

“DADDY, DO YOU THINK I’M NICE?”

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

Last week I spoke with a young mother named Susie who indicated that she is having some problems with her 7-year-old son, Simon. Apparently he does not like being told what to do. When she explains to him that she is the parent and he needs to mind her, he interprets this as his mother being disrespectful to him, because she is not taking into account his wishes or thoughts on the situation. She also told me that Simon is becoming sassy and belligerent at home, and that no disciplinary measure they have applied so far has changed his attitude.

My first thoughts were to try and assess the big picture. What was going on in and around Simon that had caused him to get to this point? Maybe he had been liberally spoiled in earlier years and now hates it when he is asked to do anything. I asked Susie about the parenting style she and her husband had adopted and she said she thought that part of the problem was inconsistency. Susie is appearing to be the stern one because her husband only applies the rules sometimes.

I talked with Susie about the need to find common ground on what values they want to uphold in their family and to write them down. I explained that it is imperative that both parents agree on their response to the violated values once their children had been taught their expectations. I talked with her about introducing each value slowly, being prepared for mistakes to be made and by praising her children liberally. I suggested that since respect was a major issue that this value be introduced first.

We talked about the importance of routine. Although Susie did say that she had established a routine, I wondered if she and her husband had explained the reason that when everyone shares set responsibilities each day there is more time for family fun. Each person is contributing to a happy, positive home environment.

As we talked, Susie offered what I consider a major key to Simon’s issues. He asked his father, “Daddy do you think I am nice?” His father said, “No, I don’t.” I am sure his dad was relaying his frustration in relation to Simon’s belligerence, but the message Simon likely got was, ‘No matter what I do, I am not going to meet my parents’ expectations. They just don’t like me.’

Sometimes we make sweeping statements without really thinking them through. It is vital that we qualify what we mean when such poignant questions are asked. Kids need to be assured that they are loved unconditionally. Assurance of worth comes from being praised, being hugged, being trusted with responsibility, being listened to and being believed in. When a child spends time with each parent on a regular basis, concerns and struggles can be sensed and

talked through so that issues do not escalate out of control. Simon's dad would have been better to have responded to him by saying, "Simon, I love you very much. There are times that your behavior is disrespectful and unacceptable. This is how I want you to respond in the future..." Simon would then have been reassured that his relationship with his dad was solid. He would know what his parents expected and be given an example of how to respond appropriately.

When kids show consistently negative behavior, it really is important to check your 'praise barometer'. Kids respond well to praise. Let's face it. We all crave it. Simon's behavior will more than likely change dramatically as his parents work on establishing their values, allow training time, play with him, talk through his frustrations and praise him frequently.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.