We are facing an epidemic of insecure parenting. We may now have the most child-sensitive generation of parents the world has ever known—and the most confused and insecure. This generation has determined not to repeat the mistakes of its own parents, who expected unquestioning obedience. But in rejecting outmoded models of authority, parents are now skittish about exercising any authority at all.

Children raised with insecure parents grow up too soon, become preoccupied with consumer goods and peer acceptance, and focus their lives on frenetic activity outside the home. They know that their parents love them deeply and want to communicate sensitively with them, but they also know that their parents are unsure about what to require of them and how to say “no” to them.

A family now in therapy has a 10-year-old boy, who is an angel in school, but who has started to call his mother a “bitch” at home. Rather than exercising legitimate authority, his mother responds by feeling sorry that her son is so distraught. (An appropriate exercise of parental authority: “You may not speak to me like that EVER, not even when you are angry. Go to your room and come back when you have a letter of apology.”)

Another example: Our local newspaper has been running a series on alcohol and teens. Kids in earlier generations drank alcohol, often to excess. The difference now, as documented in the newspaper articles, is that parents supply the keg of beer, the house or hotel room, and the funds to enjoy a Mexican frolic of booze and sex during spring break. Most parents who were interviewed were reluctant to let their children go on a Mexican spring break this year, but were unable to say “no,” particularly when most of the other kids announced they were going.

The Consumer Culture of Childhood

In the new culture of childhood, children are viewed as consumers of parental services, and parents are viewed as providers of parental services and brokers of community services for children. What gets lost is the other side of the human equation: children bearing responsibilities to their families and communities.

Children should not only receive from adults but also actively contribute to the world around them, help care for the younger and the infirm, add their own marks to the quality of family life, and contribute to the common good in their school and communities. If children live only as consumers of parental and community services, then they are not active citizens of families and communities.

If we see ourselves only as providers of services to our children, we end up confused about our authority, anxious about displeasing our children, insecure about whether we are providing enough opportunities, and worried that we are not keeping up with the output of other parents. In a market economy, the service provider must offer what is newest and best, and at all costs, must avoid disappointing the customer.

When applied to the family, this is a recipe for insecure parents and entitled kids. (One 17-year-old said to his parents, “Why should I mow the lawn? It’s not my lawn.”)
The Therapeutic Culture of Parenting

We also live in the era of therapeutic parenting. The parent becomes a junior therapist, and the child is seen as requiring special treatment that only a professional—or a trained parent—can provide. Starting back in the 1970s with Parent Effectiveness Training, a then popular book by Thomas Gordon, parents have been taught to act like therapists with their children.

A therapist is supposed to be consistently attentive, low key, accepting, non-directive, and non-judgmental. When the child acts up in a therapy session, say, by speaking disrespectfully to the therapist, the therapist’s job is to explore the underlying reasons rather than focus on the child’s immediate behavior. In addition to distorting parents’ reactions to their children’s misconduct, the therapeutic culture of parenting suggests that children’s psyches are fragile, easily broken by a parent who says the wrong thing.

The reality, according to loads of research, is that, if underlying parental care and attachment are present, most children are resilient in the face of ordinary mistakes in parenting. If children can handle most of our non-abusive mistakes, they can certainly handle our strong responses to them when these responses are fully called for. Children mostly know when they are off base, and feel safer when their parents step in assertively.

We know from research and observation that parents have a strong influence on their teenagers’ behavior. Teenagers whose parents talk to them regularly about avoiding drugs are much less likely to use drugs. Teenagers whose parents give them both nurturing and firm limits are less likely to be involved in sexual activity. They are also more likely to study hard.

How to Teach Teens Respect

We can restore parents’ confidence in their authority without returning to authoritarian parenting. There is a middle way between being dictatorial and insensitive on the one hand, and cajoling and debating with children on the other hand.

A personal example: When my son Eric was 13, we had a brief but memorable encounter in the kitchen. I was on the telephone with a friend in the early evening. Unbeknownst to me, Eric wanted to make a phone call to one of his friends. When I hung up the phone, Eric said to me, in an irritated, peremptory tone of voice, “Who was that?”

How do you think I should have responded? Consider several possible responses I could have made, and then I’ll tell you what I actually said.

**Response 1** (delivered in a mildly defensive tone): “I was on the phone with Mac. I didn’t know you wanted to use the phone.”

The problem with this response is that it accepts the child’s right to grill the parent about adult activities. The key is not the question itself, but the disrespectful demand.

**Response 2** (delivered with a mild reprimand): “I didn’t know you were waiting to use the phone. You should let me know. How am I supposed to know?”

This might be an appropriate response to a spouse or another adult peer who has equal rights to the telephone and is therefore free to express annoyance if you are clogging its use. Said to Eric, however, it would have accepted his implied claim of peer status, like a sibling he competes with for use of the shower or TV.

**Response 3** (delivered with a stern reprimand): “Who do you want to call anyway? You are on the phone far too much. You should be doing your homework.”

This counterattack appears strong but misses the main point: The problem of the moment is not Eric’s phone use but his disrespectful question. To simply assert parental authority over his phone use would make him resentful and would not teach him about this disrespectful action or forestall his next.

I’ve made my share of mistakes as a parent, but somewhere I learned to have an instant awareness when one of my children is talking disrespectfully to me—and to make that the point of my response. So here’s what I said, making eye contact and speaking firmly:

*You don’t get to ask me that question, and particularly in that tone of voice.*

The discussion was over. Eric absorbed my comment and then went to the other room to make his phone call. I did not name the person I was on the phone with. I did not defend myself. I did not counterattack. I did not make Eric defend his question. I did not punish him.

