

# Am I Spoiling My Child?

Parenting a young child is a challenging task for new parents. From the time the baby arrives, parents want to do the right things. One big worry parents often have is whether they are spoiling their child. It's common for parents to ask, "If I let him have what he wants, am I spoiling him?" Relatives and friends have been known to say, "You're going to spoil that child if you always pick her up when she cries!"

But, what does it mean to be spoiled? Most people agree that a spoiled child is self-centered and demanding, inconsiderate of others, and unpleasant to be around. The classic spoiled child sees himself and his needs as more important than anything else and does everything he can to get what he wants. In this publication, we will talk about the kinds of things young children do that make parents wonder if they are raising spoiled children. We will also talk about how you can encourage your children to behave in ways that are self-confident rather than self-centered, cooperative rather than controlling, and considerate rather than demanding.



## Can I Spoil My Baby?

Some people believe that comforting a crying baby will just encourage her to cry more. This is a myth—babies cry for a reason! A baby cannot feed herself or calm herself when she is hungry or in pain. Her cries are signals that she needs help. You cannot spoil your

infant by meeting these needs. In fact, prompt attention to their needs gives babies confidence that their world is safe and predictable. Many people are surprised to learn that babies whose parents respond promptly to their cries actually cry less than other babies.

Some people believe that parents who drop everything in order to comfort a crying infant teach a baby that he is in charge and can control his parents. This is also a myth. The fact is that babies are unable to think about how their behavior affects their parents. They cannot think about getting what they want like older children and adults do. Babies are dependent upon the good will of their caregivers. When parents respond to their babies' genuine needs for comfort and care, they are not spoiling their children. They are building a good foundation for the capable, caring people their children will become.

As babies mature physically and socially, parents' expectations need to change. Because parents have responded sensitively to their needs during the first 3 to 6 months, babies are better able to calm themselves in some situations and may not need the same kind of care as when they were younger. A fussy 7-month-old, for example, may not need to be picked up and carried around when he cries. Instead, he may be able to calm himself if he's given a toy to play with or the opportunity to crawl around on the floor. As the baby grows, you will want to be on the lookout for the growing number of things that he can do for himself. Try to avoid getting into a habit of doing things for your children that they can do for themselves.

No matter how skillful babies become at doing things for themselves, however, they have some needs that only others can satisfy—plenty of love, attention, and affection. Babies thrive on the kind and loving attention of their caregivers. In fact, research tells us that parental warmth and affection is very important to how children

develop physically, mentally, and socially. What can you do to show warmth and love? Here are a few suggestions.

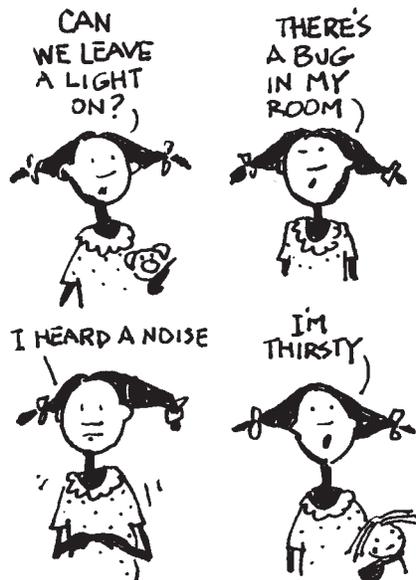
- Hold your baby.
- Rock him.
- Cuddle your baby.
- Play with him.
- Talk to him.
- Give your baby lots of love and attention.

Can you think of any others?

## Spoiled Children Or Growing Children?

Sometimes adults think children who do unpleasant or annoying things are spoiled. But what adults see as bad behavior may simply be normal behavior for a child at that particular age and developmental stage. For example, it is not unusual for a 2-year-old who can't have something she badly wants to throw a tantrum. This is unpleasant and irritating, but it does not mean the child is spoiled.

Children do things that are irritating and obnoxious. Throwing tantrums, ordering people around, and testing the limits parents set for them are just normal ways young children behave at times. A toddler,



for example, is just beginning to use his improving language and physical skills to meet his own needs. His attempts may be pretty clumsy, but understanding parents see the annoying aspects of their toddler's attempts at independence as part of growing up. They see the tantrum as a sign of a frustrated child, not a sign of a spoiled child. Wise parents recognize that with time, patience, and parental guidance young children learn more acceptable ways of communicating and getting their wants and needs met.

