

Too Too MUCH SOON

Breaking the Entitlement Cycle

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Maggie comes home from school and says she needs a cell phone. But she doesn't want just any cell phone—it has to be an iPhone 4. After all, she's in fourth grade and all of her friends have it. Maggie is relentless. She wants a phone. She *needs* a phone. Over the course of a month, Maggie does not miss an opportunity to inform her parents of how unfair they are being by not giving her one.

Matthew is a second grader who is crazy about sports. He does well, maybe even a bit better than other kids in his peer group, but he struggles with sportsmanship and boasts that he is "clearly the best." While sports come more easily than other things to Matthew, he struggles when his coach pushes him to expand his skills. Rather than seeing an opportunity, he gives up or blames others for the failure. In Cub Scouts, when he doesn't win the pinewood derby, he is devastated and yells, "It's not fair! The track must be broken!"

Jenna is a college freshman. All through elementary, junior high and high school, she got her schoolwork done on time, participated in multiple sports and extracurricular activities. But away from home, she can't handle the stress of having to choose her own classes, make her own schedule and structure her own time. Her parents or her counselors had

always given her deadlines, helped her choose her activities, and followed through to make sure things in her life were done. Now in college, she is anxious and stressed out because the pressure is too much for her to handle on her own, and for the first time in her life, her grades begin to slip.

We hear a lot about entitlement as parents. Here in Silicon Valley, where the accumulation of wealth or the perceived accumulation of wealth surrounds us, it feels especially noticeable. While the notion of entitlement is often thought to be related to wealth, it is actually an attitude and a way to perceive oneself ("I expect to receive ...") and can be influenced by how we parent—with or without great amounts of money. Entitlement is not simply buying a child too many things. It is a process of parenting that promotes giving children too much, too soon or doing things that children can do for themselves. The consequences are often that children experience a false sense of self-esteem, an expectation of life being "easy" and/or an insatiable need to be validated by others. The danger is that these children can fall apart later in life when they realize that they may not be as fabulous/

smart/talented as they have been told all their lives. Entitled parenting interrupts a child's normal child development including learning the skills to help cope with disappointment and to develop the ability to accurately assess one's own strengths and weaknesses. Kids who do not develop these skills have later difficulty understanding how to cope with everyday stressors and use their knowledge to make healthy personal decisions. Entitled children often have difficulty learning that all people have weaknesses and no one is perfect.

Entitled parenting has been greatly influenced by the self-

esteem movement over the past 20 years. This movement sought to use a strength-based approach to promote the healthy development of children. But it has largely been misinterpreted by well meaning professionals and parents. Kids no longer keep score while playing T-ball for fear that the competition is harmful. Every child in a classroom now receives a gold star whether they earned the star or not out of fear that someone's feelings may be hurt. The consequence of the idea that everyone is equal regardless of his individual achievements is that our culture has started to interfere with a child's natural and evolving understanding of his abilities and strengths. Without this skill, children do not develop adequate coping skills that may help them later in life.

Providing children with material possessions, even with the good intention of trying to make them feel better, fuels the sense of entitlement and does little to help their self-esteem. Giving in to a child's desire to be like everyone else and have the same things as his friends may seem like a

good idea, but it actually can teach a child that working for something or earning something is not necessary to getting what he wants. That can be a dangerous lesson to teach a child when it comes time to be an adult and the hand-outs from employers do not exist.

Trying to raise a child in Silicon Valley can be tough – not only because of the academic pressures and the current economy, but because of the wide diversity of social pressures as well. Even if you feel that you are doing your best to ground your child with the understanding that certain privileges should be earned, how do you help your child cope with the peer pressure that other entitled children and their families promulgate?

WORK ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD.

Provide age-appropriate structure, limits and boundaries. When your child is young, work on building a solid foundation of trust and responsiveness in order to help your child cope with stress and disappointment. For school-age children, work on increasing impulse control and a sense of responsibility. For teenagers, promote age-appropriate money management skills and encouraging them or her to volunteer or take on other work related activities. These strategies will help you develop a better ability to



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understand your child and lead to a happier and healthier relationship, which is the foundation for a healthy and successful child.

Matthew's parents, for example, could help him build a true sense of himself by praising him for participating in the sport and his sportsmanship, not just for winning. They could talk about other ways to help out and to work as a team member, such as with set-up, clean-up or uniforms, so that he can see that being involved as part of a team is not only about winning or losing—it is about responsibility to other peers as well.

PROMOTE AGE-APPROPRIATE AUTONOMY BY AVOIDING DOING TOO MANY THINGS THAT YOUR CHILD MAY BE ABLE TO DO FOR HIMSELF. For example, over scheduling your child for after-school activities will not teach your child how to manage his time. Instead, weigh the pros and cons of different activities or determine which activities he likes best. For example, if your eight-year-old is engaged in too many after-school activities without any thought or input (because you have made the choice), it becomes more difficult in high school for him to prioritize activities and make appropriate scheduling choices.

Jenna could have benefitted from her parents allowing her to make some choices about classes and activities while in junior high and high school so that her transition to college would not have been so fraught with anxiety. Choices teach valuable skills in decision making, prioritization and coping with frustration.

UNDERSTAND THAT YOUR CHILD'S QUESTIONS, CONCERNS OR DEMANDS ABOUT HOW HE DIFFERS FROM HIS PEERS IN TERMS OF DRESS OR OTHER MATERIAL THINGS IS NOT ONLY A TYPICAL PART OF YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT, it is an opening for a more important conversation: What are your family values? How

are these values the same or different from other families? How did you earn the nice things in your home? How do you define success?

Maggie's parents could tell her that her family believes children don't need a smart phone of their own until eighth grade. It is their family rule. When she keeps asking for one, they have a firm answer that promotes their values and teaches Maggie that privileges increase as children are able to handle more responsibility

By having an open conversation with your child about the differences he notices and what your rules and boundaries are, you will not only prepare your child to cope with entitled children and families, but will also promote his success in the world by building his social competence. If successful, your child will easily transition to college while the entitled children will be struggling to come to terms with the meaning of hard work, dedication and reward. <

Jennifer Rhodes is a licensed psychologist who specializes in working with young children at Children's Health Council. Children's Health Council helps kids and families with small to large challenges and offers free parent education, consultation, evaluation, individual and group skill building and educational services including a school for grades K-3.

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