



by Karen Stephens

Coping with Power Struggles Requires Patience and Resolve

Four-year-old Danny didn't want to pick up his blocks for lunchtime. His first attempt to duck the chore was to berate me with an impulsive, "I hate you." He was hoping I'd be insecure enough as his teacher to cave in and not expect the blocks to be picked up, just in order to maintain his love.

He tried emotional blackmail, pure and simple. But his attempt failed. By ignoring the distracting remark, I kept on target and focused only on his frustration, and the appropriate expression of it. I was able to stand my ground so Danny would learn he'd be held responsible for picking up his toys. (Not to mention a lifetime of other much more important responsibilities!)

When a child insults an adult with a vindictive and emotionally charged comment like, "I hate you!" adults sometimes fly off the handle. But to lose composure would be letting a child control the situation. It turns the situation into a brawl rather than using it as a constructive learning opportunity. (Emphasize on "constructive". Blowing one's top in reaction to such a childish remark merely teaches poor self-control.)

Actually, it was relatively easy for me to side-step Danny's "I hate you!" response. It took two firm reminders, and a clearly stated consequence; but he did cooperate and pick up his blocks. In fact, it was a brief interaction that was quickly followed by lunch. Similar power-struggles happen a hundred times a day when living and working with preschoolers. The momentary struggle didn't disrupt our fundamental good relationship. Danny pushed, I clarified the situation without budging, and it was over. But if Danny had been my own child, I'd lay odds that the interchange could have blossomed into a long, drawn-out and explosive ordeal. A "scene" is what passer-bys would call it. (Embarrassing humiliation is what you'd call it!)

Had I been Danny's parent, he might have quickly followed up his "I hate you!" comment with: "You're the meanest mommy in the world," "Daddy never makes me pick up. He's nicer than you," "Grandma really loves me. She wouldn't make me eat stupid lunch," and/or "Bobby's mom lets him leave his toys out ALL day. She's a good mommy." Danny didn't lay any of those guilt-trips on me. And because I was his child care teacher, and not his parent, it was simpler for me to focus on the real source of the conflict. From there I could teach appropriate alternate behavior. I could do that because I didn't have to worry about the highly-charged nuances of a parent-child relationship.

Over the years, I've found that children test parents with emotional and manipulative behavior much more often than they do child care professionals. I'm not sure why, but I have some guesses. Teachers work with children to guide and teach them for a short time, not for a lifetime. In contrast, parents had children to love and be loved, for keeps and forever. Because of that long-term, emotional bond, parents are much more vulnerable to children's unhappiness and internal struggles.

Children know parents more intimately, so they quickly learn to push their *bot buttons* with uncanny precision. Young parents, new to childrearing, are often so tired they end up being inconsistent, which reinforces kids' testing behavior. And of course, many late-in-life parents are just so grateful to finally have children that they end up coddling them when they should be holding them accountable.

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There are other issues that cloud parents' judgment when dealing with children's testing behavior. For instance, if Danny's parents were insecure about their authority, he would dig his heels in for a power-struggle. If he had parents who succumbed to excessive guilt over any number of issues, ranging from not spending enough time with him, to working outside the home, to living on a limited income, he would have played on that guilt until they gave in to his desires. Some life circumstances set children up to become masters of manipulation. For instance, when parents fight bitterly, or act out the drama of a rancorous divorce, it's especially seductive for kids to use emotional blackmail to play one parent against the other. Parents, acting like children themselves, don't set good role models for children to do otherwise.

If parents, based on guilt or misinformation, believe their child has a *right* to be happy every waking minute, they are sitting ducks for kids' manipulation. It is NOT a parent's job to make children happy. And in fact, it's not good for kids to be happy all the time. Moments of temporary sadness or frustration teach children how to deal with disappointment and the natural and inevitable ups and downs of life. Giving into children's whims so they don't experience unhappiness reinforces their tendencies toward manipulation.

Establishing expectations and enforcing consequences IS an act of love. Never let a child, of any age, make you think differently.

Avoiding all those emotional land mines isn't easy, but parents should remain as firm and objective as possible when responding to kids' inappropriate behavior. Parents should not lower standards whenever children pull on (or try to sever!) heartstrings. Establishing expectations and enforcing consequences IS an act of love. Never let a child, of any age, make you think differently. Love does have expectations; and one of them is respectful, cooperative behavior. Parents have an obligation to establish behavior guidelines that help children cope with life, now and in their futures. When a parent is confident that expectations are clear and reasonable, there is no call to buckle under children's emotional blackmail. If not nipped in the bud in the early years, manipulating feelings can become compulsive, destructive behavior and a permanent crutch when confronting conflict. In most cases, when a child name calls or back talks, parents should focus on sorting out the basic issue that led to the volatile feelings. From that vantage point, parents can guide children in dealing with the real source of conflict.

Danny's problem wasn't that he hated me; it was he didn't want to stop the fun of playing to pick up his toys. He had to learn to live with that minor frustration and disappointment. Once our point of disagreement was identified, it could be addressed in an honest and forthright manner.

As every parent finds out, children are persistent about what they want and when they want it—whether it be a toy, or getting out of a chore. To achieve their goal, they'll go for a parent's weakness or *sore spot* every time. Is that fair? Of course not, but remember, children are not born with ethics, they must be learned. Over time, children can learn that the end does not justify the means. You are their designated teacher.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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