

BE A CONFIDENT PARENT

Parents need to have confidence in themselves and realize that they are the experts on their family. Earlier generations of parents confidently exercised leadership and looked to experienced family members for guidance and support. There were grandparents, aunts, nuns, etc. who were naturally confident and could pass on habits of confident parenting. The chain was broken in the Cultural Tsunami of the sixties which questioned all authority and promoted individualism and self-expression. This coupled with a trend of looking for experts who can tell us how to live resulted in parents lacking confidence in their own knowledge, experience and judgment.

Because all of us as parents have the goal of raising children who'll become responsible adults, we need to confidently reclaim our role as parents. Some of the ways in which we go about doing this are setting boundaries and limits. In the earliest days of our children's lives, we provide them with structure and help them set limits to their behavior. As parents, we have to set limits with wisdom and love, and courageously guide our child's natural inclination to explore, whether they are toddlers or adolescents. Inevitably, children will test those limits. As parents, we must have the fortitude to stand firm. Obviously, we wouldn't allow the toddler to poke something into the wall outlet to learn of the wonders of electricity. We need to confidently set limits for our children throughout their growing years.

Unfortunately, many parents today have lost confidence in their ability to raise children who will become responsible adults. In fact, William J. Doherty, an expert in the area of family life, suggests that the current generation of parents are ". . . the most confused and insecure." We live in a society where parents, feeling so dissatisfied with their role as parents, have often emotionally resigned their role as parents. William Doherty suggests that this happened not because we aren't devoted or caring or sensitive. In fact, if anything parents now are much more sensitive than parents of past generations. This trend toward being more sensitive in our parenting approach is part of the fallout from the anti-authoritarian cultural upheaval of the sixties and seventies which saw the past as bad old days of repressive parenting. What we have instead is a generation of parents who are afraid to set limits or, heaven forbid, get angry out of fear of upsetting their children, and parents shaped by a consumer-driven society.

In his book, *Take Back Your Kids: Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times*, William Doherty offers the following observations:

- We no longer want our children to grow up in fear of our anger, but we now live in fear of theirs.
- We support our children's right to express their ire and frustration, but don't know when they cross the line into disrespect.
- We are expert at finding community activities for our children to participate in, but don't know when to say "enough."
- We are better at knowing what to buy for our children than what to deny them.
- When dealing with schools, we are better at advocating for our children, but fail to side with the school when our children's behavior is out of line.

In a consumer-driven society, children look to their parents simply as providers of goods and services. This consumer mind-set is also in our schools and our churches. We live in a society where the idea of sin and personal accountability has been lost. In this new unstable world of parenting where children are consumers of parental services and parents are expected to keep the customer (the kid) satisfied, any sense of responsibility on the part of the child gets lost.

In addition to this consumer mind-set that has influenced our approach to parenting, there exists what Doherty refers to as the therapeutic influence; a belief that began in the 70's that suggests that parents should be consistently attentive, accepting, non-directive and non-

judgmental. With this came the suggestion that parents shouldn't deal with the immediate behavior but should help the child explore the underlying cause for their behavior. This is unfortunate. Children know when they are out of step and that is when they benefit from a parent or other adult's assertive and confident intervention.

In a stable world, children are expected to not only receive from their parents and their teachers, but they are expected to likewise contribute to the world around them. It is expected that they will contribute to the common good of the home, looking after younger siblings and do chores without expectation of compensation, and that they will assume personal responsibility for their school work.

We should expect our children to contribute to the common good of the home and the school and assume personal responsibility for their decisions and actions in both. Children need and want limits, boundaries, and the predictability that comes with assertive and confident parenting. The ambiguity that comes with the wishy-washy, keeping my child happy approach to parenting in the end does not make for happy, contented children. Instead, you have a child who tests the limits and approaches every situation from a posture of "me first." Children also need us to stand behind the authority of others, such as teachers, coaches, referees, choir directors, etc.

It is important as parents to free yourself of some popular myths regarding parenting:

- If I assert myself or raise my voice, my child will be traumatized or turn against me. This simply is not true. A loving and involved parent being assertive or raising their voice when providing discipline contributes to children growing into successful and responsible adults.
- A second myth we encounter is that each child needs to be allowed to express themselves freely; we should avoid asking them to conform to certain social standards. We should expect our children to act in ways that are counter to how they authentically feel, such as insisting your adolescent child stop cursing at you. These situations, should they occur, are not about infringing upon the child's need for self-expression. It's about who the parent is and who is the child; it's about common simple courtesy between two people.
- Another myth is that, as parents, we really don't have much influence over our teenager. They should be given the opportunity to make their own choices even though it runs counter to what we think is best, e.g., "Well, ya know, they're going to drink anyway" or "Boys will be boys." An overwhelming amount of research tells us that no one has more influence on your children than you do. The truth is that parents who talk to their children about making responsible choices concerning drugs, alcohol, and sexual behavior are less likely to have children making unhealthy choices in those areas. Trust your common sense that if you set the standard they more than likely will do those things you expect.

Aware of this, let's take a look at the real job of a confident parent. Our expectations should be grounded solidly in our own behavior and beliefs as adults. If, for instance, we don't attend church regularly, it's going to be quite unreasonable to expect anything different from our children. A friend of mine who had attended one of these financial guru seminars suggested to me that the secret to financial planning is in being long-term in your perspective. Similarly, parenting efforts should be focused upon an everlasting legacy. Our parenting efforts will have an eternal influence upon those children God entrusted to our care.

Your confident parenting needs to help children deal with corrosive cultural forces:

- The advertising media should certainly be at the top of any parent's list of things to be on guard against. One of the most frequent sources of conflict between children and parents seems to be that of purchases. And this often gets played out with a tug-of-war between parent and child with the parent too often caving in, thereby, teaching the child that all good things come to those who whine long enough.

- Television viewing is and has been for sometime a major influence on our children. Parents need to consider what values are being allowed into their home. Televisions and internet have no business being in any child's bedroom; it not only invites undesirable viewing, it diminishes family interaction.
- Engaging in a profusion of out of home activities makes it difficult for the confident parent to maintain a needed balance between family time and children's activities. I believe some of the confusion today comes with a misconceived notion that children's time is family time. You need to lead in striking a balance.

Other things to consider in steering our children toward being responsible:

- As parents, we should only reward and praise children when they truly deserve it. Rewarding children when they make no effort only teaches them to expect rewards for no effort. This isn't teaching them how to function in the real world. Unmerited praise does nothing for a child's self-esteem.
- As parents, we should teach our children to appreciate that other people have needs and feelings starting with their parents.
- Keep Christian Faith central in family life. It will help you be a confident parent and a blessing to your children.

It requires considerable fortitude to parent children in a culture whose messages run counter to what we know is necessary to raise children who'll become responsible adults. If as parents we have God first in our lives and we are living our lives in accordance with God's plan for us, we will then have the confidence needed to raise responsible children with whom we can be well-pleased. I recommend *Take Back Your Kids: Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times* by William Doherty, PhD.

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