**What I did was to directly defend and assert my right to respect as a parent.** And I did not feel angry at him during the rest of the evening. During the subsequent years ahead we had the normal parent-adolescent hassles, but he never spoke disrespectfully to me again.

If I had taken a different path that evening, one that would lead to similar encounters in the future, my son’s adolescence and our family life might have been much different.

Teaching Respect to Young Children

Four-year-old Jason developed the annoying habit of demanding his food. At dinner, he would shout, “Pour me milk!” or “Give me more French fries!”

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It’s not as if Jason had an impulse control disorder. He was a model of appropriate behavior in preschool where the standards for politeness were clear and consistently enforced.

How did Jason’s parents respond to his demanding behavior? Often they tried to shut him up by immediately fetching what he demanded. Other times they got irritated with him and told him to ask nicely—but they still fetched his food without making him ask politely. Psychologists describe this as reinforcing the child’s behavior.

Parents whose children treat them disrespectfully will eventually start to fear and resent their children. Parents will start withdrawing emotionally, or become punitive. They will have explosions of anger they feel bad about later. Or they will become sarcastic and passive-aggressive.

How did Jason’s parents turn around his behavior at meals? They firmly challenged him every time he asked for something rudely and waited for him to politely restate his request before giving him the item. If he refused to ask politely, they withheld the food item and went about finishing the meal. Jason eventually learned the meaning of “polite,” and the incidence of demanding behavior at the table declined drastically.

Why Anger-Free Parenting Doesn’t Work

To many parents, anger is one short step away from verbal and physical abuse of children. But anger is a normal human emotion that signals “something’s got to change here—right now.” Without anger, parents are wishy-washy in the face of their children’s willfulness. Fear of showing anger to our children is at the heart of the impotence problem among many contemporary parents.

Occasional parental anger is necessary.

Recently I observed the following scenario: A boy (about 4) and his mother were walking on the beach. The boy ran ahead. He went under a fence and into a flower garden that was about 6 feet from a 30-foot drop to the railroad tracks below.

As she approached her son, I heard the mother say to him in a very mild tone, “Sweetie, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be back there.”
The Consequences Approach

Another major school of parenting advice from the 1970s (written about extensively by Haim Ginott) would recommend a “consequences” approach. You would give your son a choice: If he continues to stand there, he is choosing to accept a negative consequence you have promised. You could tell him that there will be no more walks this week unless he cooperates.

Laying out consequences and waiting for the child to make a choice is a normal technique for effective parenting. When your teenager won’t do the dishes in a timely fashion, it’s generally better to connect the chore with a consequence—say, no watching TV or talking on the phone that evening—and let the child choose to cooperate. Continued non-cooperation means escalating consequences, until almost all kids will decide it’s less hassle to do the dishes.

A limitation of the consequences approach to discipline, however, is that it is not powerful and immediate enough for some situations. The defiant little boy in the flower bed required a stronger response than the mother laying out the consequences for his continuing to stand there. In moments of willful confrontation, some children don’t care about future consequences—they want things their way right now, thank you. In these situations, discussing future consequences rather than rising to the occasion comes across as weak.

What most of the rational, anger-free parenting advice misses is the importance of occasional angry power assertions by a parent. I say “occasional” because research has clearly pointed out that rigid, authoritarian parenting (“I’m the boss; be quiet and do what you’re told”) tends to breed anxiety and rebellion. Appropriate Power Assertion

What do I mean by appropriately angry power assertion? In the case of the mother and her defiant boy, I would call him by his name and say in a strong, loud voice: “JEFFREY, GET OUT OF THERE RIGHT NOW!” I would be moving towards him as I said these words.

If he did not immediately move back towards the fence, I would shout “COME HERE!” as I arrived at the fence.

If he did not instantly move towards me, I would climb the fence and retrieve him physically. Then I would get down face to face with him, and say:

I am FURIOUS with you. First, you went under a fence and into the flowers—and you know better. Second, you were near your railroad tracks—and you know better. And third, you did not come back when I told you to. You are in big trouble with me.

I would take him home, with no further discussion.

Later in the day, I would talk calmly with him about what happened on that walk, and what level of cooperation I wanted on walks in the future. I would expect him to agree to cooperate better in the future.

There are psychological levels deeper than what I have described, levels that could be explored after the original power assertion is successful. Perhaps the child’s behavior, if it’s unusual for him, reflects the stress of a recent family move. Perhaps he is angry at his mother about something. Perhaps he is testing his newly found 4-year-old independence. On the other hand, if the behavior is chronic, then it also suggests a misalignment of authority between parent and child.

But whatever the deeper meaning of the boy’s risky, defiant behavior, the parent must deal with the immediate situation. If a child is stealing because of a troubled childhood, we must first stop the stealing; then we can talk about the underlying problem.

The new parenting problem is “anger phobia.” We end up with bland parents who refuse to ever show anger to their children. They consequently lack authority and allow their children to walk over them. In my experience as a therapist, however, I have found that such parents can take back their kids if they have a mind to.

Adapted from William Doherty’s Take Back Your Kids. Dr. Doherty is a family therapist and professor, Department of Family Medicine and Community Health at the University of Minnesota. He is the author or editor of 14 books, including The Intentional Family, Take Back Your Marriage, and Putting Family First. See www.drbilldoherty.com. (Click on book titles for hot links.)