

Podcast #38 -- The Myth of the Spoiled Child

I want to talk today about what I call the “myth of the spoiled child.” A spoiled child usually refers to a child who we think “gets everything he or she wants”—usually material things--or a child whose appetites seem to be endlessly indulged by parents who just don’t ever seem to say No. And, so-- the story goes--these kids then grow up to be entitled and self-centered. These are usually unlikeable ‘bratty’ children who, we believe, are likely to grow up to become unlikeable selfish adults.

The problem with this story is that the notion that these kids get everything they want and that such gratification harms their development is based on fundamental misunderstandings about children--about what they need, about the nature of “gratification”, and about what causes kids and later adults to develop a sense of entitlement. In other words, it’s wrong in every way.

Let start with the issue of what children need from their parents in order to develop in a healthy way. Simply put, kids need two things, two interrelated things: They need empathy

and they need to be appreciated as separate individuals. First and foremost—children need empathy. Empathy should be distinguished from sympathy. Empathy is feeling what someone else feels; it's seeing the world from the other person's point of view. Sympathy is feeling sorry for that person. Children need parents who are empathetic, who are attuned to them.

But they also need parents who appreciate them for being individuals; in other words, children need to be recognized and loved for the way that they're different and special. Children need to be seen for the ways they are unique.

Children look to their parents for these two qualities. When they get them, this is the true moment of gratification. When they get these two things, they feel secure and can grow up able to give these things to others--in other words, they grow up healthy. They don't become narcissistic and entitled.

We have to change our view of gratification. Think about it this way: When a child skins her knee and comes home crying and her mother is empathetic and acknowledges the child's

suffering with compassion, this response is gratifying—it gratifies a deep need in the child. Giving the child a present does not. In fact, we often see parents give children gifts, physical objects, as a substitute for genuine empathy. Unable to attune themselves to what their child is actually feeling inside, parents may often resort to satisfying the child’s superficial need for example, for toys. Material things, or things like sweets, are substitutes for the real thing.

Similarly, when parents recognize their child’s difference, their child’s special strengths and weaknesses—strengths and weaknesses DIFFERENT than the parents—the child feels special in a way that leads to a heightened self esteem. When a child is only gratified or seen on the parents’ terms, that child feels neglected and THEN might well develop a sense later on of entitlement. Their need for a special type of recognition is being frustrated and they may then spend their life seeking or demanding that they get it from others. When gifts, things, are given without regard to what the child really needs, without regard to what’s really going on inside the child, that child feel bribed, strangely invisible even in the midst of a lot of toys. Such a child is actually being deprived, not “spoiled.”

So, I see the classic “spoiled child” as one who is actually a victim of neglect, of deprivation, not someone whose life is too easy but whose life is hard, absent as it is of empathy and recognition.

There is another very particular dimension of the spoiled child that bears further examination, and that is the experience often seen in these cases of never being told “No.” Parents in these cases have a great difficulty saying no to their children, of setting limits on the child’s behavior through a calm and consistent expression of parental authority. Paradoxically, the absence of this—the inability, in other words to say No-- isn’t a sign that the child is being spoiled, but is actually another form of deprivation. When a parent can’t say No, the child is deprived and suffers an insidious form of neglect.

These parents often feel uncomfortable, even guilty, about appearing to deprive their child of something the child wants or wants to do. In the parents’ minds, saying No is experienced as almost a hostile act. In some cases I’ve seen, for example, the parents are both working a lot outside the home

and are already feeling guilty about neglecting their kids. To set limits when they ARE home feels like rubbing salt in the wound.

So what is the harm being done? Children want their parents to be strong. When a parent can't say no, the child experiences this as weakness and starts to feel that he or she—the child—is too strong. The result is often guilt. The child grows up feeling guilty about pushing the parent around. When the parent is strong and says No in a clear and assertive way, the child actually feels safe and cared for.

So, we should all be cognizant of what children actually need. When a child throws a tantrum, racing around trying to satisfy that child is experienced as weak. Providing a firm and empathic “holding environment” is what is actually gratifying to the child, despite appearances to the contrary.