years to maintain positive self-esteem in our children. This sounds like a good idea, but for many it has transformed into extreme efforts to protect our children from distress or negative feedback of any kind. Twenty years ago, when a child did not do well in school, the parents asked the child for an explanation. Currently, in order to protect children from feeling badly, it is common for parents to ask the teacher for an explanation of the child's poor performance. This promotes blame and entitlement to have individual needs met by others.

Parenting practices encourage children to have input into family decisions, which is reasonable. However, when taken to the extreme it can create over accommodation to the child's desires to prevent disappointment. Children then learn that their needs are paramount and must be satisfied. We have grown accustomed to rewarding children for simple behaviors. For example, in sports, children are given trophies for simply participating, creating an expectation of grand rewards for minimal effort. There is also an emphasis on treating everyone equally in an attempt to maintain self-esteem in our children. I am reminded of the movie "Parental Guidance," where the main character watched his grandson strikeout a boy that recently bullied him. The grandfather complained that the umpire did not call the batter "out." The umpire then explained that there are no outs and every game ends in a tie. When a child first learns a sport this approach is fine, but at some point children need constructive and comparative feedback, so they can know their strengths and weaknesses and what skills need development. If everyone is the best and equal, children are not afforded growth opportunities because

there is little need and motivation to improve. They can feel entitled to good outcomes independent of their effort, but the real world does not operate in this “everybody wins” manner.

It is important to understand the implied message we give our children about entitlement, blame, and excessive debate. Protecting children from frustration and disappointment impedes children from learning important real life lessons. Being sensitive to children’s needs is very important, however, we may have gone too far. So what do we need to do? We need to teach children critical real life skills.

- Let them experience natural cause and effect consequences
- Provide opportunities to deal with challenges and frustrations in life
- Promote the idea that privileges and rewards are earned not simply given
- Help kids look beyond themselves by volunteering to help others in need
- Connect achievement with effort
- Assist children in accurately assessing their strengths, weaknesses, and areas to improve
- Be accountable for their own performance and behavior

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