## Too Little Attention Can Cause Spoiled Behaviors

While it is true that very young children may behave poorly because they don't yet have the skills to act otherwise, some things parents do may also contribute to poor behavior. Even as children grow and are able to do many things for themselves, they never outgrow the need for their parents' positive attention. Be generous with the time and encouragement you offer young children. They benefit from hearing about your good feelings and positive attitudes. Such attention makes a child feel accepted as a person. Your warmth and affection will also encourage your child to respond more positively to your guidance.

Children who don't get enough positive attention may try to get it in ways that irritate their parents—tantrums, whining, and clinging. It may be hard for adults to understand, but to young children, the attention of their parents is so important that even the attention of an angry parent is preferable to not being noticed at all.



If you are worried that your children are spoiled, ask yourself about the kinds of attention you give them. Do you spend a lot of time telling them what to do or not do? Do you give children positive attention when they are well-behaved? Parents who find themselves focusing on the negative things children do also need to notice them when they are happy and occupied. For example, "Denise, that's a tall building you've made!" "Son, you look like you are really enjoying that book." Take time to appreciate something about your children each day. For example, "Sondra, I notice you have a real talent for finding things." "William, thank you for keeping your toys picked up."

Regularly offering kind words and attention removes the need for your children to demand attention in less acceptable ways. If you would like more ideas for giving your child positive attention, other publications in this series may be helpful. See especially Extension publications HE-681, "Enjoying Each Child As An Individual," and HE-684, "Building A Positive Relationship With Your Child."

## When Too Much Attention Causes Spoiled Behaviors

Sometimes children act spoiled when parents do too much. Don't continue to do things for your children that they can physically do for themselves. For example, most preschool-age children can dress themselves, brush their hair, and put their own toys away. To do these things regularly for children teaches them to feel they deserve such service all the time. Few children learn to show appreciation for these efforts. Instead, they often become impossible to satisfy, thinking there is no limit to what they can demand. Parents who feel exhausted and unappreciated may find that they have made their children dependent on them. In that case, you need to encourage children to do as much as their age and abilities allow them. Wise parents will do this in a step-by-step manner, starting out with suggestions that the child and parent complete the task together. As children understand what is expected of them, parents can remove their help little by little. It will take some time, but you can teach children to gradually become more self-reliant.

## Not Setting Limits Can Cause Spoiled Behaviors

Some parents who may be very good at allowing their children to be independent may not be good at setting clear and firm limits for behavior. Children easily discover rules that can be broken if their protest is long and loud enough. Parents allow this to happen for different reasons.

- Some parents just want to avoid the hassle of a conflict with their children. It's easier for them to let the rules slide than to deal with the fuss.
- For other parents, it is hard to refuse their children anything, because they don't want them to be unhappy. These parents think "unhappy children" equals "bad parents."
- Still others are afraid their angry children will not love them. The fact is that children want to know that their parents are in charge; they need structure and limits.

Parents who set rules and then do not enforce them very often have children who think that rules don't apply to them. Not only are these children hard to live with, but they may be disliked by other children and put at a disadvantage when they

enter school. Caring parents firmly and fairly require their children to follow rules that have been made clear ahead of time. Doing this encourages responsibility in children and teaches them not to hurt or behave disrespectfully to others. If you would like to know more about setting limits and rules for young children, another publication in this series, HE-719, "Helping Young Children Behave," will give you more information.

For young children, learning the rules takes patient guidance from parents. Remember, it's harder for a child to follow the rules when he is sick, tired, hungry, or finds himself in an unfamiliar or exciting new environment. Parents' expectations in these situations need to be more flexible. It may take longer to put a child to bed if he is sleeping at grandma's house. A child may fight more with others if he is feeling ill or cranky. It is still appropriate to expect the child to go to bed or that he not hit others when angry, but in these situations understanding parents will recognize that they need to take a more active role than usual to help children do what is expected.

## Good Parenting Behaviors Avoid Spoiling

Raising children who are self-reliant, cooperative, and considerate rather than spoiled is a challenging but rewarding process. Parents who succeed know how children grow and what to expect of their children at different ages. They are able to respond to their children's genuine needs for care and comfort. They recognize when the limits they set need to change.

Good parents know how powerful their positive attention, affection, and support is to their children's willingness to be cooperative. They also recognize how important setting limits and simple rules is for helping young children to understand and do what is expected of them.



Knowing all these things is important. But even wise parents find that it's not always easy to know if they are doing the right things every time. Parenting is a balancing act that asks you to decide many things at once. How much attention and how much discipline does my child need right now? Whose needs should I meet first? How will what I do now affect what happens later?

Sometimes you will lose your balance. You will make mistakes. The important thing is not to be perfect, but to learn a little more and do a little better the next day. Be patient with your child and with yourself. In time, your steady guidance will help your young child grow into a responsible and considerate youngster.



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