

Top 10 Parenting Pitfalls

By Heather Hatfield
WebMD Feature

Reviewed By Ann Edmundson, MD

Parenting is no walk in the park, especially on the days when your little angel, whether he's 6 or 16, decides to act like a demon.

If it's the temper tantrum in the toy store over the latest video game, or the daily fight over math homework, or the food fight in a restaurant on Friday night, parents have a choice: To react in a way that will only make matters worse when the bell rings for round two, or respond like the calm, cool, and collected parents we see on TV shows like *Nanny 911* -- after weeks of live-in, televised therapy.

What is the secret to their success, other than public humiliation?

"Overall, with any scenario, the worst thing a parent can do that helps bratty behavior blossom is to not set clear expectations and not have consequences to a child's behavior," says Jenn Berman, PhD, a psychologist in private practice in Beverly Hills who specializes in family therapy.

Experts offer advice on the top 10 parenting pitfalls that will help you raise a well-behaved child -- instead of a brat.

The TV Toy

It's Saturday morning, you're doing laundry, the kids are watching their morning cartoons, and it happens: Your middle child sees the toy of his dreams on TV, starts in with the begging, and doesn't let up.

Brat-building response: "A lot of kids see things on TV -- games, food, or dolls -- and then they start nagging until they get it," says Berman. "If you run to the store to buy your child exactly what they want, then you've taught them that nagging is an effective tool for getting their way."

Angel-building response: "You can say, 'It's a cool toy. Let me find out how much it is, and I can help you save your allowance for it,'" says Berman. "You are teaching your child to work toward a goal --instead of giving in. It helps the child learn about goals, saving money, and it's a good response for both parent and child."

The Bribes

You're having your boss over for dinner on Friday night, and while you begged your sister to watch the kids for the evening, no such luck. Is it time to start bribing them to be quiet with expensive sneakers or the latest handbag from Dolce & Gabbana?

Brat-building response: "Parents often try to buy good behavior by getting their kids expensive gifts," says Berman. "And then they say, 'I don't understand why she isn't better behaved? I get her everything she wants!'" These cool gifts lose their meaning and the child feels entitled and less well behaved."

Angel-building response: "Allow the child the opportunity to earn what you give them, and set limits around their expectations," says Berman. "Tell them, 'You can get one pair of shoes within this amount of money.' Teach them early on how to make choices."

The Sleepover

Her bags are packed and she's ready to go to the sleepover, except for one thing: She forgot to ask for your permission.

Brat-building behavior: Even though she's screaming bloody murder, if you let her get away with it once, she'll do it again, and again and again. "You've taught your child that screaming long enough will get her what she wants, and now you've created your own private hell," Berman tells WebMD.

Angel-building behavior: "As a parent, it is always considerate and helpful to let a child know your thinking, so your child knows why you don't want her to go to the sleepover, so it doesn't seem like you are being unreasonable," says Berman. "But if you shared your reasoning, and she keeps yelling, you have to stand your ground."

The Divide and Conquer

You've been very clear and given your son a decisive NO when he asked, "Can I go to the birthday party, puh-lease?" His tactic? To ask dad.

Brat-building behavior: "When a child gets 'no' from mom, and 'yes' from dad, it teaches them they can divide and conquer," says Berman. "They learn that they can divide their parents and fool them, and if they are manipulative enough, they can get what they want."

Angel-building behavior: "Enforce in advance," says Berman. "Tell a child that if you ask mom and get 'no,' and then you ask dad and get 'yes,' the 'no' still stands, and your punishment for asking us both is xyz."

The Screaming in the Store

We've all seen it: The screaming child in the toy store. He wants the latest video game, and he's not shutting up until he has it.

Brat-building response: "If you give in, you teach your child that when he acts like a brat he can get what he wants," says Dan Kindlon, author of *Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age*. "You're reinforcing his bratty behavior."

Angel-building response: "There are two ways to approach it," says Kindlon, who teaches child psychology at Harvard University.

First, plan ahead, and second, plan a response.

"Make a deal with them beforehand -- you are going to buy them something and it's only going to cost \$5," says Kindlon. "Or tell them, 'I'm going shopping for your cousin and this is not for you.' Give them structure beforehand so they're not caught off guard. Then, if they still explode in the store, ignore them, say you are not going to listen anymore. Then you leave the store and take them with you."

The Car Ride

You have 300 miles in front of you when your youngest explodes in a temper tantrum that rivals the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius.

Brat-building response: "If you just start yelling and screaming at her, it's not going to help," Kindlon tells WebMD. "And a major mistake most parents make is to give the child an ultimatum, like 'If you keep this up you're not going to watch TV when you get home.'"

