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Family Focus

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There are several theories on why many present-day families are very child-centered. There are positive reasons of course: parental love, compassion and willingness to sacrifice; efforts to compensate for unmet needs in one's own childhood; societal emphasis on the importance of the family; and a tendency to identify closely with our children so that their joy is our joy.

One of the not-so-positive outcomes may be raising children who become entitled and self-centered. Many parents have devoted themselves to their children only to have them become adults who are much more preoccupied with their lives than giving thought to their parents or to others. Some parents express surprise, since they thought that by giving to their children there would be more reciprocation along the way.

Another potentially negative consequence of highly child-centered families is that the parents often don't receive enough respect from their children as they are growing up. Some older children have expressed the view that their parents' job is to serve their needs. And parents sometimes enable this lack of respect by not setting limits with their children; and if they do, not implementing them consistently. For example, many parents report how they limit time on screens and tend to have to remind, nag, or cajole until their child finally complies with the set time limit. By then, inevitably, there is frustration, anger, and resentment in the air. Another hot issue is struggling over older children consistently doing chores around the house.

One couple I worked with, Katy and Joel, were low-key non-confrontational people. They had three children ages 5 to 11. Both worked at outside jobs full-time and spent most of their non-working time with their family. They wanted parenting help to figure out better ways to handle the chaotic situation with their kids. It seemed that their two sons and daughter constantly argued with each other and vied for attention from Katy and Joel. In addition, the children were generally uncooperative at home, arguing often with their parents, "forgetting" to do their assigned chores and prolonging bedtime for up to an hour later most nights.

The stress of dealing with challenging children and a somewhat out-of-control household led to this couple being increasingly more upset. Katy and Joel were each unhappy with the way things were and took out their frustrations on each other.

Their children witnessed Katy and Joel constantly trying to cater to them. There were very few consequences for misbehavior; instead, their parents tended to try to explain and reason with them to convince them to behave. As a result, the children seemed to feel much more in control than either of their parents did.

Even though it wasn't in their natures to be "take-charge parents," over time Katy and Joel learned to establish rules and most importantly, implement them consistently. They made a chores chart with positive incentives and also with consequences for failure to perform. The outcome was their children started having healthy competitions with each other over who would get the most rewards.

Katy and Joel practiced not letting their children interrupt them when they were talking to each other, and to say "excuse me" and wait. They scheduled date nights with each other more often in order to have more breaks from parenting and also to strengthen their relationship.

Other important changes they made with their children included setting limits on screens, working to eliminate disrespectful talk, and eventually letting their children "have a seat at the table" to have a limited choice on consequences for non-compliance. It became clear to their children that their parents were taking charge and following up on rules and expectations with consequences.

Katy and Joel saw how effective these strategies and others gradually became, and the eventual result was a much calmer atmosphere in the home and more cooperation and respect from their children.

Dear readers: This will be my last column for the Lamorinda Weekly Newspaper as I would like to make more time for personal pursuits as well as my therapy practice. I started writing the Family Focus column 16 years ago, and I've compiled many of these columns into a book: Family Focus: A Therapist's Tips for Happier Families (Amazon.com 2021). I hope it can be a resource for those of you who have enjoyed my columns.

We're fortunate to live in a community that values children -- protecting them, educating them, encouraging them, and caring for them in all the important ways. Everyone contributes to this: parents, grandparents, teachers, school counselors and administrators, coaches, child care workers, and neighbors. And notably, I see parents and grandparents constantly reaching out to gather information and resources to help their families in every possible way. It is this caring and open-minded spirit that helps our children flourish and ultimately feel thankful to have grown up in this community.

Thank you to everyone who has read my musings, and also to those who have provided valuable feedback. And a special thank-you to the wonderful editor of Lamorinda Weekly, Jennifer Wake, and to Wendy and Andy Scheck, the publishers, who have always been very encouraging and supportive.

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