

Did You Know?

Kids need **YOU** to make the decisions!

I am troubled about a pattern I see. Many parents, in a sincere effort to be supportive of their young children, are including them in negotiation and “democratic decision-making” much of the time. This isn't a problem when we're talking about the ‘small stuff,’ like what to clothes a child wants to wear or what kind of sandwich he wants for lunch. But it has some serious consequences when parents turn to their children to make decisions about bigger things, like when and where to sleep, readiness for toilet-training, TV time, choice of sitter, where to go on vacation, and even the choice of school.

It's not a child's job to make the decision about whether she comes to preschool or not. It's not a child's job to define when he goes to bed and who takes him there. It's not up to a child to determine if she wants to have her meal served now or later, at the table or on the floor! It's not a child's job to ‘direct the show,’ whether it's informing Mommy that he only wants Mc Donald's for lunch today or insisting that he will only ride in Daddy's car to school in the morning.

Yes, we want to encourage young children to have choices and to make decisions. We want them to learn from their choices *now*, so that they don't fall so hard when they get out in the world. But young children need *limited* choices. And, those choices must be *age-appropriate*. Too many preschool children are now being encouraged to make decisions that really belong to their parents! At the same time, they are not hearing their parents say strong “Yes's” and “No's” which are both unshakable and comforting at the same time.

I am seeing a shift in the way parents see their function. Instead of seeing their parental role as one of making decisions, taking charge, soothing, teaching, protecting, and having certain clear (fixed) expectations of their child, parents are striving to be patient and democratic *all* the time. Their expectations are fuzzy. They are bending over backwards to accommodate to their child's demands, to the point that they are sacrificing their own needs. Parents also feel guilty or even apologetic when they cannot meet the demands made by their child, no matter how unrealistic they may be.

What's wrong with this? Parents seem to have the best of intentions. They aren't “bad parents.” On the contrary, what I'm seeing is that they very much want to be positive, attuned parents who do the “right thing.” Unfortunately, it turns out that doing their best to meet their child's demands most of the time is having some startling consequences. We're starting to see more of them at Mandala.

Kids keep pushing for POWER

...
They are trying to find
out when you'll stand
up so they can sit
down!!!

❖ We see more separation problems and various adjustment problems. More parents seem to be looking to their children because they are unsure. As a result of this shift, children are picking up their parent's uncertainty. It makes them nervous, anxious, and clingy. Kids worry about their parents. They worry more when they're not in charge. They have trouble coming to school, they have difficulty settling in, and they are generally “on edge” much of the time. Preschoolers are carrying TOO MUCH worry for their age. Young children need you to make the decisions and then stay clear and firm, even when they protest loudly.

❖ Some kids are at risk of missing developmental milestones because they aren't getting what they need. When parents listen to *wants* more than *needs*, they may fail to see the ‘big picture.’ In seeking to be patient and obliging so much of the time, parents can overlook important clues about what their child *truly* needs. For instance, they can misinterpret their child's resistance as a sign to “back-off,” instead of trusting that *all* kids protest some of the time—even when something is good for them. A parent may mistake a child's momentary anguish at the prospect of coming to school (which is normal behavior when a young child has to separate or transition) and decide that school is hurtful to their child. Another parent may miss the growing sleepiness or fussiness of a child who, after a morning of vigorous play at school, is shuttled to another play-date or activity, when she would really be happiest unwinding at home or taking a nap in her own room. Some parents in our workshops have realized that they missed the “developmental window” for toilet training because their

How Do You See Your Parental Role?

Is it your job to make
decisions, take charge,
soothe, protect and teach?

...or

Is it your job to be patient,
accommodating, and
democratic above all else?

child whined and pleaded to remain in pull-ups, which they misread as a sign that he was not yet ready for training. (*Good News: These parents went home and had astonishing success with toilet-training once they discovered it was up to them to start the process!*)

❖ **Children aren't learning to cope with disappointment, so they have BIG problems when things don't go their way.** I hear an increasing number of parents seeking their child's approval on a decision. If their child doesn't like it, they doubt themselves or change their mind. They try hard to keep their child satisfied and content most of the time. For instance, parents are yielding to their child's night time demands for sleeping with them, or for food, videos, and stories during the night, and they accept that this is a natural part of parenthood, even though they are sleep-deprived and exhausted as a result. Parents are using phenomenal energy 'doing the dance'—that is, trying to avoid frustrating or disappointing their child that so he or she won't "get upset." This means that their child misses the opportunity to *regularly* experience disappointments and learn how to tolerate them. Learning to cope with small losses makes it easier to survive the big ones that come along later.

