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family

No, You Shut Up!

What to do when your kid provokes you into an inhuman rage.

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If you're a parent, you are probably familiar with being provoked into a blood vessel-popping rage that instantly overwhelms any resolution you might have made to stay calm. That's because kids are amazingly good at refining behaviors that they can turn to when they're upset or angry, especially in public, to make their parents even angrier—in fact, insanely angry. Let's just stand back for a moment and appreciate the virtuosity of the 6-year-old who trails along behind you every morning on the way to school wailing that you're mean because you make him wear an uncomfortable backpack or wrinkly socks, or the 9-year-old who demonstrates her budding independence and wit by being rude to you in front of others, or the 12-year-old who during an argument over chores shouts, "You don't care about anybody but yourself! You just want me to do all this stupid stuff around your stupid house because you're so selfish and lazy!" It's as if they had commissioned a study of the most effective ways to set you off and then implemented the findings with great care and foresight.

And yet there you go, rising to the bait. What's your standard move? The hard come-along arm yank? The livid pinch-and-shake combo? The point-by-point counterargument? "*What*? *I'm* selfish? *I'm* lazy? I changed your diapers and picked your nose and sat up with you all night long when you were sick! I work hard all day to support this family, and then I get home and I *clean* and I *cook*. ..."

There's really no satisfying response, is there? Decreeing an extravagantly harsh punishment may immediately address your sense of justice, but it's unlikely to make the annoying behavior go away, and once you calm down, you're unlikely to stick with the punishment, anyway. Grabbing, shaking, hitting, or screaming at your kid may stop the behavior and be cathartic for you, but only for a moment (after which you may well begin to feel bad for losing control of yourself and overreacting), and over time such responses will likely lead to further behavioral problems. Ignoring the unwanted behavior and finding ways to encourage its positive opposite will be most effective in getting rid of the unwanted behavior in the long run, but this approach won't satisfy your overwhelming short-term urge to do something right now that addresses and fits the crime.

It's difficult to work out a satisfying response to flagrant disrespect because you're typically in the grip of at least four distinct, only partially overlapping, and often conflicting motives: an *emotional* urge to do something with the anger surging up inside you, a *moralistic* impulse to dispense justice in proportion to the offense, a *social* obligation to show yourself and your child and any others who might be watching that you don't tolerate such behavior, and a *practical* intent to get rid of the problem so you don't have to put up with such hassles in the future.

When your child stages a scene in front of witnesses, the mixed motives—and the anger, now supercharged by humiliation—grow all the more complex and difficult to handle. Yes, sure, a vast body of psychological research tells you that *any* attention you give to a bad behavior, even if it's in the form of screaming and hitting and grounding your child for the rest of her life, will only reinforce that behavior, so it's best not to react, but your kid just called you an a--hole in front of the neighbors—unless you're B.F. Skinner or the Buddha, ignoring it is not an option. And, anyway, ignoring it won't make it go away. You need to *do* something.

So, what do you do?

Let's consider the immediate, long-term, and side effects of some common and not-so-common responses to a disrespectful provocation by your child.

Shock and Awe: Respond swiftly with justified fury and indignation. This is one of the most common and least effective responses.

Immediate effect: A rage-out on your part could instantly stop the disrespect by interdicting it with your own yelling, screaming, etc., but it's very likely to escalate the confrontation by inviting the child to continue a negative back-and-forth with you, which will in turn inspire further escalation by you—stronger comments, grabbing, slapping—and so on.

Long-term effect: Will not achieve a long-term reduction of the behavior, and its side effects could increase the occurrence of disrespect in the future.

Side effects: You will feel that you have held the line by not tolerating misbehavior, but this momentary satisfaction comes at a huge delayed price. Since the tone and content of your response model how to respond to others, through observational learning you will be teaching your child to do the same, and the force of your reaction (a tsunami of attention to your child's worst behavior) will train the child to continue and even increase the provocation.

The Evil Eye: Stare down your child with a dire expression and say nothing.

Immediate: The stare-down is likely to escalate and continue the child's behavior, and the struggle goes on.

Long term: Will probably not make things worse for very long, so in the long-term it's better than full-bore rage but not as good as walking away.

Side: If your child is doing the yelling and screaming, then your refusal to react at the same angry uncontrolled level provides a useful model and will actually help to develop calmer behavior on the child's part in the long run, but the harsh expression will still be inflammatory.

The Rational Saint: Exhibiting inhuman restraint, go to the child and in a gentle voice explain why what she is doing is not the appropriate way to treat her parents and/or ask her to explain why she's misbehaving so terribly. Like Shock and Awe, a common but largely ineffective response, and when serene self-control evaporates in the heat of battle, the Rational Saint often gives way to Shock and Awe.

Immediate: Your explaining will not make the crisis worse and will help to end it more quickly by not being provocative, which is better than a rage reaction but not likely to change the behavior. If you invite your child to explain, you will probably prolong the crisis, as she will take the opportunity to further elaborate her point: "Because you're a jerk! Didn't you hear me?"

Long term: Your modeling of calm in response to rage will have a positive influence over time, but the effect would be slow to occur, and few humans could keep it up for long.

Side: Your refusal to react may be calming, but that alone will not teach the child the proper behavior. Also, by moving in close to explain, you leave yourself open to being hit or pushed, and few parents can take that without reacting. Still, if you can restrain yourself, you will feel that you are wonderfully controlled and empathetic—and you are.

The Ringmaster: Divert your child's interest to something else to get him out of crisis mode. Hand him a toy or, if he's older, attempt to engage him in discussing whether anyone shreds more rulingly than the guys in DragonForce.

