

Kids Gone Bad

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"CHILDREN should be seen and not heard" may be due for a comeback. After decades of indulgence, American society seems to have reached some kind of tipping point, as far as tolerance for wild and woolly kid behavior is concerned.

Last month, an Associated Press-Ipsos poll found that nearly 70 percent of Americans said they believed that people are ruder now than they were 20 or 30 years ago, and that children are among the worst offenders. (As annoyances, they tied with obnoxious cellphone users.)

The conservative child psychologist John Rosemond recently denounced in his syndicated column the increasing presence of "disruptive urchins" who "obviously have yet to have been taught the basic rudiments of public behavior," as he related the wretched experience of dining in a four-star restaurant in the company of one child roller skating around his table and another watching a movie on a portable DVD player.

In 2002, only 9 percent of adults were able to say that the children they saw in public were "respectful toward adults," according to surveys done then by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan and nonprofit public opinion research group. In 2004, more than one in three teachers told Public Agenda pollsters they had seriously considered leaving their profession or knew a colleague who had left because of "intolerable" student behavior.

Even [Madonna](#) - her "Papa Don't Preach" years long past - has joined the throng, proclaiming herself a proud "disciplinarian" in a recent issue of the British magazine *Harpers & Queen* and bragging that, as a mom, she takes a tough line on homework, tidiness and chores: "If you leave your clothes on the floor, they're gone when you come home."

Jo Frost, ABC's superstar "Supernanny," would be proud.

Whether children are actually any worse behaved now than they ever have been before is, of course, debatable. Children have always been considered, basically,

savages. The question, from the late 17th century onwards, has been whether they come by it naturally or are shaped by the brutality of society.

But what seems to have changed recently, according to childrearing experts, is parental behavior - particularly among the most status-conscious and ambitious - along with the kinds of behavior parents expect from their kids. The pressure to do well is up. The demand to do good is down, way down, particularly if it's the kind of do-gooding that doesn't show up on a college application.

Once upon a time, parenting was largely about training children to take their proper place in their community, which, in large measure, meant learning to play by the rules and cooperate, said Alvin Rosenfeld, a child psychiatrist and co-author, with Nicole Wise, of "The OverScheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyperparenting Trap."

"There was a time when there was a certain code of conduct by which you viewed the character of a person," he said, "and you needed that code of conduct to have your place in the community."

Rude behavior, particularly toward adults, was something for which children had to be chastised, even punished. That has also now changed, said Dan Kindlon, a Harvard University child psychologist and author of "Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age."

Most parents, Dr. Kindlon said, would like their children to be polite, considerate and well behaved. But they're too tired, worn down by work and personally needy to take up the task of teaching them proper behavior at home.

"We use kids like Prozac," he said. "People don't necessarily feel great about their spouse or their job but the kids are the bright spot in their day. They don't want to muck up that one moment by getting yelled at. They don't want to hurt. They don't want to feel bad. They want to get satisfaction from their kids. They're so precious to us - maybe more than to any generation previously. What gets thrown out the window is limits. It's a lot easier to pick their towel up off the floor than to get them away from the PlayStation to do it."

Parenting today is also largely about training children to compete - in school and on the soccer field - and the kinds of attributes they need to be competitive are precisely those that help break down society's civility.

Parents who want their children to succeed more than anything, Dr. Kindlon said, teach them to value and prioritize achievement above all else - including other people.

"We're insane about achievement," he said. "Schoolwork is up 50 percent since 1981, and we're so obsessed with our kids getting into the right school, getting the right grades, we let a lot of things slide. Kids don't do chores at home anymore because there isn't time."

And other adults, even those who should have authority, are afraid to get involved. "Nobody feels entitled to discipline other people's kids anymore," Dr. Kindlon said. "They don't feel they have the right if they see a kid doing something wrong to step in."

Educators feel helpless, too: Nearly 8 in 10 teachers, according to the 2004 Public Agenda report, said their students were quick to remind them that they had rights or that their parents could sue if they were too harshly disciplined. More than half said they ended up being soft on discipline "because they can't count on parents or schools to support them."

And that, Dr. Rosenfeld said, strikes at the heart of the problem. "Parents are out of control," he said. "We always want to blame the kids, but if there's something wrong with their incivility, it's the way their parents model for them."

There's also the chance, said Wendy Mogel, a clinical psychologist whose 2001 book, "The Blessing of a Skinned Knee," has earned her a cult following, that when children are rude, obnoxious and outrageously behaved, they're trying to tell parents something - something they've got to shout in order for them to hear.

"These kids are so extremely stressed from the academic load they're carrying and how cloistered they are and how they have to live under the watchful eye of their parents," Dr. Mogel said. "They have no kid space."

Paradoxically, she said, parental over-involvement in their children's lives today often hides a very basic kind of indifference to their children's real need, simply to be kids. "There are all these blurry boundaries," she said. "They need to do fifth-grade-level math in third grade and have every pleasure and indulgence of adulthood in childhood and they act like kids and we get mad."

If stress and strain, self-centeredness and competition are the pathogens underlying the rash of rudeness perceived to be endemic among children in America today, then the cure, some experts said, has to be systemic and not topical. Stop blaming the children, they said. Stop focusing on the surface level of behavior and start curing instead the social, educational and parental ills that feed it.

This may mean less "quality" time with children and more time getting them to do things they don't want to do, like sitting for meals, making polite conversation and - Madonna was right - picking their clothes up off the floor.