But even though their tantrum continues ad nauseam, the TV goes on when the family gets home because the parent is beaten down.

"This teaches a child that the best way to get what they want is to behave like a brat," says Kindlon.

Angel-building response: "Plan ahead," says Kindlon "Bring snacks, games, and things to keep them entertained in the car. If that doesn't work, help them understand the consequences of their behavior. Again, with the ultimatum, if you use one, stick to it: 'If you don't stop behaving this way, you don't get to watch TV when you get home.'"

The Lack of Respect

Your kid just called you a name, or talked back, or showed you some all-around lack of what Aretha Franklin likes to call R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

Brat-building response: "If you sink to their level and use the same language back at them, you're modeling bad behavior," says Kindlon. "You're teaching them the wrong way to deal with something and someone when you're upset."

Angel-building response: "Dock a kid fifty cents on their allowance when they use a tone of voice or an inappropriate word you don't like," says Kindlon. "Maintain your cool. Show mature behavior, and give them consequences for their bad behavior."

The Restaurant

You just sat down to dinner with your husband and three kids at a local restaurant when the outbursts start.

Brat-building behavior: "What happens is there is talk of punishment and threats at the restaurant, like 'I'm going to take away your play date on Sunday,' or 'No TV for a week,'" says Paul Donahue, PhD, director of Child Development Associates in Scarsdale, N.Y. "Punishments don't work as well as a rewards, or the threats are idle because the kid knows that the parent won't take away their TV."

Angel-building response: "Before you get to the restaurant, tell your child what you expect in terms of behavior," says Donahue. "If your behavior is good, here is what privilege will come your way, whether its dessert at the restaurant, or that they get to watch a movie when they get home."

Kids need to understand that their privileges are based on their behavior, explains Donahue.

"While I'm not suggesting you bribe your kids or take them to Toys 'R' Us because they sit at the dinner table, they need to understand that the things they enjoy are privileges and they can have those things if they behave well," says Donahue. "Kids have to have an understanding that good behavior is expected, and if they behave well, good things will come their way."

The Morning Routine

It's hard enough for you to get out of bed at 6 a.m., let alone get your two kids out of bed. Should you let them sleep late, just this once?

Brat-building response: "Sometimes kids come downstairs in the morning, they watch TV, they get around to eating their breakfast, they get dressed, the process gets delayed, mom or dad gets frustrated and angry, and maybe they make the bus, maybe the don't," says Donahue. Better yet, the whole routine starts over again the next day.

Angel-building response: "Kids shouldn't come down and watch TV or play a video game first thing in the morning," says Donahue. "It's like saying you get to have this fun experience before you get dressed, brush your teeth, or do your work. You have to take care of your responsibilities first."

The Homework

As your child gets older and wiser, his pile of homework grows -- as does the frustration you feel in making sure he gets it all done.

Brat-building response: "We want our kids to do well in school, and yet we are not clear that homework takes precedent over a play date or after-school activities," says Donahue. "So then the homework gets left until after dinner, and then it's diminishing returns: they're tired, and it's getting much more difficult to get them to do it, and they don't have incentive to get it done."

Angel-building response: "There needs to be a reasonable structure for homework," says Donahue. "Say to your kids, 'At 3 p.m. you get to play, but at 4 p.m., you sit down and do your homework.' It's especially important

in most families that homework get done before dinner. Set the structure in place so when they are older and they have more activities, they know they still need to get homework done before dinner."

Parenting Tips

No matter the scenario, here are tips for dealing with parenting pitfalls:

Mean business. "Speak to your child like you mean business, and send clear messages when you're communicating with your kids," says Donahue.

Stick to your guns. "The toughest thing is to have endurance," says Donahue. "Stick to your guns, even when the kids are whining and pushing your buttons. Kids know that if we have a history of not sticking to what we say, they're going to push and push. Have the endurance and the strength and the energy to keep up with them."

Plan ahead. "Parents have to do a better job of helping kids to anticipate the behavior that is expected of them beforehand," Donahue tells WebMD. "When you're in the middle of a situation, you're busy and rushing and don't think about it, and then things can get out of control."

Take care of yourself. "Sleep more, exercise, and take care of yourself," says Donahue. "Parenting is extremely exhausting work."

Published May 15, 2006.

Sources: Jenn Berman, PhD, psychologist, Beverly Hills, Calif. Paul Donahue, PhD, director, Child Development Associates, Scarsdale, N.Y. Dan Kindlon, professor of, child psychology, Harvard University; author, *Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age*.

© 2006 WebMD Inc. All rights reserved.