

Entitled to Love

As the holidays approach, the excitement and anticipation can be over-whelming for children – and adults too. This is true even if your family doesn't celebrate any of the upcoming holidays. Our consumer-oriented culture goes into over-drive at this time of year and we all have to deal with that. Children and adults are bombarded with the message that we simply must have the latest toy, or gadget or the most fashionable apparel. We need this, we deserve it, and we're entitled to it! These "give me, give me, give me" messages are very powerful and as parents it's not easy to decide where to draw the line about what children need and what children want and how much is too much?

Maybe the holidays are a good time to think about this sense of entitlement and what it might mean for you as parents. We could begin by making a list of what we each think children are entitled to. Most of us would probably agree children are entitled to unconditional love and support. They are entitled to be loved for who they are, not what they do. I think most of us would agree children are entitled to food, shelter, clothing, medical care and education. And I think all children are entitled to live free from hate and war. This list may not be your list, but what's important is to make your own list. Getting clear about what you believe your children are entitled to may help clarify your thoughts about what they're *not* entitled to.

I think a sense of entitlement is learned behavior. It's up to us as parents and as community to help children learn the difference between what they need and are entitled to and what they want and are not entitled to. Let's think about a few every-day examples.

Are children entitled to be free from all responsibility? I think most of us would say "No!", but our actions may not be sending the same message. If you find yourself constantly picking-up after your children, finding lost shoes and homework, taking responsibility for long term projects, doing all the household chores, then you may be sending the message that your children are entitled to a life free of responsibility. Children learn to be responsible by being responsible. When we don't insist that they be responsible, we send the message that either they are not capable of being responsible or they just don't have to be because we'll do it for them. Both those messages could lead to a sense of entitlement.

Are children entitled to have everything they want? I can hear a loud and resounding "NO!" from all of us. But again, sometimes our actions and reactions may be sending a different message. If you're in the grocery store with your child and they want candy or gum, what do you do? If you and your child are shopping for a birthday present for his/her friend, do you end up buying a present for your child too – even just a little one? When one of your children is celebrating a birthday, do the siblings get a present too – even just a little one? Your child has a wish list a mile long for the holidays, are you tempted to make sure he or she has everything on that list? And what's the harm anyway?

Certainly, there is no harm in giving your child a gift – something they really want, but certainly don't need. We all do that. Most of us love to give gifts! But children need to understand they are not *entitled* to gifts even on their birthdays! Real gifts are given freely out of a sense of love and generosity and that's what makes gift-giving and receiving so special. Gifts given out of a sense of desperation or obligation or simply to keep the peace aren't really gifts at all. If we want our children to grow into caring and generous adults we have to teach them now about giving and receiving gifts.

Are children entitled to immediate gratification? Again, I think we would say "No". Children should learn to delay gratification. But are we as parents and community consistently sending that message? Do we encourage our children to save their allowance so they can buy what they want in the future? And if they spend all their allowance do we buy whatever they wanted anyway? The Assets Model identifies "delaying gratification" as a "thriving" behavior. Thriving behaviors are more-or-less the opposite of risk behaviors. They're the behaviors associated with the **best outcomes** for children and teens. Helping our children learn to wait and save will serve them well all their lives.

Combating a sense of entitlement isn't an easy task. Parents are up against a whole legion of very smart advertisers who are paid to make all of us feel dissatisfied and unhappy with what we have. As Mary Pipher says in her book, The Shelter of Each Other, "Advertising trivializes the important and elevates the trivial." Advertisers send the message that you are entitled to whatever you want and you are entitled to it right now. And their most insidious message is that once you get all these things you want, then you'll be happy. Parents and community have to work hard and continuously to counter that message and help children learn that although what they can buy can be good and fun and exciting, those things can never really make them happy. The things that make children happy are the same things they're entitled to – things like love and security and connectedness - and they're not for sale.

Have a wonderful holiday season – take some time to enjoy it!