Immediate: Not likely to work at all, but if you present some wildly novel gimmick it could reduce the duration of the misbehavior. Of course, next time you have to come up with a fresh gimmick. No human can keep this up for long.

Long term: No effect. Distraction does not change the likelihood of future occurrences.

Side: Avoids the task of teaching other ways to handle stress, but you do show restraint by not fanning the flames of rage.

The Void: Ignore the provocation and walk away.

Immediate: Withholding all attention de-escalates the child's behavior and so is likely to end the child's comments sooner than would be the case if you responded in a heated fashion.

Long term: Ignoring—known technically as "extinction"—could slightly decrease the likelihood of disrespect over the long-term, but its effect is still weak. The best benefit of this option is your modeling of a nonimpulsive reaction.

Side: You're modeling poise under fire, but you are likely to view it instead as a weak response that passively accepts abuse, so you'll be unhappy with it.

The Mona Lisa: Say nothing, show no emotional reaction, and deploy a slightly amused, faintly dismissive expression that says, in effect, "Pretty good for a novice, but nowhere near good enough to get to me." You have to practice this one in front of a mirror before you use it in action. This response will be relatively effective, but it requires great self-control to carry it off without being drawn into a confrontation or taking it too far into contempt or sarcasm.

Immediate: The Mona Lisa will de-escalate the child's behavior. The child may finish the current diatribe but will probably not go on beyond that.

Long term: Decreases slightly the likelihood of future battles. The Mona Lisa shows the child—more effectively than simple ignoring would—that provocative misbehavior will not get a satisfying rise out of you.

Side: You're asking a lot of yourself, in terms of restraint, because you will feel that you have not taught the child a lesson and that you permitted yourself to be abused, but you will have modeled restraint, the very behavior you wish to teach here.

The Parking Ticket: On balance, the most effective option. Take away a privilege according to a scheme that you have already discussed with the child and walk away. He already knows, because you went over it in a calm moment, that if he speaks disrespectfully to you, for instance, then he will lose a specific privilege that matters to him: a weekend event, a TV show, or computer time. The penalty should take place as close to immediately as possible—within 24 hours—and be brief in duration (no TV tonight, rather than no TV for a week). It should be significant but not harsh; accept in advance that it won't fully satisfy your ticked-off desire to throw the book at him with a prodigious, long-lasting, delayed penalty ("You can't go out for the football team next fall! Happy now?"). When he commits the offense, you say, "You lose X because of the way you are talking to me," and then go to another room, without turning your departure into a dramatic event. The tone is relaxed, almost bureaucratic, not hot or cold fury. When you cue up a reasonable consequence in advance, you're much more likely to end up with one you can stick to. When you improvise a punishment in a towering rage, on the other hand, you often have to renounce it later—when you're calm enough to realize that, for instance, taking away the cell phone for six months just isn't practicable.

Immediate: This option de-escalates by not fostering continuation. Your behavior does not invite a response, and the preordained character of the consequence discourages argument.

Long term: Likely to decrease slightly the occurrence of future provocations and battles.

Side: Although you may still pine to administer a stiffer punishment that more fully meets the severity of the crime, you will feel you have provided a consequence and not tolerated the misbehavior. Bear in mind that a more severe punishment would almost certainly have side effects that would make it harder for you to help improve your child's behavior. Also, you will have modeled a calm, controlled reaction rather than an impulsive, uncontrolled one.

None of these results offers a perfectly satisfactory response (because, in fact, there is none), but the Parking Ticket speaks most practically to the full range of a parent's mixed motives when provoked by a child's misbehavior.

And, of course, if you really want to change your child's behavior and not just endure it, you have to combine crisis-handling techniques with teaching better behavior to replace the problem behavior. Wait until a time when both you and your child are calm and then work with her on how to act when she is angry and in the mood to provoke you. You can decrease the likelihood, over both the short- and long term, that an undesirable behavior—such as flagrant disrespect—will occur. Try some of these.

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1. Problem solving: When you're both in a good mood (out of the blue is fine), propose a problem to your child—"Let's say you're really mad at me"—and together identify a few possible ways he might respond. Three would be great. Discuss with your child in each case what the results of his response would be—that is, how you would respond to his response. A great deal of research supports the efficacy of talking with your child about problem situations and possible positive solutions. When you've discussed the possibilities in advance, the child is much more likely to use one of the solutions you've identified as positive.

2. Point out positive models: When you see (in public, on TV, wherever) good examples of children disagreeing with their parents, children expressing anger without losing it, or parents expressing disapproval, point it out. Label specifically what is happening and why it's good. "You see how mad that kid is at his dad, he's really frustrated and angry, but look what he's doing: He said X and Y, but he didn't yell or scream."

3. In a calm moment, have the child role-play being calm when she's angry—at you or anybody else: It helps to simulate the hot-button situations when everybody's cool. Wait until a quiet moment and then say, "Let's pretend you're mad at me, and let's practice how you can tell me you're mad in a calm, respectful way, so we can make it better." Since your child isn't really mad, she will not find it hard to play her role properly by saying she's angry at you in an appropriate way that doesn't set off a confrontation. When she does it right, offer lots of praise and maybe even a small treat or extra privilege (it can be nominal; for a smaller child, extending bedtime by 10 minutes, for instance) to

reinforce this positive opposite of disrespectful provocation. This kind of practice will give your child a repertoire of appropriate responses to which she can turn when she gets mad, in the same way that having a preordained routine and consequence ready to go (see the Parking Ticket) allows you to stay a little calmer and respond more reasonably when your child's behavior provokes you.

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