



Works in Progress

A parenting report card: needs improvement

By Kelli Wheeler

A horrible realization dawned on me the other day: My children aren't perfect. The just-as-brutal follow-up conclusion was, if my children are not perfect, than I am not doing a Mother of the Year Award job raising my children. I was already preparing my speech.

Now of course I don't think my children are flawless, but I did think my high expectations of manners, polite interaction and, let's face it, likability, were being reasonably well met. It occurred to me that my children are turning out to be the equivalent of book smart, but not street smart.

In theory, they are prepared to be absolute darlings with such teachings as don't (yell, grab, hit) use your words; cover your mouth when you cough; say please and thank you; and friends share. But my kids had been trying out these teachings mostly on each other under strict review from Mommy and Daddy. When they hit

the playdate circuit, despite all the repetition, rehearsal and occasional pop quizzes, everything they learned apparently was instantly forgotten.

Case in point: Sharing suddenly came with clauses and fine print. "But I don't want them to play with that; it's new," said my son. And, "They can't play with that because it's special."

So, to see where this logic would take us, I said, "OK. What's not special then?" I was met with extended silence. Then, "Why can't they play with Whitney's toys?"

Meanwhile, the friends had gone off to Whitney's room since Logan's had been stamped with museum status. Whitney, not quite grasping the concept that when you invite friends over to play you actually play with them, was screaming one decibel shy of breaking the sound barrier, "Now look what you did! Get out of my room! Get out of my room!"

It didn't get any better. Coping and decision-making skills, I soon recognized, were also low and close to nonexistent under pressure to

actually use them. When Logan redesignated his swords as "not so special" and regrouped his friends, then Whitney had an Academy Award-nominating breakdown of "Nobody will play with me!" Once I got her to stop looking in the mirror to see how she looked while she was crying, I tried to reintroduce the lesson If You Want a Friend, Then You Need to BE a Friend.

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Next, Logan thought it would be cool to show his friends how much fun it is to throw blocks around. He didn't start to see the ill-advisedness of his decision until blocks started bouncing off his head and nobody listened to his cries of cease-fire because they were too busy laughing at each slapstick moment and agreeing, "This *is* fun!"

I was finally saved from continuous evidence of my failure as a teacher of manners, morals and values when I served lunch and put in a video to distract them. I reviewed my parental progress report for the day and knew it was time to shred the speech:

Display and Use of Good Manners F
Sharing: F

Making Good Choices: F
Art of Distraction: A+

I was actually glad to have witnessed these failures in the privacy of my own home and away from the pitying glances of my peers—although I cringed at the thought of our little guests' interpretations and how it would be reported back home. I could just see the mothers' confused faces as they tried to make sense of it all. "You weren't allowed to touch anything in the whole house and Whitney was in timeout the whole visit?"

If this horrible play date had taken place at the house of my children's friends, I know I wouldn't have gotten a true reporting of how awful they could be. I'm sure, trying to spare my feelings, the mother would have given me a mild-mannered report along the lines of "Well, there was a little trouble sharing, but they were fine." Nobody wants to be the one to say, "Your children were bratty, bossy, overly emotional and obviously living in cave-like conditions for the last three years of their lives." Plus, a true test of your children's manners and likability doesn't really occur in an unfamiliar environment. Their shyness and reservation in a new situation can be easily confused with politeness and compatibility.

Later, when I had banished my kids to naptime (I really wanted to lock them in their rooms until they emerged well-mannered, polished adults), something occurred to me: They aren't adults—a long way from it at 3 and 5 years old. When I pushed my adult expectations aside for a moment, I was able to see that what I thought was unacceptable behavior

for preschoolers was actually normal behavior. I didn't have to like it, but just accept that they are works in progress.

Even though I wanted my kids to be a similar representation of the adult I had become and mirror my own values, I had to remind myself that it took me a good 15 years to get there myself. It took a lot of mistakes, missteps, embarrassing situations and even punishment to find my way. It also took the guidance of two parents who loved me enough to not only weather those hard times with me, but also put in the time and the patience to instruct me, model for me, correct me and redirect me with firm but loving hands.

I imagine my mom and dad's parenting report card at times had a few deficiencies on it thanks to me, but they gave me the room and the time I needed to grow up and learn from my mistakes while still letting me be a kid. And I think I turned out all right.

Now I just need to step back and remove my adult expectations from

my own kids and put achievable kid goals in front of them. I need to put the proper timeline on it. I need to accept that there are going to be bumps and setbacks along the way. I can't expect my kids to learn all lessons before they're capable. I need to look at them with hope in their potential, not judgment of their failures, and trust that they are works in progress.

And so am I. One day, when my kids have achieved my hopes and dreams for them of becoming well-rounded, contributing, personable adults, I hope to have become a more open-minded, patient and forgiving person. And maybe then I can work on my speech for Lifetime Achievement Award.

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