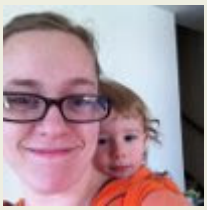
My Sons: I Want To Be Your Friend And Your Parent



Send her mail.

"Balancing on My Toes" is an original column appearing every other Friday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Angel M. Ethell. Angel lives in the Chicagoland area with her family: sons Teen (13) and Lil G (2) along with their little sister Cassie Pie (dog), her partner Daddy G and father-in-law Grandpa G. She loves learning new things along with learning that she might not always be right... 100% of the time. Archived columns can be found here. BMT-only RSS feed available here.

We have all heard it. Over and over again throughout our lives there is the idea that parents cannot be a parent first and foremost, and still be a friend. There is a mentality of one or the other. But after really thinking about this phrase that I've heard so many times, I decided that it's a very out-dated concept. What if I told you that tough love is *not necessary*? What if I told you that not only is it not necessary, it *actually harms* the parent-child respect relationship?

Parent-Child Mutual Respect

Yes, we were all told that kids need to respect adults. Adults were misinformed as to how to get those results for many years. The assumption is that children are mini-adults and when given tough discipline they will conform and learn respect. But children are *not* mini-adults. They have undeveloped frontal lobes and not only do they not have any impulse control under a certain age, they also have no concept of right and wrong. They just don't. Because of this they cannot reason. Children could very easily be molded into anything, and the way we mold them is to show them how we want them to act. Children will model our behavior, so if ours is bad, so too will our children's be. Because of this, there needs to be forethought in how we treat our kids and other people in our lives. To give respect is the most effective way to create children and adults that show respect. Respect is a mind set. We need to remember that.

If one were to do a Google search right now about how to teach a child respect, it will send you links telling you to model and give your children respect and you will see it in them as they grow. What I like about this is that it confirms what the child in me thought all along. Respect was always demanded from me, but I didn't really understand what it meant. This really hurt me in school, because I was defiant and hostile most of the time; not trusting of

adults or anyone in authority. Why was this? Because I was not listened to and was treated, in my mind, unfairly. I admit a child does not really have a concept of “fair” but the feeling is *real*.

Becoming a Friend While Setting the Proper Boundaries

If you can, start young. Begin really listening to your child. He will tell you all kinds of things and many of those things may not even be the language you speak, but you need to listen anyway. This is showing your child how to listen and respect others that are talking. You also show them how to interact with others by the way you act around them. Do your research and figure out where your child is developmentally and try not to expect too much from him. This is important for his sense of self-worth later in life. Urging a child to accomplish an age appropriate goal though is different than, say, expecting a small child to sit still and not fidget for long periods of time. Children *can* be taught how to “behave” but this is usually after force has been used against him and he is afraid of punishment. Do not berate or belittle your child. Throughout his life parents have the power to create in their child an internal locust of control so that he will truly believe the opinions of others do not matter. This is important and will serve you well as your child becomes older and more subject to peer pressure.

Talk to Your Children

If you have fostered the kind of relationship that is built on trust your child *will* talk to you about personal things. Some examples of trouble teens can get into are: dangerous situations, intense sexual situations, intense pressure from others, and trouble believing in themselves. This is a small, general list, but I would rather have a child that feels he can talk to me rather than feeling scared that I will disapprove and get mad or just don’t care. Either of those reactions are unacceptable to me. If you use moderated conversation skills and try to face every situation calmly, children will feel comfortable telling his parents personal and scary things, and the parent has a powerful chance to help shape the child’s judgment for future situations. An added bonus of consistently listening and respecting your children is that they will, after developing the ability, think about how *you feel* about what they are thinking of doing. This my friends is the end goal. To have a confident child who thinks for himself and considered not only what his friends want him to do, but what you think and what he feels comfortable doing.

So There You Have It

I know a few real life examples of how this actually works and is not just a pile of horse manure. On the reverse side, I have experience with not having been shown patience, respect and feeling as if I don’t matter. My childhood self promised my future kids that I *would* find a better way and that I was *never* going to treat them as badly as I felt I was.

So, with my older son we talk about his situations and I give him boundaries. He usually has a hand in the consequences that we use as teaching tools for different situations. He knows that if he stays up all night long watching stuff on his phone he will not only be tired in the morning as a natural consequence, but he also cannot take his phone to school the next day. We talk about things in advance if we can, like what happens if this boundary is broken, but I also praise him for doing what we agreed on. “Thank you for calling me everyday to ask if you can go to your friends house after school” even though because I work I might not even know if he goes or not, but he tells me where he is going to be because he knows its important to me, not because he knows he is going to be punished. See how this works? I have a toddler, too. I was late to the game for my first son, but we are getting it together again. I have the opportunity to watch how these practices are throughout a life time and that is so awesome to me. It will be *so* much more rewarding than watching how my unknowingly bad parenting style affected my first son.