❖ **Children aren't learning how to calm themselves and make themselves feel better.** They expect that someone will do it for them. Children who are constantly praised, entertained, and "emotionally indulged" (i.e.: *their* needs always take priority) miss learning important emotional skills. They don't develop the ability to think about and reflect on their own moods because someone is always there making it better. They don't learn how to manage their up-and-down feelings and regulate their different emotions. They expect some *thing* or *someone* on the outside to do it for them. *This makes them demanding and extremely self-centered.* In time, they just grow into bigger, self-absorbed people who feel disappointed in life because others never quite seem to give them 'enough.'

❖ **Some preschoolers are staying overly dependent and baby-like, even though they act like little adults.** The result is more bedtime problems, sleep disturbances, eating problems, delayed toilet training, and even elective mutism. It's a paradox. These young children look incredibly independent in so many ways. They bark orders. They negotiate. They seem to reason with you and argue their point like brilliant prosecutors. They are treated as little adults, while at the same time they are being given *so much* of what they want that they don't have the opportunity to develop real independence. When children end up predictably winning the battle (if only by parental exhaustion or default!), they really lose. They have seized the power, but now they can't trust you. Without that level of trust, they can't move along in their development and become autonomous. When young children get the sense that you, the parent, are unsure...or are caving in...they feel insecure and angry. They vacillate between feelings of helplessness and super-powerfulness. All of which prompts them to test their parents more. You see, kids just keep pushing to see when you'll stand up so that they can finally sit down! They want to relax, knowing that you are fully in charge.

❖ **More children are having control problems.** Children whose parents avoid saying "No" are deprived of having a "No" Role Model to identify with, and as a result, they have difficulty saying "No" to themselves. These children have a weakened 'control system.' They are impulsive and demanding with peers and adults, wanting what they want, when they want it. All young children first develop inner controls by experiencing outer controls. They learn by identifying with their parents as role models. We observe them imitating us in surprising ways—working, comforting, scolding, expressing emotions, etc. A parent who tries not to disappoint her child with a "No" keeps her child from developing a strong, separate self with a working conscience. Even though it may feel mean, a firm "NO" is a healthy gift to a growing child.

❖ **Children are missing structure in their lives, which keeps them from developing helpful habits.** Structure is something that makes many people squirm, but children *really* need it. When things occur on a regular basis, at a regular time, in a consistent way, they become routines and habits that happen without conscious thought. They get wired into our brains. When a child comes in the house and puts his coat on a peg, day after day, that's become a habit. Or, if he tosses it on the floor, and Mommy always picks it up, that's become a habit too. Early on, establishing routines requires **Patience**, **Repetition** (lots of it!) and **Follow-Through**. With time, a routine will quickly become hard-wired into a habit that is part of the child's natural body rhythm. If parents remember the importance of early programming, they can use this to their advantage. Routines might seem boring, but they reduce resistance and make for sunnier times!

What Can You Do?

- Be positive.
- Give limited choices—appropriate for preschoolers.
- Make decisions and stick to them, even if your child whines and complains.
- Don't argue!! (You'll only feed the fire!) Just restate your decision.
- Tell yourself that all kids resist at first.
- Act strong, even if you don't feel it. (Eventually you will grow into it!)
- Routines and rules help. Establish yours.
- Decide to be proactive, not reactive!
- You don't have to do it perfectly—Just DO it!! (Any firm decision is better than ambivalence for kids.)
- Before you respond to your child's begging or pleading...THINK!
- If you're giving in "to keep the peace," what's the cost?
- Ask yourself: what lesson will my child learn?
- Say a firm *No* and stick to it, when called for.
- Try not to doubt yourself when your child protests.
- Feel shaky? Get feedback from someone you trust.
- Be willing to invest energy now so that your child can learn life skills for the future.
- No family is without some conflict. Life with children is all about push and pull. It is NEVER tension-free.

Habits are like rabbits—good or bad, they multiply!!